

The background of the cover is a vibrant illustration. On the left, a girl with long, flowing blonde hair and blue eyes is shown from the waist up, wearing a white dress with a blue bow. On the right, a girl with short blonde hair and green eyes is shown from the waist up, wearing a green dress with a white collar and a white flower. They are both surrounded by green foliage and flowers. In the background, a large, ornate castle with multiple towers and spires is visible under a blue sky with white clouds.

13

Author

Riku Nanano

Illustrator

cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Great-Tree Warden's
Testament



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CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Epilogue

Afterword

“I followed
your example and
started practicing
in the mornings,
so, u-um...”



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.

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.



First princess
Lady of Light

CHERYL WAINWRIGHT

She attended the Royal Academy with Allen and with Lydia, whom she equals in ability.



"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 & Co. head clerk

FELICIA FOSSE

Although Felicia is shy and physically frail, her brilliant mind is unmatched in fortitude. Her father went missing during the rebellion.



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 in the Royal Academy entrance exams.



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

GRAHAM WALKER Head butler to the Ducal House of Howard.

TETO TIJERINA "Allen's star pupil."
One of the professor's university students.

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.

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

SAGE? An enigmatic sorcerer who wields the great spell Falling Star.

ALICIA COALFIELD A vampiress who calls herself "Crescent Moon."

IO LOCKFIELD Second-ranked of the Church of the Holy Spirit's apostles,
after Alicia.

VIOLA KOKONOE Loyal servant of the False Saint.

ROSA HOWARD Stella and Tina's late mother. Much about her remains mysterious.

Prologue

“Oh, wow! Look, Tuna, a Leinster steam engine! I’ve read about them in books, but I’ve never seen a metal machine move in real life! I can’t believe my eyes!” cried a boy with pale-blue hair—my younger brother, Niccolò Nitti. He broke into a run as the train glided into the drab stop on the western edge of the Avasiek Plain.

“D-Don Niccolò, be careful! Don Niche, if you’ll excuse me!” Tuna gave chase in a panic. My brother’s pretty attendant, a daughter of the Solevinos, longtime servants of our house, had elven blood in her veins. Her adoptive father, Toni, had betrayed us for the Church of the Holy Spirit. Losing him in the final battle for the city of water must have come as a shock, yet she let no sadness show. My brother hardly deserved her.

Just under three months had flown by since our truce with the Leinsters. Even in the Principality of Atlas, toward the south of the continent, we were starting to hear the footsteps of winter. The shelter of the hills couldn’t shut out the cold wind completely, and I felt a chill even in broad daylight.

Niccolò and Tuna seemed well armored against the cold in matching coats, knit wool hats, scarves, and gloves. Still, they would be journeying to the Wainwright Kingdom’s southern and then royal capital on behalf of the House of Nitti. I had better warn them to take care of themselves before they set out. And that they were bound for the royal capital because the church might target them again.

Niccolò wasn’t alone in gawking at his first train; other children going to study in the southern and royal capitals shared his enthusiasm. Merchants and Atlasian officials also eyed the machine with interest. I spared them a glance before turning to check our immediate surroundings.

Beautiful black hair flecked with gray feathers distinguished the woman who would escort the pair to the royal capital with a group of Leinster maids. They had agreed to serve as bodyguards. I supposed I could afford to relax a little

until the departure ceremony.

“I see the cold hasn’t dampened the little ones’ spirits” came a sudden remark from behind me.

I turned to find an unassuming man with round spectacles and hair a dusty shade of dark brown. Slit-like eyes and a plump build were probably his most remarkable features.

“Marchese Atlas,” I said. “I didn’t realize you were attending.”

This man bore the name Ray Atlas. The former Marchese Atlas had met an *unexpected end* during the battle for the city of water, and his rightful heir, the bold general Robson Atlas, had fallen fighting one of the church’s apostles, Io “Black Blossom” Lockfield, at the Fortress of Seven Towers. As a result, the third brother had assumed the title. He had made no public appearances prior to his accession, leaving both his character and his ability largely unknown. I had heard he was my age—twenty-five—but he looked older.

“Only to fill space at the ceremony,” the marchese replied without turning a hair. “And call me Ray. You know I’m marchese in name only. As things stand, no one in this principality outranks *you*, Don Niche Nitti. My whole house accepts that. After all, the man who forged a covenant with the water dragon gave you his seal of approval.”

I grimaced, remembering the utterly bizarre position I’d been placed in. One young man had driven off the vampiress Alicia Coalfield, a corpse dragon with my brother and Tuna at its core, and multiple church apostles to save the city of water, then exchanged a vow with the water dragon—Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. His words in the Leinsters’ southern capital council chamber came back to me:

“Niche, the Principality of Atlas is in your hands.”

While I spewed a litany of curses in my head for the umpteenth time, the marchese’s eyes grew yet narrower.

“We haven’t been at peace three months yet, and the Leinsters have already laid tracks from the heart of their under-duchy to our border as though it were nothing. During the war, Scarlet Heaven fired not a single proper spell in battle,

and the Bloodstained Lady only waved her sword a bit at Avasiek and a few cities. The Smiling Lady, who they say came up with the griffin raids, never left the under-duchy's capital." He paused. "I suppose we should never have picked that fight."

"I couldn't agree more," I said.

This string of battles had left appallingly deep scars on the League of Principalities. Atlas had seceded and started on its own path as a vassal nation with Leinster backing. The remaining four northern principalities were staggering under the economic toll of griffin strikes on ports, bridges, and highways. Three of the six southern marches had fallen to church assassins. Another, Fossi Folonto, had turned traitor and become an apostle. That left only the elderly Marchesa Rondoiro, who had lost her left arm, and Carlyle Carnien. And as for the city of water...

"Are you sure you shouldn't put in an appearance in the royal capital?" the marchese asked offhandedly.

Watching my brother chat excitedly with Tuna in front of the train, I shook my head. I had no need to keep Ray Atlas in the dark; we shared a duty and an understanding. "Demands keep piling up. Extending the tracks to the Atlasian capital, enlisting griffins to map terrain, supporting those who lost family in the war, recruiting capable agents... I can't afford to leave. I could appeal to the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, but he has at least as much on his plate as I do. Be wary of that man—he honestly believes that if he can do something, so can anyone else. Give him half a chance, and you'll find yourself in my shoes."

"That only shows how much he trusts you. Mr. Allen wrote that we should defer to you in everything and he'll take responsibility. Rumor has it that Allen & Co.'s fiendish head clerk considers you a rival."

I snorted. Allen & Co.—the common name for a joint commercial venture launched by the ducal houses of Leinster and Howard—had taken an active hand in rebuilding Atlas. It was fast gaining influence over trade in food, liquor, clothing, various raw materials, and just about everything else we needed. And I couldn't deny that every letter I received from the girl who served as its head clerk included the words, "You'll never beat me, got that?! Allen trusts *me* the

most!”

How had it come to this? I ruffled my own hair as I recalled what the young man and I had said to each other when we’d reunited at the Leinsters’ main house two months earlier.



“We’re to ‘cede the Avasiek Plain, recognize Atlas’s independence, relinquish any old tomes or spell books that the kingdom’s representatives request, punish those involved with the Church of the Holy Spirit, repatriate prisoners with all due speed, maintain the social standing of residents who fled to Leinster territory during the war, and restore Robson Atlas’s honor.’ That much seems fair, and I can accept the fine print as well. But...” I glared at the young man with dark-brown hair seated across from me. Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, wore a white shirt with black trousers. His hands were full of paperwork, which he’d been speedily processing while we spoke.

On a nearby sofa, a young woman lounged sipping tea, her long scarlet hair blazing in the sunbeams that slanted through the windows. Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword and the duke’s eldest daughter.

“What is the meaning of this?” I demanded.

“Hm? Of what?” Allen paused his pen to give me a quizzical look.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know!” I snapped, grinding my teeth at his insufferable attitude. “What is my name doing in a supplementary article to an international peace treaty?! It says, ‘Niche Nitti shall be inducted by the Ducal House of Leinster’ plain as day!”

My words hung in the air for a long moment. Then, “Who knows?”

“Wh-Why you—”

No sooner had I reached for him in anger than blazing plumes filled the air. I shrank back and froze in spite of myself.

The young man spared me only a glance as he scattered the feathers with a wave of his left hand. “Lydia,” he said, “I wish you wouldn’t cast Firebird indoors.”

“Excuse me?!”

“I don’t see why you’re angry at *me*. Whatever am I to do with Your Highness?”

“No titles!”

To my alarm, the indignant Lady of the Sword flicked her left wrist, hurling a dagger of fire. A hit would prove fatal. Yet Allen made it vanish with a twirl of his pen.

Freak!

The self-proclaimed “private tutor” turned back to me and said, “Niche, the Principality of Atlas is in your hands. The news has already reached the heads of the relevant houses as well as His Royal Majesty, so those who care have their eyes on you. I’m told no one objected. I’ve also secured approval from Doge Pirro Pisani. And although your father, the former deputy Nieto Nitti, departed the city of water after taking public responsibility for his ties to the church, he gave his blessing as well.”

“What?! Wh-When did you...?”

Little time had passed since the church’s schemes had pushed the city of water to the brink of ruin. What’s more, Allen and his companions had remained there until mere days ago, tending to Marchesa Carlotta Carnien’s mysterious ailment. I couldn’t imagine him finding the time to make such arrangements.

The young man folded his arms on the desk, unfazed by my stare. “I shouldn’t need to tell you how deeply the church’s apostles and inquisitors have been involved in the Algren rebellion and the conflicts it sparked—carrying out the orders of a girl who calls herself the Saint. What happened in the city of water leaves no doubt that they’ll stop at nothing to achieve their ends. Neither the kingdom nor the Leinsters and the southern houses can spare the manpower to rebuild Atlas.”

“We can foot the bill,” the Lady of the Sword added, circling behind the desk and resting a hand on Allen’s chair. “But we can’t send people. And as you’ve probably guessed, my house needs results that will entice the other four

northern principalities. Considering that we'll shelter Niccolò and Tuna from any future attempts the church is almost certain to make on them, I wouldn't say you're getting a bad deal. Would you?"

"I am grateful for that, and for ensuring that my father and our servants would not face blame," I gritted out, aware of the sour face I must have been making. "But that doesn't tell me why! Why me?! There must be other suitable —"

"None, except you." Allen spoke with a certainty that left me speechless. Leaving his papers on the desk, he looked me straight in the eye. "When Alicia cast the strategic taboo spell Everlasting Scarlet Dream and the corpse dragon manifested itself, I thought things couldn't get any worse. I had no idea whether we even stood a chance. And yet..." I couldn't look away. "You never gave up."

In spite of myself, I felt warmth flood my chest. This man—the schoolmate I'd envied and refused to extend a helping hand to at the Royal Academy—was praising Niche Nitti from the bottom of his heart!

Allen smiled as he signed a document. "You held firm and did your utmost to keep your word to me by rescuing townspeople who didn't escape in time. Resisting despair and rejecting fear, you fought gamely on to the bitter end." Handing the paper to the noblewoman behind him, he added a remark that made me doubt my ears. "My father taught me what to call people like that: heroes."

I didn't know what to say. At a loss, I turned to the young woman behind his chair. "Lady of the Sword?"

"He means every word," she declared, looking over the paper. "Stop fighting it and accept that your luck has run out."

I never could stand paragons!

"Humph. Suppose you do cede authority to me. Did you ever stop to think that I might use it against you?" I asked to blow off steam, although I planned no such thing. "Carlyle may be putty in your hands now that you have his wife, but not me."

The machinations of Fossi Folonto, the traitor marchese, had laid Carlotta low

with a prolonged and mysterious illness—the result of a curse much like the “ten-day fever” that had once ravaged the kingdom’s royal capital. Now Princess Cheryl Wainwright’s and Lady Stella Howard’s purifying magic was speeding her toward recovery. Once she regained her strength, she might even visit the royal capital. And Carlyle, who had sided with the church to save his wife, would never stand against the Wainwright Kingdom again. Of course, neither would I.

The Lady of the Sword met my spiteful words with a glare, but the young man I’d addressed them to only looked puzzled.

“Well,” he said, “I realize old grudges aren’t so easy to square away, so I suppose I couldn’t blame you. I made the recommendation, so my reputation will suffer if it goes wrong, but that’s all! The Leinsters wouldn’t be so petty as to harm you, Niccolò, or Don Nieto Nitti just because you proved uncooperative.”

He doesn’t mean...? Did he link his own glory to my recommendation?! Absurd!

While I stood frozen, Allen made yet another credulity-straining pronouncement.

“I’ve talked it over with Marchese Ray Atlas too. Whatever else you do, bring peace to Atlas and the northern principalities! I’ll be in the royal capital, working on reassessing ten-day fever, ameliorating Stella’s overdeveloped affinity for light, deciphering Duchess Rosa Howard’s notes, and of course, doing my real job, tutoring. I’m recruiting a capable secretary for you as we speak, so look forward to meeting them.”

He already struck a deal with the new marchese?!

I looked to the scarlet-haired young woman, but she merely scowled. She must not have known.

Faced with the prospect of the city of water’s savior choosing even my secretary for me, I took several deep, albeit ragged, breaths to steady myself, then straightened both my formal blue suit and my back. “Understood on all counts. I, Niche Nitti, swear to do all in my power, little though that may be. But may I point out one last thing?”

“Yes, of course.” Allen nodded graciously.

If looks could kill, the glare I shot at his smile would have. I said...



A snicker escaped me as I remembered the stunned expression on his face. Even he could show surprise.

The marchese gave me a puzzled look, but then a steam whistle sounded. The boys and girls were thrilled with joy. Ray Atlas had lost his chance to ask questions.

“It must be time. If you’ll excuse me,” he said, the hem of his battered army greatcoat flapping as he started to walk.

“Ray Atlas! Tell me just one thing.” I called after the portly marchese, although I hadn’t meant to. “Why cooperate with me? The assassin who took advantage of the chaos in the city of water to slay your brother was—”

“My eldest brother!” Ray Atlas stopped and shouted before I could finish. His predecessor had fallen, with the rest of the fence-sitting aristocrats and assemblymen who “stood in the way of the league’s postwar restoration,” at the hands of my father, Nieto.

Without looking at me, the marchese spat, “My eldest brother was a fool. He fell for the apostles’ flattery, then abandoned his duty along with his soldiers and subjects when he fled to the city of water. To the bitter end, he never acknowledged a bastard like me as his brother. Of course, the same goes for our late father and my stepmother. I never once felt familial love for any of them. But...” A strong wind blew, fanning the bespectacled man’s coat. “My other brother, Robson... He loved me since we were children.”

Amid a string of defeats, that stalwart had faced down a massive Leinster army at the Fortress of Seven Towers. I didn’t recall ever exchanging words with him, but I knew his reputation for talent. Some had even said he had the makings of a doge.

As Ray Atlas clutched his sleeves, I noticed the stains on them. The coat must have belonged to Robson.

“He always opposed this war. ‘We won’t stand a chance if Scarlet Heaven, the Bloodstained Lady, and the Smiling Lady take to the field,’ he said. You see, he’d studied the histories and members of every house he could. But after the rout at Avasiek, when our eldest brother fled to the city of water, he took command himself.” The marchese gave an exaggerated shrug. “I originally planned to man the Fortress of Seven Towers. We were fighting the Leinsters. The odds of survival were slim. Looking to the future, a mediocre bastard son’s life seemed a small price to pay to save my talented brother. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I couldn’t answer. I knew what I would do if...if Niccolò ever tried such a thing.

Ray Atlas looked heavenward. “But Robson dismissed the proposal on the spot and set off for the fortress himself—practically stormed it,” he said with an air of self-mockery. “I’d never been bawled out like that in my life. Or punched, for that matter.”

Another blast of the steam whistle. The ceremony would start soon. A beastfolk girl in a maid uniform darted past the corner of my eye.

The marchese met my gaze for the first time that day. “After the truce, once things had calmed down”—he hesitated—“I received a midnight visitor on griffinback.”

“Who?” I asked. Then, slowly, “You don’t mean...?”

“He brought two maids with him. One carried a two-handed scythe. The other had pale-scarlet hair. She never stopped smiling. The old hands placed them as the ‘Headhunter’ and a Leinster relation.”

Allen. The maids must have been guards. What was he thinking?

Ray Atlas let slip a faint chuckle, perhaps reliving the event. “When I worked up the courage to ask him the reason for his visit, he answered, ‘I hope you’ll allow me to offer flowers at the grave of the great General Robson Atlas. The church recognized him as a threat, alongside Marchesa Carlotta Carnien.’ Can you believe it? That was all! Just for that, he entered what had been enemy territory mere days before practically unguarded!”

“He’s that sort of man,” I said stiffly. He saw it as the right thing to do and refused to be swayed, even if most people could never hope to follow his

example.

The marchese removed his spectacles and covered his eyes with his hand. “After paying his respects to Robson, he said, ‘I have a younger sister myself, although not by blood. If I had been in Robson’s shoes, I would have done just what he did. Protecting your family doesn’t have to make logical sense.’ He’s a great man, the Shooting Star who treated with the water dragon. The people we tell legends about must have been like him.”

“Not that he seems to realize it. You’ll get to see some funny faces if you ever tell him so.” Expressing the same opinion in that Leinster council chamber had provoked a rare look of heartfelt distaste.

Ray Atlas replaced his spectacles and cracked a slight grin. Then he straightened up. “I’m a mediocre man. I lack the swordplay, sorcery, scholarship, and looks of a leader. But...that young man toiled secretly to restore my brother’s honor even though he stood to gain nothing from it. Who knows how many times he must have bowed and scraped before the kingdom’s leaders? I believe in him—and in you, the man he entrusted with absolute authority.” The eyes behind the spectacles opened, and their gaze met mine. “Ray Atlas will bear full responsibility. Please, give your talents free rein.”

I fumbled for a response in the face of this forthright admission. “I have no talents to speak of,” I said at last, “but I promise to do what little I can.”

At that, Ray narrowed his eyes and curled his lips in a semblance of a smile. “Oh, I almost forgot. The supplementary article you proposed Doge Pisani add to the peace treaty in utmost secrecy has my full support. We must give our savior a taste of his own medicine.”

Once again, the brave man strode off toward the station, where the ceremony was to take place. I expected to work with him for a long time to come. The more fellow sufferers of Allen’s meddling, the better.

Seeing the marchese depart, a round-eared weasel-clan girl popped out from behind a wooden crate and dashed up to me, her shoulder-length faded-brown hair and tail bobbing. Jutta, the secretary Allen had chosen for me, wore a maid uniform courtesy of the Leinsters. He had apparently found her selling fruit in the southern capital. But what was she thinking, not wearing so much as a coat

in this cold wind?

No sooner had she reached my front than she clenched her fists and hopped in place, crying, “M-Master, I think it’s time! Please hurry!”

“Stop calling me that,” I said stiffly. “It invites misunderstandings.”

“P-Please forgi—”

Sure enough, Jutta’s apology ended abruptly in a cute little sneeze, which left her staring at her feet in shame.

Good grief.

I massaged my forehead, then draped my own cloak over the girl.

“D-Don Niche?!”

“Wear that and come along,” I said, starting to walk before she could utter another awkward word. I could see an excited Niccolò with Tuna hovering close to him.

Fine, then. Have it your way. You left Atlas and the northern principalities in my care, so I’ll get them back on track if it’s the last thing I do.

Suddenly, I came to a standstill and looked up at the northern sky. What was our savior doing in the royal capital? Not resting, at least. Of that I felt sure. How would he react when he heard the article I’d proposed to the doge: “The sanctuary on the city of water’s central island shall be ceded to Allen personally”? A chuckle escaped me as I pictured the face of the self-proclaimed “private tutor” who had saved my homeland.

Chapter 1

“Really? They’ve already linked the tracks? The Leinsters and Niche don’t waste any time. Oh, Cindy, you made a calculation error on this form. Please go over it again.” I broke off listening to the latest news from the south to levitate a document I’d been checking onto a desk ahead and to the right of mine.

Allen & Co. had its new premises in the royal capital’s western quarter. The company had relocated because a raid during the Algren rebellion had nearly demolished its former offices. I’d heard that this house had belonged to a hidebound noble family that had fallen amid the successive disturbances. Still, it was spacious, convenient, and sturdy. I hardly felt the cold weather.

The Leinster Maid Corps’s number six pulled a face as she accepted the document, then fell flat on her desk. Her milky-white tresses swayed with the impact.

“I drew the winning lot to leave the city of water early, and this is what I get,” she groaned. “A-And you’re supposed to have the day off because you’re tutoring this afternoon, Mr. Allen. It says so on the blackboard. I...I can’t take any more paperwork! Oh, Saki! Hurry up and get here already!”

A little girl with long white hair—Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals—looked up in alarm from the nearby sofa where she’d been dozing but closed her eyes again, relieved, when she saw me. The sight brought smiles to the faces of every Leinster and Howard maid in the room and to the former Fosse Company staff driven by circumstance to work with them.

“An urgent summons went out to all the ranking Howard maids, including Sally Walker and the others assigned to the company,” I said, tweaking spell formulae arrayed in midair while I dashed off a signature. “Their departure for the northern capital leaves us shorthanded. I’ve put in a request to Anna for additional staff. The next document, if you please.”

“Oh, so that’s why all our officers have been gathering in the royal capital. Except Lady Lily—she’s visiting her parents in the under-duchy. But why do I

have to pick up the slack?” Cindy grumbled, although she also set about correcting paperwork. She took her job seriously.

Two months had flown by since the battle for the city of water. Even those of us who had remained there at first, dealing with the aftermath, had gradually made our way back to the royal capital via the southern one. I thought that I’d done all I could in my grudging role as a contact for negotiations. Assigning Saki’s team to guard Niccolò Nitti and Tuna had been my idea. But I had taken no direct hand in politics after my return to the capital. Although I’d been forced to stand in the line of fire ever since the Algren rebellion, I remained a “houseless” wolf-clan adoptee, a humble private tutor, and the nominal president of the company that bore my name.

Formal peace with the Yustinian Empire had been delayed, or so I’d heard, by that nation’s plunge into a civil war pitting the old emperor against the crown prince. But I would let my old mentor, the professor, see to that, along with the Archmage, as the headmaster of the Royal Academy was known, and Dukes Howard, Leinster, and Lebufera.

Nothing beats peace and quiet! Let the professor and the headmaster handle every thorny, convoluted problem from now on!

“Mr. Allen? Do you realize you look like a mischievous little boy who just got a wicked idea?” Cindy demanded, eyeing me coldly. “And I’ll thank you to not deploy such menacing formulae while juggling so much work.”

I winked. “Just prepping for this afternoon’s lesson and going over my spoils from the city of water. You needn’t worry—I don’t have the mana to activate any of them except the one for Tina.”

Young Lady Tina Howard, the second daughter of Duke Howard, had launched my tutoring career. Her father held one of the kingdom’s Four Great Dukedoms, making him ruler of the north and her a genuine noblewoman of the highest degree, entitled to the style “Highness.” She also possessed prodigious mana and a brilliant intellect and housed the great elemental Frigid Crane within her body. Since returning to the city, she had resumed attending the Royal Academy, which was back in session. I would probably find her in class at that very moment.

“Normal people don’t line up rows of formulae like that,” Cindy said, sounding exasperated as she darted her pen across a page. “I really think you take on too much work. How many impossible problems do you have on your plate right now? Come on, you can tell me. Tutoring and company work don’t count.”

“Let me think.”

First of all, I was reinvestigating the sudden outbreak of ten-day fever that had struck the royal capital eleven years earlier. My pupil and Tina’s personal maid, Ellie Walker, had lost both parents to the disease. Yet in the city of water, I had encountered a strange phenomenon. Marchesa Carlotta Carnien had lain comatose with a mysterious ailment—actually a curse cast by an apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit—and its symptoms had matched those of ten-day fever. That meant that rather than any plague, far-reaching church sorcery might have claimed the Walkers’ lives. I needed to get to the bottom of things posthaste.

Second, Stella Howard, Tina’s elder sister and the president of the Royal Academy’s student council, had been suffering for several months from an unexplained and growing profusion of light-elemental mana. The Ducal House of Howard traditionally wielded ice, with which its forebears had contributed greatly to the kingdom’s founding. But at present, Stella could only cast light spells—despite the fact that her mana reserves continued to increase. Her powerful purifying force had saved Marchesa Carnien, and Stella herself bore the situation bravely. Nevertheless...

I saw cars, carriages, and pedestrians bundled up in coats speeding past on the street beyond the windows.

“Any word from the western capital, Cindy?” I asked.

“If you mean pleas for your hand in marriage, we receive more every day!”

I needed a moment.

“Please don’t mention those to the girls,” I reminded the smirking milky-haired maid. Then I returned to my thoughts.

As far as alleviating Stella’s symptoms went, loath though I was to admit it, I had no choice but to wait on the flower-dragon oracle I’d asked the dragonfolk

chieftain for in the eastern capital. Dragons far surpassed mortal comprehension, and the oracular rites called on their wisdom.

Third, I wanted to decipher more of the notes that Tina and Stella's mother, Duchess Rosa Howard, had left in the Nittis' secret archive as a child.

Apart from that, the vampiress Alicia Coalfield, who claimed to have served as the legendary Shooting Star's lieutenant in the War of the Dark Lord, and Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, who had assassinated Robson Atlas, required a thorough investigation. I also couldn't forget the sorcerer who had appeared to cast the great spell Falling Star at the tail end of the battle for the city of water...or the church's self-proclaimed "Saint," who had orchestrated a whole string of disasters from the shadows. The enigmatic stone tablet she had taken from its resting place sealed in the Old Temple worried me too. The thorny problems really had piled up.

Cindy twirled her pen. "One look at your face tells me you've taken on quite a lot. Don't think I won't put in a word with Lady Lydia if I catch you pushing yourself too hard."

"She seems awfully busy herself these days," I mused absentmindedly.

My partner, Lady Lydia Leinster, had been appointed to the personal guard of our old Royal Academy classmate Princess Cheryl Wainwright at the start of the year. The schemes of dreadful old men and the former Crown Prince John, whom they had set up as a figurehead, had purged the aristocracy of diehards who couldn't see which way the wind was blowing and paved the way for Cheryl's rise to heir apparent. Naturally, she had started attending a great many more gatherings, which kept Lydia equally busy. We hadn't met face-to-face in two weeks. We did exchange small, magically conjured birds three times a day, but her recent messages reeked of a woman on the edge: "No more," "I can't take it," "We're eloping. To Lalannoy this time," "Tell me how to beat this scheming princess right now," and so on. Arranging to see her soon might serve the cause of peace.

A rapid clomp of footfalls in the corridor heralded the approach of someone who clearly did not excel at running. It seemed the mistress of the office had returned.

“Allen!” cried a scrawny, bespectacled girl as she burst into the room, long chestnut hair flying every which way. A flush brightened her pallid skin, and the bangs that hid her eyes bobbed up and down, as did her ample bosoms. She wore a white shirt and a long skirt, having evidently entrusted her winter outerwear to the maid who had accompanied her when she’d left for a business negotiation.

“Welcome back, Felicia. Was it cold outside?” I asked, magically warming the air around her.

This girl, Felicia Fosse, had been attending classes at the Royal Academy just a few short months earlier. She was close friends with both Stella and my sister, Caren. And through a quirk of fate, she currently led Allen & Co. as head clerk. During the war with the League of Principalities, she had served as inspector general of logistics and maintained difficult supply operations through the end of hostilities.

“Oh, yes,” Felicia answered, nodding. “The wind was so chilly that— Don’t try to change the subject! Jeez!”

Pouting fiercely, she strode up to my desk. Every nearby maid had an amused glimmer in her eyes. Oblivious to them, Felicia planted her little hands on the desk and fixed me with an icy stare.

“Weren’t you scheduled to take today off?” she demanded. “Won’t you be tutoring the girls this afternoon? That’s what it says on the board.”

“I finished preparing my lesson, so I thought I’d drop in,” I said. “To keep an eye on Cindy.”

“St-Still,” Felicia mumbled, looking down and fiddling with her fingers, “y-you could have picked a time when I’d be here.”

“Mr. Allen?” The milky-haired maid gave me another withering look.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Atra mimicking the bespectacled girl. Adorable.

“I took the liberty of reading your report,” I said, levitating a nearby chair and setting it down beside Felicia. “Business with Atlas seems to be growing nicely.”

“Yes, but we don’t have the profits to show for it yet,” she admitted, taking the proffered seat. “I think we should be using this time to plant seeds. I got a chance to speak with the president of the Skyhawk Company while I was in the southern capital. Atlas is just the first step to monopolizing every air lane in the league! I swear I’ll have all that trade under my thumb someday!” The big eyes peeking through her bangs burned with soaring ambition as she clenched her little fists.

I wouldn’t put it past her.

The face of the unfamiliar maid who had accompanied me to Atlas’s capital popped into my mind. Who had she been, anyway? She had smiled the whole trip.

“If you develop any concerns about Atlas, please share them with Niche,” I advised the bespectacled girl as maids converged to tidy her hair. “He seems to be building a good rapport with Marchese Atlas, so I doubt you need to worry about information leaking.”

Felicia immediately pursed her lips. “If you say so.”

What have we here? She seemed reasonably cheery until just now. I know Niche is an easy man to misunderstand, but even so.

While I pondered, a calm voice chimed in, “Miss Fosse is burning with envy because you repose so much trust in Don Niche Nitti. Just now, in the carriage, she insisted that he ‘won’t get the better of her.’”

A dark-skinned maid with dark-brown hair entered—Emma, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number four, who had been supporting Felicia since the company first opened for business. She carried a coat and scarf, both neatly folded.

I blinked and looked at Felicia, whose face had turned bright red.

“Er, w-well...can you blame me?! Y-You seem to trust him so much, and it doesn’t feel fair that—”

“Emma!” the milky-haired maid interrupted, pouncing to hug her brunette colleague. I waved my left hand, casting a levitation spell which deposited the papers that had just gone airborne on a nearby desk.

“Eek! C-Cindy?!” Emma cried. “S-See here. You’re number six now, so as a Leinster maid, you ought to show some decorum and...”

Felicia clasped her hands, eyes wide behind her spectacles and the rest of her complaint forgotten. Emma’s discomfiture couldn’t have been an everyday occurrence.

Meanwhile, Cindy pressed her head against Emma’s bosom and said simply, “Hard.”

“Cindy? I must have misheard you,” Emma responded slowly. “Need I remind you that the wrong word at the wrong time can put your life in danger? A-And you’re hardly one to talk!”

“Sorry, Emma, but I’ve got more than you!”

I distinctly heard something snap. The maids relocated the panicked Felicia’s chair and the excited Atra’s couch while the former Fosse Company clerks evacuated. They moved like they’d had plenty of practice.

Emma narrowed her eyes and spread her hands. “Have it your way. I’ll beat some manners into you this instant!”

“Oh, will you, now? I survived a thrashing from Lady Lydia in the city of water. Do you think you have what it takes?” Cindy sprang into action as well.

A moment later, every one of their spell formulae disintegrated.

“We just moved into this nice, new building,” I reproved the startled maids, waving my right hand. My ring and bracelet caught the light. “I can tell what good friends you are, but please save your roughhousing for the Leinster estate. Think of the bad example it sets for Atra.”

“I beg your pardon,” Emma said after a moment.

“Oh, all right,” Cindy added. The pair relaxed and moved apart, looking conflicted.

I glanced at the sofa. Sure enough, Atra had a sparkle in her eyes, and her ears and tail were twitching.

“Felicia, may I see your report?” I called. “Emma, Cindy, would you be kind enough to entertain Atra?”

“R-Right!”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Sure thing!”

I sank into the sofa and perused the latest business report. The sums changing hands grew each time I read one.

Emma was with Atra in the kitchenette, preparing tea. The mail had apparently arrived, and Cindy had gone to the front hall to fetch it. “Isn’t the cold awful?” she had said as she left the room.

Felicia’s little hand reached over from beside me and traced a line of writing: “concerning the acquisition of the Fosse Company.”

“My mom was over the moon,” she said. “Dad might throw a fit, though.”

After our return to the royal capital, I had broken the news of Ernest Fosse’s possible ties to the rebel army and subsequent disappearance to Felicia. Stella and Caren had agreed it was the right thing to do. But that had left us with a conundrum: what would become of the business he’d left behind? With its president missing and his only daughter, Felicia, disowned, the Fosse Company could have disintegrated. I had proposed a merger with Allen & Co. as an expedient.

“Many houses are searching for Mr. Fosse,” I said. “I doubt he was more than an unwitting pawn of the church. I’ll explain things when he gets back.”

“There’s such a thing as *too* nice, Allen.” Felicia groaned, blushed, and pummeled my left arm. I simply continued reading the report.

“I’m against using the Fosse Company’s sales routes to expand westward. Better to focus on existing trade with Atlas.”

“What?! We’re all set for a big push!”

“The answer is no, at least until Sally and the Howard maids get back from the northern capital. Besides...”

“A-Allen? Ah.” The bespectacled girl gasped as I raised my right index finger to her forehead and gave her a light poke. That was all it took to knock her back

onto the sofa.

“Head Clerk Felicia Fosse will collapse from the strain,” I finished.

“Th-That’s not— M-Maybe you can’t tell, but I’ve really upped my stamina!”

“Oh? In that case...” I took the petite girl’s hand and helped her to her feet. While she blinked, I thrust my right index finger at her once more. “Let’s try this again standing up. If you don’t fall over—”

“We expand westward!”

“I’ll at least consider it.” I brushed aside the bangs that hid her lovely eyes and smiled. “If you *do* fall over, I’ll add days off to your schedule—days of total rest. No work allowed.”

“Y-You wouldn’t!” Felicia reeled. “Y-You expect me to take that from someone who never rests himself?”

Measured footsteps sounded.

“I’m all in favor,” said the brunette maid, returning with a tea service on a tray.

“Felicia go nighty-night?” asked Atra, trailing behind her. The child had taken to the head clerk from their first meeting in the southern capital.

“E-Emma?! N-Not you too, Atra!”

As the bespectacled girl recoiled, I launched a surprise attack. My hand snaked out—but not toward her forehead. A pat on the head drew a sudden shout, then a panicked babble. At last, blushing furiously, she squeaked and seemed about to faint.

“Whoops!” I caught her before she collapsed.

Can I consider this a victory?

I looked at Emma, who nodded vigorously with an air of thorough satisfaction. “A splendid performance, Mr. Allen,” she said. “You may depend upon me to mind Miss Fosse’s health.”

“Please do,” I replied. Felicia didn’t have a terribly strong constitution. We needed to make certain she took her rest when she could get it.

I lifted the still-swooning girl, laid her on the sofa, and covered her with a blanket. She regained consciousness with a confused murmur, followed by another blush and a frantic scramble to burrow under the covers. I commended her regardless.

“Excellent work. Now take the rest of the day off—president’s orders.”

“Or-durs!” Atra echoed. I was chuckling at her pronunciation when I felt a tug on the hem of my robe.

“Felicia?” I asked, looking down at her.

“Allen,” she announced, face half hidden, “I’ll *never* let that Nitti guy outdo me, you hear?!” Her eyes blazed with fighting spirit. Niche, it seemed, had well and truly fallen afoul of this prodigy.

“Please try to keep it within reason,” I ventured.

“I will not! Not even for you!” she snapped and turned her back on me.

Sorry, Niche. Try to stay strong.

I was enjoying tea with Atra and Emma, keeping one ear tuned to the slumbering Felicia’s rhythmic breathing, when Cindy returned with a letter in hand.

“Mr. Allen, urgent news from Lady Lily in the under-duchy!”

“Mail?” Atra asked, racing to greet her.

The milky-haired maid scooped the white-haired child up in her arms. “It sounds like Lady Lily has solved her problems for the present,” she said seriously, proffering an envelope adorned with flowers and little scarlet birds. “She says she’ll be coming to the royal capital before long and that she has matters to discuss with you when she gets here.”

“Lily wants to talk?” I repeated. “With me?”

“It seems like it, although she didn’t mention what about.”

I had a bad—no, make that a *dreadful* feeling. The maid in question could do some outrageous things. I accepted the envelope, touched the bracelet on my right wrist, and flashed the maid a bright smile. “Cindy—”

“I’m counting on you to sort out any difficulties!” she cheerily informed me. “Isn’t it getting time for you to meet the young ladies?”

So she scented trouble before I did. No wonder she survived those experiments to recreate the Dark Lord!

I tucked the message into an inner pocket, then seized my coat and slipped it on. Atra looked delighted as Emma bundled her up too.

“I think it’s time I left for today,” I said. “Emma, please see that Felicia doesn’t overtax herself. Cindy...try to hang on a little longer!”

“You may depend upon it, sir,” the brunette maid responded with a courteous bow.

“Allen?” the bespectacled girl asked, sitting up. She seemed flustered despite her drowsiness.

“Oh, all right.” The milky-haired maid nodded, fiddling with her bangs.

Atra was ready to face the cold, so I took her hand in my left and raised my right in a slight wave. “I finished checking all the paperwork. Felicia, I’ll see you again at the Leinsters’ tonight.”



“Your cocoa and tea, sir. Be careful when you drink, Atra, dear. It’s hot.”

“Thank you,” I told the waitress, who had become quite a familiar face.

Beside me, Atra sang a note and gave her ears and tail a happy shake. I patted her head, and the waitress beamed at the child as she moved back behind the counter.

I saw few other patrons in the café with the sky-blue roof near the Royal Academy, where I had arranged to meet the girls. The early evening hour partially explained the slow business, but I also took it as a sign that the city’s population had yet to fully recover. Months of continuous upheaval had left deep scars.

Atra tried to sip her cocoa and gave a start. “Allen.” She looked up at me, ears plastered flat to her head.

“Is it too hot for you?” I said, raising my right index finger to cool the drink slightly with a temperature-control spell—carefully, since chilling it too much would spoil the flavor. The ring on my third finger flashed mockingly.

The white-haired child watched the magic activate with rapt interest, then gingerly clutched the white porcelain cup and took a sip. Her big eyes lit up. “Sweet!”

“Don’t drink too fast, now. You wouldn’t want to burn yourself,” I cautioned, rubbing her head. Then I popped open the pocket watch I’d left on the table and checked the time.

Maybe we got here a bit too early.

I reached into an inner pocket for a letter I’d received from the western chieftains just the other day. But no sooner had I begun to read than I glimpsed a girl run past the café’s front window. Two bunches of blonde hair tied with white ribbons poked out the sides of her Royal Academy beret, and a warm-looking scarf circled her neck above a navy-blue cloak.

She stopped near the entrance, took several deep breaths, then straightened her beret and started neatening her hair. She seemed to be feeling just a tad nervous.

Our eyes met. She immediately clapped her hands to her cheeks, flustered.

The waitress behind the counter kindly opened the door for her. “Come in! You’re here to meet someone, aren’t you? Right this way.”

“Y-Yes.” With an awkward nod, the girl entered. She reached our seats before I finished wiping Atra’s mouth with a handkerchief.

“Hello, Ellie,” I said, smiling. “You’re awfully early.”

“H-Hello, Allen, sir,” Ellie Walker said bashfully, eyes downcast. She was not only my student but also Lady Tina Howard’s personal maid and heir to the renowned Walkers of the north.

“Aren’t Tina and Lynne with you?” I asked as I stood, took her cloak, and hung it on a coatrack.

“W-We were on our way here when my ladies remembered that they still had

spell books to return and went back to school. We couldn't keep you waiting, sir, so I ran ahead on my own!" Ellie looked up and took a half step toward me, blonde hair and scarf bobbing as she clenched her fists.

"That scarf looks charming on you," I said, honestly grateful.

"Thank you very much! My grandma sent it from the northern capital. Because it won't be long before winter sets in here as well, she said. Lady Tina and Lady Lynne each got one too!"

"Mrs. Walker did? What do you know."

I pictured the stern face of Ellie's grandmother, Shelley Walker, who served the Ducal House of Howard as head maid. In their war with the Yustinian Empire and subsequent march on the royal and eastern capitals, the Howards had fielded armies so large that just thinking about the task of supplying them made my brain hurt. Yet Shelley had overseen their logistics single-handedly and reportedly continued to do so. Between her and her husband, Graham, the Walkers were a family to be feared!

While I reflected on the wearer's impressive lineage, Atra stared at the scarf.

A tender look came over Ellie's face. "Would you like to wear one too, Atra?" she asked, bending down.

The child piped a note and nodded vigorously, ears and tail twitching.

Ellie untied her scarf and wrapped it around Atra's neck. "I'll knit you one for next time, okay?"

"Soft!" The white-haired child beamed and buried her face in the scarf, wagging her tail like mad.

"How kind of you, Ellie. I didn't know you could knit," I said, winking and motioning the girl to a seat.

"Yessir. My grandma taught our whole family," she replied, sitting across from me. "I can knit gloves too, and— U-Um, Allen, sir, I know Ms. L-Lydia gave you that scarf, but..." She took off her beret and hugged it to her chest, fidgeting.

True, Lydia did give me this scarf for my birthday last year. But what difference does that make?

While I waited for Ellie to continue, the waitress walked over with a spring in her step.

“May I take your order?”

Ellie gave a start. “Oh, w-well...”

She was making progress a little at a time, but unexpected questions still flummoxed her as much as they had when we’d first met. I was just about to lend her a hand when the front door opened and two petite girls entered, also wearing cloaks over Royal Academy uniforms. They looked around until they spotted us, then one—platinum-haired and carrying a sorcerous rod on her back—gave an energetic wave.

“Sir! Ellie!” called Lady Tina Howard, light flashing off her hair clip.

“Don’t shout, Miss First Place. You’re embarrassing me,” scolded the other, red-haired and wearing a sword and dagger at her hip. Lydia’s younger sister and Duke Leinster’s second daughter, Lynne, seemed her usual self.

“Would you order for all of you, Ellie?” I asked, sliding a menu to the girl across from me. “Atra included, if you don’t mind.”

“Y-Yessir!” The young maid gathered her courage and sank into earnest contemplation. Soon, she looked up and said, “Four cake sets, each with a different cake. And hot black tea to drink, please.”

“Coming right up!”

“Well done,” I told Ellie.

Tina and Lynne reached our table just as the waitress left.

“See? I told you Mr. Allen would be here,” said the former. “Just as I predicted!”

“Did you forget that Ellie and I both thought the same thing?” the latter countered.

Tempers flared, calling forth snowflakes and sparks. I dispelled both before they got a chance to spread. Ellie scooted over to make room for the pair.

“Tina, Lynne,” I said, “hang your cloaks on that coatrack and have a seat.”

“Yes, sir,” the young noblewomen responded in unison and eagerly squeezed in next to Ellie.

The cake sets arrived, and the girls dug in, all smiles.

“How is school, now that it’s back in session?” I asked while I watched them eat. I’d been dying to know.

“Our class was down to about half size at first,” said Tina. “Still, it’s been growing bit by bit!”

“But Patricia Lockheart hasn’t returned to the city,” Lynne added. “I think she’s staying in her house’s lands out west, where she took Fred Harclay. I know you wanted to question her, dear brother.”

“We h-heard it from Nori and Nanao,” Ellie supplied.

The string of upheavals that had moved the kingdom’s Four Great Ducal Houses to military action was also taking its toll on the young pupils of the Royal Academy. I had hoped to ask Patricia about Io “Black Blossom” Lockfield, who had assassinated Robson Atlas at the Fortress of Seven Towers and fought Caren, Lynne, and Lily in the city of water, but no such luck. Fred’s house might even have ordered him to remain in the west, since Earl Harclay had fought in the Algren vanguard and been punished accordingly.

“Lady Stella and Ms. Caren seem to have their hands full with student council work,” Ellie continued, sticking her fork into a bright yellow fruit tart.

“You wouldn’t believe the scary faces they make because they can’t see you, sir. They keep screwing up their eyes and mouths like *this*.” Tina used her fingers to push up the corners of her eyes. Both Caren and Stella would normally have joined us, but with the next school election still up in the air, they found themselves buried under paperwork and students’ concerns.

I’d better put in a word with the headmaster.

“My dear sister seems just as hectic, at least according to Anna,” Lynne added, stirring milk into her tea.

“Cheryl’s had nonstop meetings with foreign dignitaries since she became first in line to the throne, so she always needs an escort. As her bodyguard,

Lydia doesn't get a moment's rest," I said, reflecting that Lydia's mental state must have been even more precarious than I'd supposed. A reaction to all the time we'd spent together in the city of water, perhaps?

"Oh, and I think my father and Graham will visit the city soon!" Tina volunteered.

"As will my dear parents," said Lynne.

"D-Duke Lebufera and Duchess Letty too," Ellie chimed in. "Chieftain Chise, um, said so in a letter, although she can't come because she needs to guard the border at Blood River."

"Is that so?" I said slowly.

Hostilities with the Yustinians had ceased, although we hadn't yet signed a peace treaty. So what could bring Dukes Walter Howard, Liam Leinster, and Leo Lebufera together under one roof? And I couldn't forget the Howards' head butler, Graham "the Abyss" Walker; Duchess Lisa Leinster, the former Lady of the Sword; or Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the "Emerald Gale," who had served as the legendary Shooting Star's lieutenant two hundred years ago and even crossed blades with the Dark Lord. The Leinster Maid Corps's officers were gathering as well.

The whole thing is unusual—no, extraordinary. I'm sure they have measures against the church to discuss, but the flower dragon oracle might have something to do with it.

"Do you remember what I asked the western chieftains for in the eastern capital?" I asked my students, watching Atra do battle with her fruitcake. "They wrote from the western capital to say that the rites to invoke the flower dragon have begun. And the preparations to reforge Caren's dagger and forge Lynne's new one are coming along nicely."

The girls' eyes widened, and their cheeks flushed. Caren's dagger had once belonged to Shooting Star, so restoring it ought to rank high in the western peoples' priorities. We could expect great things from Lynne's new blade as well.

"But as things stand, Ellie's made the most progress," I added, gently teasing

the young maid while I sipped my tea. “Not many people get a chance to train under the great Flower Sage. I’ve learned a lot from your lessons myself—the chance was too good to pass up.”

Ellie’s spellcasting left few traces, and she also excelled in fine control. She had recently overcome her struggles with lightning, the only one of the eight elements that had given her trouble, and started learning botanical magic, although she remained far from mastering it.

She shook her blonde hair, blushed, and smiled. “Y-Yessir! Chieftain Chise sends me lots of letters. Sh-She can sound harsh, but I think she has a warm heart.”

I knew it—Ellie really is a little angel. I must defend her smile, no matter the cost!

I was in the middle of renewing my resolve when I found a fork loaded with fruitcake thrust in my direction.

“Allen, aah.”

“Oh? Why, thank you, Atra,” I replied, accepting the child’s kindness and gobbling the proffered treat. Its refreshing citrus flavor was to die for.

The girls across the table froze, staring at me.

I beg your pardon?

Unfazed by the change of atmosphere, Atra sang a merry tune and resumed the conquest of her cake.

Immediately, forks lanced toward my mouth from three directions. Each girl smiled in her own distinctive way, all pressing me to choose.

“Sir.”

“Dear brother.”

“A-Allen, sir.”

I let out a hollow laugh. The ring on my right hand gleamed with exasperation.



“A-All right, I...I’ll give it a try,” Ellie announced nervously in the Leinster

mansion's inner courtyard, enclosed in a military barrier. Night had already fallen, but mana lamps kept our surroundings bright.

I nodded to Ellie and motioned for Tina and Lynne to take a few steps back. Both girls watched their year-older friend with interest. They had changed into everyday clothes and Ellie, into her maid uniform. Stella and Caren had yet to join us. Felicia had gone for a bath with Emma and the company maids, and she had taken Atra with her.

I grinned ruefully. What I'd meant as a bit of after-dinner exercise had taken a turn for the serious.

Silently, Ellie cast her spell. Moments later, Tina and Lynne cheered as flowers blanketed the courtyard in a profusion of colors. Red, blue, brown, green, violet, white, black... She had combined *seven* elements into botanical magic.

A formula from Chise Glenbysidhe, the Flower Sage herself!

If my formulae were schematics, then the great demisprite sorceress's were sheet music, beautiful as works of art. And unlike those passed down among the beastfolk, they evidently activated even without ice, so long as the caster kept her mana in perfect proportion. Fascinating.



I was still marveling when Ellie turned around, cheeks flushed, and jumped for joy. “Allen, sir!” she cried. “I...I did it!”

“Well done, Ellie.” I couldn’t stop my hand from reaching out and patting her on the head. “There are only a handful of botanical sorcerers in the whole kingdom. I’d better get practicing, or you’ll surpass me in no time. I know how hard you worked for this.”

“Y-You’re giving me too much credit. But th-thank you.” The angel smiled, bashful but delighted. I had no doubt that she would one day master the grand-scale botanical spell I’d been devising.

Our pleasant moment lasted until the red-haired young noblewoman cleared her throat. “Dear brother! I believe I’m up next,” Lynne announced, looking perfectly composed as she stepped forward.

I locked eyes with Cindy, who was standing by on the roof, and gave a slight nod. Multiple military fire-resistant barriers swiftly rose around us.

Lynne gripped the hilt of the Dagger of Fiery Serpents hanging from her belt. Her shout split the air as she yanked the blade free, loosing a massive snake of flame into the air above. Yet the creature’s flight never breached the barriers. Lynne had it under control.

“Humph. Not half bad,” Tina said, looking up.

“A-Amazing,” Ellie murmured, her eyes also on the spectacle above.

I can’t believe how far she’s come in such a short time. I stared at Lynne’s stately profile. *She’s a Leinster all right.*

The red-haired young noblewoman scythed her dagger through the air, dismissing the serpent, and sheathed the blade with aplomb. “Well, dear brother? What do you think?” she asked, a lock of her hair swaying as she strode over to me.

“I think you’ve really started to get the hang of that dagger,” I replied.

“I have! I followed your example and started practicing in the mornings, so, u-um...” Lynne’s proud stance suddenly faltered. She advanced another step and leaned her head toward me. Her upturned eyes held a plea, which I answered

with a light pat and my honest opinion.

“I know I said the same thing to Ellie, but I bet you really will surpass me before you know it.”

For all their remarkable progress, both girls shook their heads.

“I hardly think so.”

“I...I couldn't possibly.”

Not a speck of gloom dulled their clear eyes. I couldn't let them down.

“Thank you both,” I said.

Lynne and Ellie giggled and swayed happily, hands pressed to their cheeks.

Their platinum-haired best friend's hand shot up. “I'm ready too, sir! Teach me a new spell or technique or—”

“A new spell control exercise it is. Go right ahead,” I interrupted, instantly deploying over a hundred practice formulae for Tina to drill in front of her.

“Wha—?!” The young noblewoman's eyes widened. Then she puffed out her cheeks, crossed her arms, and turned her back on me. “Ooh! Why do you have to be so *mean*, sir?!”

Glittering snowflakes fluttered over the flowers. Her mana reserves had grown since our first meeting, and they had already been massive then. Was it the influence of Frigid Crane within her, or was her talent simply blossoming? I didn't know how far I could guide her, but for the moment, she needed me to hold her hand.

With renewed purpose, I met the blonde maid's eyes. “Ellie, I have your next assignment. Look it over.”

“Yessir!” Ellie clenched her little fists.

I gave her a wink, then lightly waved my left hand. At once, the flowers sprang to life, forming high walls and a spiral staircase into the sky. The charming maid's eyes lit up.

“Work on using plants to build structures like this,” I said, raising my left index finger. “With your mana reserves, you should be able to attack and defend with

them. Stick to Chieftain Chise's stable formulae. Adding ice improves durability, but it seems to raise the difficulty as well."

"I'll t-try my best, but..." Pressing her left hand to her chest and clutching my sleeve with her right, Ellie said clearly, "I want to use y-your formulae, even if it's harder."

I stared blankly at her, taken aback in spite of myself. Turning to Tina and Lynne, I found them holding their hands over gaping mouths. Shy, reserved Ellie had learned to assert herself!

My pupil's growth brought a smile to my face. "In that case, I'll make them just a little easier to use for you. And try a flight spell while we're at it!"

"Yessir!" the angelic maid chirped, pressing her hands together and beaming from ear to ear.

I turned next to the red-haired young noblewoman fidgeting as she waited her turn. "Lynne, your sword, if you please."

"Of course!" she answered promptly, proffering the weapon scabbard and all.

I drew the sword, then held it aloft and conjured a fireball. "You know I lack the mana for secret arts," I told Lynne over my shoulder. "Consider this an imitation, nothing more. I'll give you the formula later."

Almost immediately, the fireball burst, scattering across the whole courtyard. A brief lull followed. Then the girls gave a start as eight whirling pillars of flame converged on the center. An inferno towered...and vanished. I'd kept the blaze on a tight rein, since I couldn't bear to burn the flowers Ellie had worked so hard for.

Tina clutched her rod. "Amazing," she murmured as the errant hair atop her head waved. Ellie hugged her mistress from behind, flush with excitement.

"Delayed activation followed by unexpected convergence," I explained, resheathing the sword and returning it to Lynne. "You lose the element of surprise after the first one, but it works well in real combat. Practice it while you wait for the dagger I asked the western chieftains to make."

"I will, dear brother!" the red-haired girl answered eagerly, clutching the

sword to herself with both hands. I had every faith that she would succeed. Lynne Leinster was no prodigy, but she always kept forging ahead one step at a time.

Ellie and Lynne quietly touched fists. As for the remaining girl...

"I know, I know. Nothing but control exercises for me. Yes, even though you teach new spells to Ellie and Lynne and Stella and Caren," she muttered, sitting on her haunches a short distance off and stealing obvious glances in my direction. Something about her performance reminded me of Cheryl. They had struck up a friendship in the city of water and the southern capital, so I supposed the princess had imparted some questionable lessons.

The next time I see her, she's getting a piece of my mind.

"Tina, please cheer up," I begged, unable to suppress a grin.

"Humph. I don't take requests from mean people, sir." Her Highness's snow-white ribbon and platinum hair fluttered as she turned her face from me.

I considered, then changed tack. "Is that so? Ellie, I was going to teach Tina this new spell, but since— Whoa there!"

I dispelled a small incoming ice shot and turned back to Tina. Ellie and Lynne slid smoothly into cover behind me.

"Excuse me, sir?" Tina demanded, glaring at me from amid a whirl of ice shards while that lock of her hair stood to furious attention. Her faces had gotten no less funny since the day we'd met.

I chuckled and cast an ice spell.

"Wh-What on earth...?" Tina gaped as myriad tiny ice mirrors appeared over the courtyard, scattering reflected light.

"How gorgeous." Lynne marveled at the wondrous scene.

Ellie gasped, at a loss for words.

"I tried incorporating Linaria's formulae into Divine Ice Mirror," I explained. "I designed it to deflect incoming attacks, but I think you could adapt it for offense or a diversion too. Will you learn it?"

My question sent a slight tremor through Tina's little body. Color rose in her cheeks, and her hair stood bolt upright.

"You have to ask?!"

I spent a little while walking Tina through the spell and putting Ellie and Lynne through their paces. I was sitting back in a chair, watching the girls throw themselves into their drills, when a male voice said, "A little late for exercise, isn't it?"

Its owner, a young man with curly red hair wearing a somewhat battered white uniform, settled into the empty chair beside me.

"Long day, Richard?" I asked.

Lydia and Lynne's elder brother, Vice Commander Lord Richard Leinster of the royal guard, took the teapot from the antique wooden table and turned a cup right side up. The knight who had done his house proud fighting in the eastern capital gave me a weary grin as he poured his own herbal tea.

"Hi there, Allen. I realized I haven't been able to make time for a talk with you since you got back, so I snuck out tonight. Anna told me where to find you. *She* seemed to be in good spirits."

"Did she really?"

Anna ought to be as busy as any of us. Maybe she's looking forward to Lisa's visit?

"We'll conclude formal peace with the Yustinians," Richard said, watching the girls practice in a field of flowers. "No monetary reparations. They'll cede us an out-of-the-way border region called Shiki. We've got our hands full planning security for the signing ceremony."

After suffering a major defeat at Rostlay in the kingdom's far north, the empire had reportedly fallen into civil war as the emperor initiated a purge. If it had gotten around to signing treaties, then he must have more or less finished "cleaning house."

"I hear the League of Principalities is still in chaos. What about the eastern

border?” I asked, taking a sip of herbal tea. It couldn’t hurt to compare notes.

The kingdom had dealt blows to the Yustinians and the league, achieving stability in the north and south. The western demonfolk staring us down across Blood River posed a serious threat, but they didn’t want total war. The real problem lay eastward: the Knights of the Holy Spirit who had used the Algren rebellion to invade the royal and eastern capitals. I grimaced, recalling their war cry: “The Saint and the Holy Spirit wish it so!” I had met the girl who called herself the Saint in the city of water, but I couldn’t fathom what she was thinking.

Richard’s youngest sister carried on a heated argument with Tina until a hug from Ellie calmed them down.

“The church hasn’t made any moves within our borders yet,” he said evenly, watching her with a fond look in his eyes. “Anna, our own Earl Sykes, and the western House of Checker are putting everything they’ve got into intelligence. What we need to worry about”—he pulled a map of the continent’s western regions from his pocket and tapped a country northeast of the kingdom—“is Lalannoy.”

A young nation, the Lalannoy Republic had been the empire’s northeastern tip until half a century ago, when a marquess wielding the supreme light spell had led it to independence. It also bordered the kingdom across the Four Heroes Sea—the continent’s largest saltwater lake—and had likely taken part in the Algren rebellion.

I know we can’t let them get away with that, but is it really such a pressing issue?

“It sounds like their government might change hands for the first time since independence,” the red-haired nobleman said in answer to my questioning look. “The higher-ups are rattled.”

“You don’t say,” I replied. While I knew about the Lalannoyan system of government, I couldn’t see why the kingdom’s leaders found it so concerning.

His Highness produced several sheets of paper from an inner pocket—evidently copied from a video orb.

“And those are?” I asked.

“Duplicates of stuff the Yustinians handed over to smooth negotiations. You know how they loathe Lalannoy. They claim they happened to catch these while spying on their mortal enemy.”

Richard turned over the first sheet. The grainy picture had obviously been taken from a long way off. Even so, I would never forget this man in a dirty gray robe or the fearsome swordswoman who had held her own against Lydia and Duchess Letty in the city of water. Stunned, I murmured their names.

“Gerard and Viola.”

The former second prince of the Royal House of Wainwright had gone missing during the rebellion while in transit to the royal capital. What was the man who had tried to burn down the eastern capital using Blazing Qilin doing with Alicia “Crescent Moon” Coalfield’s sword-wielding escort from the church?

“And not just them,” Richard said, flipping over the second sheet. A young man and woman walked down an alleyway—Duke Algren’s third son, Gregory, and his attendant Ito. I’d last seen them tumbling over the Falls of Parting on the outskirts of the eastern capital.

They survived?!

Looking up, I caught a glimpse of the levelheaded war leader in the vice commander’s expression. “We don’t know any specifics,” he said. “Personally, the last one gave me the biggest shock.”

A third sheet turned to reveal a strapping red-haired man striding along a stall-lined street. He wore a sword at his hip and carried baked goods in both hands.

“Lord Ridley Leinster, the Swordmaster?!” I blurted out. “Wh-What is *he* doing in Lalannoy?!”

I had known the fearsome swordsman only briefly at the Royal Academy, back when Lydia could barely cast a spell. To the best of my knowledge, he was the only person other than Lisa ever to best Lydia in pure swordplay. And although I hadn’t known it at the time, he was also Lily’s elder brother. After his duel with Lydia and the ensuing battle against the black dragon, he had vanished, leaving

only a note that read, “I know not yet the vast ocean.”

Richard cradled his forehead. “Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Sources claim to have sighted that Ernest Fosse fellow you’re looking for and the beastfolk traitors in Lalannoy too. And with all this going on, His Majesty and Her Royal Highness have one meeting or council after another. Did Lynne tell you Lydia’s mood keeps getting worse? She’ll blow her top any day now.”

“So I hear.”

I only hope she doesn’t fight with Cheryl.

A serious clash between my former classmates would demolish the palace.

Re-collecting myself, I placed a recently delivered letter on the table. Ellie made a little chair out of flowers while Tina and Lynne applauded.

Richard poured a second cup of herbal tea and raised it to his lips. “What’s that?”

“Sui sent it,” I said. “He says he’s going to marry Momiji soon. I planned to give them a honeymoon to the royal capital, but I scrapped that idea—you see how things are. Still, it’s not often my fellow disciple asks me for a favor.”

Sui of the fox clan lived in the eastern capital, and I’d known him since we were children. We’d even studied martial arts together, although our teacher had taken me on first. His sagacious fiancée, Momiji, had her roots in the southern isles. Her long raven hair left a strong impression.

“And there you have it.” I bowed, concluding my explanation to Richard. “I know you have a lot of demands on your time, but—”

“Allen.” The red-haired nobleman cut me short. I looked up, and he broke into a grin. “My comrade in arms is starting on a new phase of life. Nothing could stop me from going to see him off. And that goes for everyone else who fought in the eastern capital too.”

“Thank you.”

Lord Richard Leinster cared for those who fought alongside him, regardless of social standing. More than ever, I felt certain he deserved to inherit the dukedom.

The vice commander drained his teacup and stood. “Well then, I’d best be going.”

“I’ll send you more details about Sui before long,” I promised.

“Good. I know everyone will be happy to hear them,” he said. “Oh, and Allen, have you heard what Chieftain Chise has to say about Stella and Ellie? She says — O-On second thought, never mind. Keep an eye on my sisters for me.”

Richard set off toward the house.

What was that about?

I was just returning my attention to the girls when he stopped in his tracks. “I almost forgot the most important thing. Allen!”

Lynne heard the shout too. “Dear brother Richard?” she said, puzzled.

I turned to the nobleman and found him smirking. I didn’t like where this was going.

“I hear my aunt and uncle want to meet you,” he said. “Just keep that in mind.”

A dull “Is that so?” was the best I could manage. I had never come face-to-face with Under-duke Lucas Leinster or his wife. Perhaps they had questions about Atlas, although I’d arranged to send all inquiries Niche’s way.

While I was lost in thought, the girls started waving frantically.

“Sir!”

“Dear brother!”

“I...I have a question.”

Whoops. No more speculating. Right now, I’m these girls’ tutor. Let the eminent and capable handle all the tough questions—the professor and the headmaster, in particular.

I waved back and started walking.

“Tina, Ellie, Lynne,” I called. “I’ll be right with you.”



“We’re ba—”

No sooner had Tina and Lynne set foot in my room than a huge, synchronized yawn overwhelmed their greeting. Back from their bath and dressed for sleep, they immediately leapt into bed and closed their eyes.

Felicia mumbled in her sleep and got a musical yip in response. Not long ago, she had been waxing eloquent about new trade deals. Now she slumbered soundly, Atra snug in her arms. And her sheer light-purple nightgown struck me as not quite decent.

“I...I’m back from— Ah.” Ellie covered her mouth and blinked in surprise, entering a step behind her friends in a pale-green nightgown and cape.

“Tina, Lynne,” I said kindly, “if you feel sleepy, you have your own rooms.”

Their exhausted Highnesses started mumbling in their sleep.

“Mmm...”

“Dear brother...”

Ellie approached them with a smile—a little angel if I’d ever seen one. Still, the bed might prove cramped for four.

“Please allow us, Mr. Allen,” Emma interjected.

“Allow us!” a troop of maids echoed as she and Cindy led them in carrying a couch, onto which they loaded Felicia. Watching the experienced way they bore her off, I reflected that they must have gotten practice in the southern capital.

“Atra, dear, upsy-daisy!” Cindy cooed, scooping up the white-haired child. With a wink at me, she added, “Don’t worry about Lady Stella and Miss Caren. I sent an escort to meet them.”

“Thank you. Take good care of Felicia and Atra,” I said, nodding to the maids. They could handle the rest.

I’ll find another room to sleep in.

Once I’d slipped out into the corridor, careful not to wake Tina and Lynne, I turned to the nightgowned angel beside me. “Aren’t you sleepy, Ellie?”

“N-Nosir,” she replied, fiddling with her bangs and staring bashfully at the

floor. “I, um, haven’t seen you in a week, so I got, well, e-excited. And soaking in the bath really woke me up, so...”

After all that training? The Walkers have quite an heir.

I checked my pocket watch to hide my astonishment. Diligent though Stella and Caren were, they could hardly arrive much later than this. The royal capital boasted safer streets than most cities, but it had just been through chaos. I would have gone to escort them myself if Cindy hadn’t made other arrangements.

I pocketed the watch and gave the girl beside me a mischievous look. “Would you lend me a hand, Ellie? I’d like to give Stella and Caren a surprise.”

Once I’d explained what I had in mind, the young maid nodded repeatedly. “Of course, Allen, sir,” she said, with a pretty smile. “I’d be delighted!”

The car carrying my sister and student pulled up to the mansion just after we finished our work. I folded my apron and asked the maids to handle the rest, then raced to the entrance hall with Ellie in tow. We practically flew down the staircase only to find the front door already open. A wolf-clan girl in a cloak and Royal Academy beret stood just inside it, thanking a group of maids.

“Caren,” I called, throwing in a quick left-handed wave.

She turned, puzzled. Then her face lit up. “Allen!” She might have overcome enduring prejudice against beastfolk to earn her place as vice president of the Royal Academy student council, but her tail still wagged like mad as she threw herself into my arms. In her joy, she let slip a crackle of violet electricity that made the mana lamps flicker.

“You’re awfully late,” I said. “Long day?”

Caren removed her beret and placed my hand on her head. “Long, not to mention exhausting,” she groused, pursing her lips. “I might not have made it to Iceday without your old beret. My fatigue knows no bounds, so pamper me. Every brother has a duty to spoil his little sister rotten. It’s an immutable law. Isn’t it, Ellie?”

“W-Well...”

“What am I going to do with you?” I said, rubbing my needy sister’s head while Ellie fumbled for a response.

Meanwhile, our other late arrival stepped inside, dressed identically to Caren. I didn’t see her rapier at her hip. The ranks of Leinster maids stood straighter and bowed deeply at her approach.

“Thank you all,” the beauty said. “You’ve been a great help.”

The maids demurred.

“O-Oh, but you needn’t...”

“We’re h-honored to have been of service to a saint.”

“Simply gorgeous.”

The student council president looked flummoxed—and far more mature than she had a few months earlier.

“I see you’ve been working hard, Stella,” I said by way of greeting.

“Weren’t you cold, Big Sis Stella?” Ellie asked almost simultaneously, clutching the hands of the girl with a snow-white ribbon in her long, azure-tinged platinum hair—Lady Stella Howard.

“I’m fine, Ellie.” Her Highness smiled. “Mr. Allen, I only had a bite for dinner, and I’m feeling famished.”

Little white flashes appeared with each step she took, and I could feel the air being purified. Stella had been struggling with this inexplicable and extreme shift toward the element of light for three months, and it showed no sign of stop—

Hm?

I sensed the faintest trace of another element, but it vanished. Had I imagined it?

“Caren,” I said.

“Oh, all right.”

Once my sister had reluctantly released me, I gave Ellie a wink. “If you’re hungry, we have dinner for you.”

“M-Mr. Allen and I made it together!” the young maid added. “Would you, um...”

“I’d love some.” Caren twitched her ears.

“So would I, Ellie. Thank you.” Stella hugged her younger sister in all but name.

“Oh, Big Sis Stella, you’re all cold.” Ellie let out a bashful laugh but returned the embrace.

The watching maids broke out in grins. Then a sharp clap split the air. I turned and saw Cindy grinning from ear to ear.

“Come along,” she said. “What you need first is a nice hot bath! Right this way.”

“Thank you, Cindy,” I replied. “Ellie, would you like to join them for another soak?”

“Y-Yessir!”

Ellie and Caren followed the milky-haired maid out, leaving Stella and me alone in the hall.

I’d better bring dinner to their rooms for—

I felt a sudden squeeze on my left hand.

“Stella?”

“I felt chilly. Do you mind?” the blushing, platinum-haired noblewoman asked timidly.

“I would be honored, Lady Stella Howard,” I replied, with an exaggerated shake of my head, and fixed the angle of the sea-green griffin feather in her beret. “But you mustn’t work so late. Will you think better of it next time?”

Stella pressed her head against my chest. “Were you worried?” she asked in a voice so small I could barely hear it, her ears burning red.

In silence, I gave the beauty one, two soft pats on the back. She responded with a happy profusion of airborne glows. I removed her beret with my left hand and was starting to comb out her hair with my right...when a wave of

menace struck my back.

“Allen, Stella?” a voice asked slowly. “What do you think you’re doing?”

We turned, startled, to find my positively glacial sister and a young maid with her cheeks puffed up like a squirrel both eyeing us suspiciously.

Oh dear. I might not survive this.

I slid the platinum-haired noblewoman into shelter behind me and braced to meet Caren’s and Ellie’s fury.



“Honestly, Allen! You’re too kind for your own good! Think long and hard about how you ought to save that affection for your one and only sister. And don’t think you’re off the hook, Stella!”

Caren’s pale-yellow nightgown and cape flapped as she complained. She had already finished her bath, wolfed down a dinner of grilled meat sandwiches and hot vegetable soup—mostly courtesy of Ellie and me—and was now digging into the tart portioned onto her dessert plate.



Ellie had been part of the conversation until just recently, when she'd succumbed to drowsiness and the maids had whisked her off to her bedroom. Staying up late once in a while would do her no harm.

"We need equal opportunity, if you ask me," Stella retorted from the couch where she sat in her pale-azure nightgown, sipping tea with perfect etiquette.

"I wish you'd stop sulking, Caren," I added, looking up from the book I'd been reading in a chair near the window.

"Humph!" My sister took a seat on the bed, tail thrashing. No sooner had she slid a pillow onto her lap than she seized my cloak from the bedside table and squeezed it tight. Her desire for affection warmed my heart even as I changed the topic.

"That reminds me, Stella: people have started calling you a saint here, as well as in the northern and southern capitals and the city of water. I hear you've cured quite a few patients."

Stella's recent growth had been nothing short of remarkable. Despite the symptoms plaguing her, she had continued to make daily efforts. Her purification magic, at least, now ranked alongside Cheryl's as some of the most potent in the kingdom.

The platinum-haired noblewoman frowned and set her cup on the table. "Don't you start too, Mr. Allen. There's nothing saintly about me. If anything..."

"And I hear they've started calling *you* 'the water dragon's emissary' in the city of water," Caren chimed in, spotting her opening to strike where I was most vulnerable. Stella nodded with a proud smile.

"Stop that, Caren," I murmured, gazing out the window at the sprawling nighttime cityscape. "Little sisters teasing big brothers goes against 'the way of the world.'"

"It does not," came her swift rejoinder.

"I wish you'd accept it, Mr. Allen," added Stella.

In the face of this concerted attack from the Royal Academy's student council, I could do nothing but groan.

I need someone to keep the whole water dragon business from spreading further. Someone like Niche.

“In any case, I see your light magic has improved considerably,” I said, turning the conversation back to Stella as she stifled a laugh behind her hand.

“I read your notes and practice every day,” she replied. “Although other elements and offensive magic still bring on weakness. Lately, even basic strength enhancement leaves me feeling wretched.” Her head drooped limply.

Sensing her fragility, I stood and knelt beside her. “Just hold out a little longer. The rite to invoke the flower dragon has begun. If only I could do more, you wouldn’t—”

Stella’s fair hand covered my mouth. Her face filled my view. Then her forehead touched mine.

“I forbid you to apologize,” she said, her voice taking on the tones of prayer. “Without the control spells you wove for me, I would be bedridden in the northern capital instead of attending school right now. Not a day passes that I don’t appreciate that. Because I have you, I can—”

“Ahem!” Caren pointedly cleared her throat, and we separated in a hurry.

Stella’s cheeks grew redder by the moment. “E-Excuse me! I’ll g-go fetch more tea!” she exclaimed, darting out of the room with a cup in hand.

Won’t she need the pot too?

While I dispelled the lingering glows, Caren got off the bed and marched up to me. “*Allen?*” She drew out my name, replete with menace.

I turned to my jealous sister and said earnestly, “Caren, keep an eye on Stella for me. For Duke Howard’s eldest daughter, losing access to ice magic probably hits harder than we imagine—and in a different way than Tina or Lydia struggled with.”

“I know. I don’t hear much talk at school, but I do hear some.” My clever sister took my meaning and sat on the couch, pouting. “But I...I always appreciate you too. Come sit next to me.”

Sensing that her sulk ran deep, I obeyed without question. As soon as I

lowered myself onto the couch to Caren's left, she leaned against me, shoulder to shoulder.

Scratching my cheek, I ventured, "Would you like me to buy you a new ber—?"

"No, never," she interrupted in a tone that brooked no argument. I had never managed to move her when she dug her heels in like this.

Her eyes said, "Pet me," so I started combing her hair with my fingers. She squirmed, acting as ticklish as she'd been when we were kids.

"You should expect a messenger from the west soon too," I said. "They'll want to see you about—"

"The dagger, right?" Caren supplied drowsily, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Right. I wrote that I'd send someone with it and got an angry letter back. They 'could never give the commander's blade such shabby treatment!' So, has my little sister been keeping up with her training?"

"Of course. I am *your* sister, remember? So you can count on my help more than ever. I won't let Lydia *or* Stella get the better of me!" Caren slurred, happily leaning her head on my left shoulder.

I don't know if a good brother would let his little sister pull his weight like that. When did I go wrong raising her?

I was still worrying when the door quietly opened.

"I...I'm back. I forgot the pot," admitted a sheepish noblewoman.

"It's good to see you again, Stella," I said.

"Welcome back," Caren added.

Stella blinked at us, then shut the door and strode briskly to the sofa without another word. She took the seat to my left and set her teacup on a side table, keeping her knees primly together. Only then, fondling her own hair, did she speak.

"My father and Graham said..."

Caren and I gave her puzzled looks. I had rarely heard her sound so tense.

Stella took the sea-green griffin feather from her pocket and continued in her normal voice, “They said they’d like to have a long, serious talk with you, Mr. Allen.”

“Duke Walter and Mr. Walker do?” I repeated.

About ten-day fever and the notes from Duchess Rosa’s youth, no doubt.

Although I’d been reporting everything I’d gleaned from the city of water, the missive I’d received on my return to the royal capital betrayed both men’s excitement. I didn’t blame them. No ducal house could best the Walkers when it came to espionage, but now a foreign country had yielded information that eluded even their best efforts.

I felt something warm and soft on my right shoulder.

Caren poked her head out to say, “Is it me, Stella, or are you closer than before?”

“You must be imagining things,” Stella replied. “I haven’t moved at all.”

The girls glared across me at each other and laughed prettily.

I reached out and gave them each a pat on the head. “Yes, yes. No fighting. And we’d better call it a night soon, or you’ll have no energy tomorrow. I’ll clean up.”

“You only need one ‘yes,’” Caren muttered.

“You never play fair,” added Stella.

Sullenly, they stood up and made for the door. It seemed I had managed to—
Both girls stopped and turned back.

“On second thought, no!” Caren exclaimed.

“I don’t want to sleep yet!” Stella cried.

Then, in unison: “There’s so much more I want to tell you! And ask you too!”

Their shout hung in the air for a moment.

“Shall we all go for more tea?” I suggested, rising with a strained grin.

Caren’s and Stella’s faces broke into smiles.

“Yes, let’s!”



Early the next morning, warmth on my stomach and back roused me to semiwakefulness.

But it’s already winter, I thought blearily as I slowly opened my eyes and looked to either side. Clinging to me, sound asleep, were a pair of white-clad children.

“Atra?” I murmured. “Lia?”

Two sets of ears twitched—one white-haired and fox-like, the other scarlet and leonine—as happy grins filled the little girls’ faces.

Atra I can understand, but Lia—Blazing Qilin—is supposed to be staying with Lydia. What’s she doing here?

At last, I came fully awake. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed lovely scarlet tresses and a pair of slender legs, sitting crossed in a chair. I sat up, careful not to wake the children, and turned to face the beauty resting her chin in her hands and watching me. As usual, the “Lady of the Sword,” eldest daughter of the southern Duke and Duchess Leinster, was dressed for swordplay.

“G-Good morning, Lydia,” I awkwardly greeted my newly eighteen-year-old partner.

“Good morning, Allen.”

Our first conversation in two weeks. Soft morning sunshine streamed through the window curtains, so why did I feel as though the temperature in the room had just dropped?

“What, er, brings you here?” I asked, silently levitating Atra. “I thought you were on duty at the palace again tod—”

Instantly, I realized my error. Grim hellfire flickered in the eyes of the young woman I’d known since our Royal Academy entrance exam.

“You have to ask?” she demanded. “I broke through that damn scheming princess’s paranoid web of wards. It gave me an awful lot of trouble, and she

says she learned it all from *a certain someone*.”

I let out a hollow laugh as I rolled back the covers and slid Atra in next to Lia. I had taught Cheryl to craft magical security measures during our student days—although I’d never imagined she’d use them to keep a bodyguard from deserting her post.

The white-haired child squirmed and latched on to her scarlet-haired friend. They were too precious for words.

A finger digging into my cheek put an end to my escapism.

“Y-You do know that hurts?” I said.

“I don’t believe it. *You* look perfectly fine.” Under her breath, Lydia added, “While here I am, already at my breaking point.”

She threw herself onto the bed, scarlet hair fanning out around her in disarray. No one would take her for a high-ranking noblewoman whose martial reputation resounded throughout the west of the continent.

“Lydia,” I called, using my hands to smooth the scarlet locks of the young woman who had planted her face in my stomach.

“I don’t need you to explain it to me,” she grumbled. “Looking at the big picture, Cheryl needs a guard because her blood is a prime target for the church.”

The apostles had used blood from Gerard and the Yustinian crown prince to cast taboo spells in battle.

“But...but...” Lydia looked up at me with teary eyes and whined, “Some things I just can’t do! If I’d known this was coming, I would have stayed in the city of water!”

Fiery plumes, a little on the dusky side, filled the air in sympathy with her tantrum. I banished them with a wave.

I knew it. All that time together in the city of water brought on a reaction.

“For a duke’s daughter, you can be hopeless sometimes,” I murmured, stroking Lydia’s head with slow, tender care.

“You know I can. Don’t act surprised,” she answered sulkily and cast a levitation spell of her own—hardly an everyday occurrence. She lifted a wooden chair beside the window and set it down beside hers, then patted the seat. “Sit! Next to me!”

“My lady’s wish is my command,” I said, obediently taking the proffered seat.

Immediately, Lydia lay her head in my lap. She gave a few irritated tugs at the ring stuck on the third finger of my right hand, then perked up a bit when she saw that I wasn’t wearing the bracelet Lily had given me. My decision to remove it in friendly territory had paid off.

Still lying down, Lydia touched my cheek and demanded, “Send magical creatures more often. Four times a day, not three.”

“Consider it done,” I replied.

“And look up countries we can elope to!”

“That, I won’t do.”

“You always hold out on me,” Lydia griped, at last showing the ghost of a smile.

I stroked her head as I repeated what I’d told Richard. The news was cause for celebration, and besides, Lydia liked it when I told her things in person.

“Like I wrote to you, Sui and Momiji will be coming to the city soon. So I wondered if...?”

The young woman had heard me out in silence. Now her face turned serious. “I’d like to attend, but it won’t be easy. We’re expecting the Yustinian princess as a peace envoy.”

Imperial Princess Yana Yustin was rumored to possess extraordinary talent, although she couldn’t trace her line directly to the aged sitting emperor. He was busy purging the crown prince’s partisans, pawns of the church, but she still might figure in his schemes. Of course, I doubted he would outwit the professor, who was apparently in top form.

“You could at least *look* disappointed,” the young woman groused, lightly pinching my cheek. “Don’t you want me with you, Allen? You won’t even link

mana.”

The noblewoman had once been called “the Leinsters’ cursed child” for her inability to use most magic. Out of kindness, she had always tried to be strong and shed her tears in secret. Even after becoming an accomplished sorceress, inheriting the mantle of Lady of the Sword, and winning glory in numerous battles, she hadn’t changed deep down. Alone with me, she was a girl who craved affection.

“Lydia, stand up,” I said.

“Why?” she asked hesitantly, rising with some reluctance.

I held my right hand out to one side, and the enchanted rod Silver Bloom, entrusted to me by Linaria Etherheart, materialized. At the same time, I produced a small, slender glass bottle sealed with a cork. The holiness of the water inside beggared belief.

Lydia’s eyes widened. “Is that...from the sanctuary in the city of water? But I thought you could barely take any with you.”

“Only three small bottles of water and a single flower,” I said.

After the water dragon’s advent, a young World Tree—a Great Tree in our parlance—had taken root in the remains of the Old Temple on the central island of the league’s capital. The further blessing of the great elementals Thunder Fox, Blazing Qilin, Frigid Crane, and Marine Crocodile—who had loved a mortal—had transformed the sight into indisputably sacred ground. On the day of our departure, I had called on Atra’s and Lia’s help and beseeched Marine Crocodile for a tiny share of the spring water and flowers that spouted and bloomed there without end.

To tell the truth, even this is more than I deserve. Still...

Lydia gave a start as I uncorked the bottle and released just a smidgen of its contents. The droplets floated in midair, not exerting any magic, yet the room’s atmosphere transformed. Even the light seemed brighter.

Incredible.

Despite my amazement, I cast the spell I’d developed through two months of

constant trial and error.

The young woman's shock grew. "The water dragon's...?" she whispered.

"Hardly," I demurred. "I can't even call it an imitation. Your hand."

"O-Okay." She extended her right hand, full of apprehension.

"We can always exchange messenger birds, but your official duties will make it harder for us to see each other from now on," I explained. "I can't be seen entering the palace, for one thing. And maintaining a mana link, even a shallow one, has side effects."

"I don't mind them. You can have everything I've—"

"No," I interrupted, gripping my rod. Then I activated the spell.

As if with a life of their own, the droplets joined together, curled around Lydia's right ring finger, and vanished. She blinked, still wide-eyed. A blush colored her cheeks as realization dawned.



“This magical pact constructs a pseudo-link,” I continued. “I refined it from a formula I found in a massive spell book in the Leinster archive back during our student days. It should let us sense each other’s mana, at least vaguely, and reach far enough to cover more or less the whole city.”

Lydia remained silent, right hand clutched to her chest and eyes lowered.

“O-Only for a limited time, of course,” I added, speaking fast as I returned my rod and bottle into thin air. “If you don’t like it, I can undo it right a—”

“I do like it!” she shouted, cutting short my excuses and diving into my arms. Whirling white plumes filled the air. “You idiot. Thank you, Allen. With this, I can hold out a little bit longer.”

“Don’t force yourself, remember? And try not to fight with Cheryl.”

“I’ll keep the first part in mind, but the second’s just impossible!” Lydia answered, pursing her lips, although I could tell she was still overjoyed. “And...”

“Yes?”

Lydia started to fidget and held up her right ring finger. Not a mark remained on it. “Wh-Why this hand?” she asked. “Why...why not the left—?”

A clamor of running feet in the corridor interrupted. A barrage of spells slammed into the door, blowing it open barrier and all.

Wait, a barrier?

“Not too shabby. I guess I should have cast stronger defenses.” Lydia clicked her tongue and stepped away from me to confront the intruders.

“Sir! Are you all—? Well, well.”

“Dear brother! And...dear sister?”

“We sensed powerful magic and— Humph!”

Tina’s, Lynne’s, and Ellie’s eyes turned menacing as the girls filled the doorway in their nightgowns.

Caren arrived a moment later. “I assume you’re prepared, Lydia?” she asked, already armored in lightning.

Stella followed, gazing at me in silent reproach. Countless tiny lights flitted around her, dotted with a few black specks.

Darkness?

I retreated to the bed and sat down beside the children, who remained sound asleep despite the uproar.

“Lydia!” Tina shouted. “I demand an explanation!”

“You might be my dear sister,” added Lynne, “but there are limits.”

“A-And this is one of them!” Ellie cried.

“Have at least *a little* shame,” said Caren.

Stella remained silent.

“Ha! Is that all you have to say?” Lydia scoffed. “He’s *mine*! Do I really need to spell out something so basic?”

The girls responded with a merciless magical barrage. Lydia chopped her way through it bare-handed, then leisurely opened a window and gestured at the inner courtyard before dropping into it. The girls gave chase. Even Stella turned on her heels. Cindy was watching from the rooftop, if her mana was anything to go by.

I was still nursing a headache when Emma entered, looking grim and muttering something about how “she waltzed right through our security.” Felicia peered in as well, with a bad case of bed head.

“A-Allen?”

“There’s no stopping them,” I replied before she could flesh out her question.

In the courtyard, the girls were already going at it hammer and tongs. Lydia’s mana showed nothing but joy.

I still hadn’t gotten over my embarrassment when a small magical bird flew through the window and alighted on my shoulder, bearing the latest tidings from the headmaster. Duke Lebufera and the legendary Emerald Gale had arrived from the western capital.

“Felicia, what would you say to an early breakfast?” I asked while shouts from

the courtyard rang in my ears. “I’d like to have a few words with you about Mr. Fosse.”

Chapter 2

“O Allen, Stella! Forgive me this sudden summons! I must attend a council shortly. Now, permit me to offer you tea.”

Fireday, the start of a new week, found us at the Lebufera mansion in the royal capital, where an elven beauty with stunning jade-green hair awaited us in an elegantly appointed chamber. Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, bustled off to a kitchenette in high spirits.

I glanced beside me at Stella, who had agreed to slip out of class. I felt glad of her presence. The young noblewoman wore her school uniform and held a white-haired child by the hand.

“Mr. Allen?” she asked, noticing my gaze. “Is there something on my face?”

“You’re fine,” I replied. “I was just thinking how glad I am to have you along.”

“Oh, but...I’m glad to be here.” Stella dropped her gaze and pressed her hands to her cheeks. A lock of her hair swayed just like Tina’s so often did.

The jade-haired legend returned with tea, and Atra approached her, tail wagging. “Letty, hug,” she begged, tugging the hem of the elf woman’s dress.

Duchess Letty roared with laughter. “How have you been, Atra?” she asked, lightly scooping up the child in her left hand and taking a seat on a sofa while her right balanced a tea service on a tray.

“I sincerely appreciate your aid in the city of water,” I said, bowing deeply as she poured hot water into cups. “And in the search for documents on ten-day fever and the Eight Great Elementals, so rare in the royal capital, your advice—”

“Spare me,” the former duchess interrupted. “How could I deny the new era’s Shooting Star my aid?! The chieftains have come here to uphold their proper duty—the defense of the west—yet they griped and groaned till the last moment. Chise has taken quite a liking to Ellie, to hear her talk. ‘I thought she was a scion of the tree wardens, but she might be a *Great Tree* warden. I thought they had died out.’ And naturally, she sang your praises as the girl’s

teacher. Oh, but ask me not to define terms—they touch on our taboos. What are you standing about for? Sit.”

I managed a vague “You don’t say?”

It delighted me that Chise Glenbysidhe, the Flower Sage, chieftain of the demisprites, had seen Ellie’s potential. But I couldn’t recall doing anything to earn such praise myself. I had asked to learn her formulae alongside Ellie, but little more. And “Great Tree warden”? The church’s apostles had called Tuna a “scion of the tree wardens.” Was there a difference?

I made a mental note and shot a pointed glance at Stella. We took a seat on the sofa in front of us, and Duchess Letty started emptying the hot water from the cups.

“I summoned you today for but one reason,” she said casually. “The flower dragon has delivered its oracle.”

Roughly three months earlier, in the eastern capital, I had made several requests of the western chieftains: a new dagger to surpass the Leinsters’ flaming sword True Scarlet, a new edge on Shooting Star’s trusty blade, initiation into the soul of botanical magic...and a plea from the dragonfolk oracle to the flower dragon, asking a cure for Stella’s overabundance of light mana. Even so, I hadn’t actually expected to receive a revelation.

Dragons knew no equal on earth. I had battled devils and vampires, often spoken of in the same breath, but surviving my encounter with the black dragon had still taken a miracle. If not for Lydia and my late friend Zelbert Régnier, my life would have ended then and there.

What little dragons bestowed was equally absolute. Their commandments far transcended any earthly authority, and we failed to perform them at our peril. I remembered something my mom had taught me as a child: “The seven dragons? They speak for the planet.”

No wonder big names are flocking to the city.

Stella’s left hand squeezed my right. It trembled slightly.

“Duchess Letty, allow me to brew the tea,” I said, striving to sound cheerful. “My mother taught me all her tricks.”

“Leave it. You are my guests, and you, Allen, have done all the western houses a great boon. And I hear you haven’t taken my advice to rest, for all the times I repeated it in the city of water. What an incorrigible fellow you are! O Atra, behold my craft!”

Hot water poured into a glass teapot, and the leaves within danced as they unfurled. Atra let out a musical yip and wagged her tail. Duchess Letty gazed fondly at the child while continuing her explanation.

“No sooner did the dragonfolk return to their lands than they set out for the Valley of Flowers, the hidden village of the lion clan where the flower dragon reveals itself but once a year. I needn’t remind you how rarely dragons appear before mortals, and they make no exception for the dragonfolk oracle.” Duchess Letty moved her hand ever so slightly, and a plate of parti-color treats appeared on the table.

Teleportation magic!

“As a matter of fact, the current oracle had never encountered it before. She says at least a century has passed since any priestess did,” she added as a pale-emerald cup came to rest before me. “Drink. You won’t regret it.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“It has such a lovely fragrance,” Stella chimed in, gracefully lifting her own cup. Atra screwed up her eyes and twitched her ears in agreement.

Duchess Letty leaned against a wall by a window, looking positively wicked. “The pick of Margrave Solos Solnhofen’s crop. One of the western houses’ most ardent men of business, he hopes to sell his finest produce here without drawing attention...yet he struggles to secure an outlet for his wares.”

“I wish you wouldn’t make more work for our brilliant head clerk,” I said, “but kindly tell me how to reach him later.”

I nibbled a cookie in the shape of the Great Tree. With their distinctive flavor, these desserts might sell as well as the tea.

“I’ve never seen them invoke the flower dragon myself,” Duchess Letty said, returning to the matter at hand. “According to Egon, the oracle prays for answers in an old village shrine all through the night of a crescent moon.”

I recalled the Old Temple in the city of water. Had that kind principle of old taken inspiration from this ritual? My thoughts then turned to Egon Io, chieftain of the dragonfolk, who had won a continent-spanning reputation for martial valor. The current oracle was his daughter, as I understood it.

“And wonder of wonders,” Duchess Letty continued, “a voice comes to her in the gap between darkness and dawn. As far as the chronicles tell us, it has never erred, though it often declines to answer. Two hundred years ago, on the eve of war, I’m told it met the question ‘Can mankind vanquish the Dark Lord?’ with silence.”

Dragons defied mortal comprehension, but they also took little account of mortal affairs. The mere fact that I had spoken with the water dragon in the city of water stood out as an exception.

Atra slid off the sofa and clambered into Stella’s lap. The young noblewoman wiped the child’s mouth with a handkerchief, used to her antics.

“But not this time.” Duchess Letty set her cup on the table, a note of tension in her voice. A strong gust rattled the windowpanes. Stella and I gulped. “The oracle, Aathena Io, returned with a message—the clearest in centuries. She exchanged words with the flower dragon.”

“You mean it showed itself?!” I blurted.

“B-But...” Stella gasped. The unthinkable news had stunned us both. And Duchess Letty felt no different, to judge from her expression.

“I, too, doubted my ears at first,” she said. “But Egon could never jest about such things. The oracle herself lies bedridden, her health ravaged by exposure to the sacred. The site of the flower dragon’s advent became holy ground. Chise and agents of my house confirmed that no mortal may enter. We must accept the truth of it.”

To calm our nerves, Stella and I took turns feeding cookies to a bemused but happy Atra.

I guess I should thank my lucky stars that I met the water dragon and got off that lightly.

Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera stood up straight. “O Allen of the wolf clan.

O Lady Stella Howard. In the name of Egon Io, chieftain of the dragonfolk, I relay the voice of the flower dragon.”

“We’re listening!” we both answered, rising ourselves and meeting her gaze.

““Question the daughter of the Star Shooter, and in the City of the Shield, let the final key, the White Saint, and the youngest of the Great Tree wardens descend into the Record Keepers’ archive. In its depths will you face, unlooked for, the paltry obsessions of mortalkind.””

Hardly a reassuring oracle. Will going where it tells us really cure Stella’s condition?

The girl in question huddled anxiously against me, while the child on her lap stared restlessly around the room. I looked at Duchess Letty, pressing her to continue.

“Chise and the dragonfolk deciphered its import,” she said. ““Star Shooter’ is another name for the founder of the Yustin line. The ancients called our royal capital ‘the City of the Shield.’ As for the others... I assume you can guess.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Myself, Stella, and...”

“Of your circle, Ellie best fits the description.” Duchess Letty snorted. “Just as Chise predicted. But ’tis the ‘Record Keepers’ who concern me. Convincing them to open the Sealed Archive will take some doing.”

What “Record Keepers”?

I stared at the former duchess, uncomprehending.

“An old office,” she explained. “Marquesses Crom and Gardner have held it since the kingdom’s founding. They trace their lines to ancestors of a different stripe, it seems. Yet only the current marquesses themselves may enter the archive. Exceptions are nigh unprecedented, even for royalty. No circumstance could be more extraordinary than the flower dragon’s oracle, yet even should it earn Stella and Ellie admittance...” The elven beauty faltered, her expression bitter.

A houseless beastfolk adoptee like me would have a hard time getting in. And to make matters worse, Crom and Gardner...

Both houses had kept aloof during the Algren rebellion, then cooperated with the “sweeping up” of remaining aristocratic hard-liners lured by then Crown Prince John. Even so, I found them uncanny. My failure in the court sorcerer exam—the reason I had started tutoring in the first place—had been orchestrated by the former second prince Gerard and Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner. And Lydia and I had set Marquess Gardner’s mansion ablaze before setting off for the city of water.

“Mr. Allen,” Stella murmured, leaning against me until our shoulders just barely touched. I would need to prepare her and Ellie to make the descent alone if necessary.

“Rest easy!” Duchess Letty declared, with a sudden, sharp clap. Atra’s ears and tail bristled. “Not even the royal family can ignore an oracle from the flower dragon. I’ll find a way. All the western houses agree on that! A palace council will decide the question soon, and we’ll see to it you have a seat.”

Stella and I exchanged looks. Who were we to doubt a living legend from the War of the Dark Lord?

“I sincerely appreciate it,” we said, bowing in unison.

“By the way, Duchess Letty,” I said quietly, “have you made any progress concerning Alicia Coalfield, Io Lockfield, and Floral Heaven?”

The time of the council was fast approaching, and the living legend had walked us to the front door while Duke Leo Lebufera called for her. Atra frolicked outside, bundled up in her cloak, and Stella kindly watched over her.

Duchess Letty lowered her voice. “We’re investigating the *real* Alicia’s birth family, the former earls of the House of Coalheart.”

I could hear the rage she struggled to suppress. Though the vampiress called herself Shooting Star’s lieutenant Crescent Moon, the former duchess had declared her an impostor. As for the demisprite sorcerer and church apostle Black Blossom, he went by a dragonfolk house name. And Floral Heaven had apparently taken a young Duchess Rosa Howard on a journey. I doubted that we would solve their mysteries anytime soon.

I bobbed my head to Duchess Letty, started walking toward Stella and Atra—and stopped in my tracks.

“One more question. About ten-day fever,” I said, meeting Duchess Letty’s eyes over my shoulder. I had been brooding on it since the city of water. “Only demisprites practice amplification magic, but do you know if it affects curses? And could someone of another race perform amplification on a grand scale?”

A typical curse, no matter how potent, affected a single target and a limited area. But eleven years ago, ten-day fever had assailed the entire city.

The elven beauty’s eyebrows rose slightly. I could hear Atra and Stella singing as she replied, “In theory, yes. I encountered it in the War of the Dark Lord. But...it would require a cost.”

“Specifically?”

The legend turned her back to me. “The caster’s life, or something of equal value.”

In my mind, pieces started fitting into place. Something had spread the mystery disease that once ravaged the royal capital.

“Mr. Allen,” Stella called, echoed by a note from Atra. Their return startled me out of my reverie.

“Stella’s gaze has grown strong,” Duchess Letty remarked, casting a temperature-control spell with her left hand. “I’ve thought so since the city of water.”

“I suppose so,” I murmured. Stella had certainly come a long way since our first meeting.

She might not need me to bring her to my secret spot anymore.

The platinum-haired young noblewoman must have overheard us, because she smiled and said, “Only because I have the world’s most dependable magician on my side.”

“You give me too much cre—”

“Not enough, if anything.” She interrupted my attempt at correction.

I scratched my cheek.

Chuckling, Duchess Letty lifted Atra in a hug. “Well spoken, Stella,” she said, with an indomitable grin. “What would you say to a husband from my house?”

“Could he best Mr. Allen?” Stella asked without missing a beat, leaving me to get flustered.

“You have me there!” Duchess Letty roared with laughter. “I admit, the western houses have no champion to match the new Shooting Star. You said the professor wishes to see you at the university after this? I shall see you before long.”

The heavy front door shut, and the living legend disappeared from view.

“Stella—”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t regret it.” She leaned her head on my left arm and dropped her voice to a whisper. “I always feel jealous whenever Lily gets to say things like that.”

“Please don’t tell Duke Walter,” I begged, holding Atra’s hand with my right. “I have a feeling he’d pay me a visit with his mask on.”



“You can open your eyes now, Stella,” I said once we’d touched down on a white roof, smiling at the girl I’d been supporting with my left arm. I also dispelled the tree branches that had formed our “path,” although perception-blocking wards already rendered them invisible.

“Wh-Where are we, Mr. Allen?” Stella asked, clinging to my arm as she surveyed the nearby buildings.

“High!” Atra cheered from her perch on my back.

Although we stood far above the tops of most trees, white-roofed buildings still crowded for space. Students came and went through the net of passages that linked them. The Royal University certainly didn’t *look* like the greatest center of learning in the west of the continent.

“We’re on top of the university’s main building: Dragon Fang Tower,” I explained, casting a levitation spell on my child passenger. “The professor

insisted that I come without alerting his students. Hold my hand just a little longer. The whole place is rigged with detection spells for security, and it can be dangerous if you're not used to it."

"O-Of course. I'll—"

Stella shrieked just as she made to reach for me. A sudden gust had caught her cloak and nearly thrown her off-balance.

"Whoa there!" I caught her hand and pulled her close, looking her full in the face. "Are you all right?" Despite my many layers of magical safety precautions, a fall would be no laughing matter.

"Yes, thank you," Stella replied, lowering her gaze in embarrassment.



A feeling of tenderness came over me, and I snapped the fingers of my right hand, stealthily casting a botanical spell. Branches snagged Atra and pulled her back from the edge of the roof, toward which she had been going.

“That’s not safe,” I chided the fuming child, neatening her white hair with my hand. Winking at Stella, I added, “Now, shall we be on our way to the professor’s lab? Most consider it the university’s best—and worst. It sounds as though he’s found the records of ten-day fever I asked him for.”

Sorcerers and scholars from many backgrounds had offices in Dragon Fang Tower. True to the university’s brilliant reputation, none were to be trifled with. Those in positions of greatest authority had the blessing of the crown and the Four Great Dukes. And my former teacher, the professor, numbered among this elite.

We made our way down a wide corridor, nullifying a deluge of detection spells and magical traps every step of the way, until we stood before a wooden door.

“The professor works here?” Stella asked nervously, clinging to my left arm, while Atra hopped and yipped.

“That’s right,” I replied. “Although it wasn’t surrounded by spells like the ones we just picked our way through back when Lydia and I were his only students. Perhaps they reflect our underclassmen’s outlook.”

Teto Tijerina and the other students she led had helped Caren and the girls more than once during the string of upheavals and had sometimes even fought alongside them. And they all had a mania for setting detection spells. Maybe other labs resented them after the way Lydia had thrown her weight around during our time here. The thought made me want to rub my forehead, but instead I knocked politely.

No response. Reluctantly, I opened the door and entered.

“Incredible,” Stella murmured.

“Lots books!” Atra cried, her big eyes shining.

Bookcases covered every wall, their shelves crammed with ancient and rare books from the professor's collection. An antique office desk and chairs shared the floor with the large sofa Lydia and I had brought. Papers formed a disorderly heap atop a round table, and an icebox, still a rarity, occupied one corner.

I shut the door with a wind spell and called, "Professor? Are you here?" loud enough to be heard in the kitchen farther inside.

Again, no response. The professor loved to foist impossible problems on his students almost as much as he disliked doing anything himself, but I had seldom known him to simply blow off an appointment.

"Stella— Oh?"

The moment I turned to look back, my foot touched something—an invisible thread.

"Mr. Allen!" the noblewoman screamed as a magic circle materialized from thin air on the ceiling and innumerable tree branches struck at me. Even though she could barely cast a single offensive spell, she tried to throw herself in front of me and—

"You needn't worry, but thank you," I said, forcing the circle to disintegrate and tracing the mana to its source. I decided it wouldn't hurt to drop a bit of ice down the shirt of the spellcaster, who lay sleeping in a basket at the back of the lab. In short order, a girl's high-pitched yelp announced her awakening.

"You never cease to amaze me," Stella murmured, blushing faintly as she straightened her beret. Atra beamed.

"You'll learn to do as much too, once you recover," I said, resting my hand on the child's head. "Let's work on it together."

"I'd love to." Stella gave a happy nod and touched the wand at her hip.

We were all savoring the moment of cozy warmth when the source of the yelp appeared atop a bookcase a short distance off. A mix of black and white hair peeked out from beneath the distinctive floral hat of a demisprite. Its owner wore a robe much like mine and stood only a little taller than Atra. I could see the thin wings on her back.

“Wh-Who dares visit such indignities upon a frail maiden?!” the girl demanded from her perch, hand to her hat brim. “Name yourself! This is the professor’s laboratory! Any funny business will bring the Lady of the Sword down on you like a raging fiend! And once she comes...the university is doomed!”

I squeezed my eyes shut in spite of myself, wishing I had done at least a *little* more to rein in Lydia’s tyranny. Pulling myself together, I raised my left hand and called, “Hi there, Suse. I see you haven’t changed.”

At once, a visible tremor rocked the demisprite girl. She practically tumbled off the bookcase as she flew down to me.

“M-My liege?! D-Don’t let appearances deceive you!” she pleaded, hovering in midair. “I was only...resting! Yes, resting! I...I wouldn’t *dream* of rebelling against Teto and the unbelievable cipher she demanded I decrypt! On my honor, I wouldn’t! A-And the professor left a message for you in my keeping!”

After Lydia’s and my graduation, the task of keeping order in the lab had fallen to the students a year below us: Gil Algren of the east and Teto Tijerina and Yen Checker of the west. A fourth student generally came under the professor’s jurisdiction. Still, the witchy young woman had stepped into the leadership role, and while she always kept on her best behavior in my presence, she seemed to strike terror into Suse.

“Keep your ‘resting’ within reason,” I said, straightening her floral hat. “Knowing Teto, she’ll catch on the moment you start slacking.”

My former underclassman groaned and spun in midair, her head in her hands. Atra’s eyes lit up. My highborn companion, however, seemed at a loss. So, with a slight bow, I made introductions.

“Suse, may I present Lady Stella Howard. And this is Atra. I’m looking after her. Stella, my former underclassman Suse Glenbysidhe. I can’t convince her to stop calling me her ‘liege.’”

Both girls froze for a moment.

“Howard, you say?”

“Glenbysidhe? Then, you must be Chieftain Chise’s...”

Mildly amused, I cast a levitation spell on Atra and started toward the professor's desk. Suse followed not far behind me, arms crossed, while the overexcited child gave chase, reaching out to hug her.

"My liege," Suse said, "I'd heard the rumors, but are you sure it's wise to seduce the daughters of two dukes? Nay, *three* if you count Gil! How can you possibly deny that you have 'a natural way with young ladies'—and gentlemen—now? And as if that weren't bad enough, you've taken up with a veritable infant. What will the others say when I tell them? Unless you wish to find out, I suggest you visit the lab more—"

"Let me see," I mused. "Where are the papers the professor left for me?"

Here, perhaps? No, these are about the students' plans postgraduation.

At last, I found the rolled-up papers I sought and took them in hand. Documents concerning ten-day fever had proven unnaturally scarce. Hoping for better luck at the university, I had sent a request to the professor, and he had mobilized his students to search.

"Old maps of the city?" Stella asked, peering over my shoulder.

"My *lieeege*, would it kill you to pay me a bit of attention?" Suse whined before I could answer, flying sulky circles. "Extend a loving hand to a former schoolmate crushed in Teto's iron grip. Yen can't get out from under his bride-to-be's thumb, Gil won't leave the eastern border, and Soi... Well, you know what—"

Suse shrieked as Atra pounced on her from behind. The two girls spun out of control, Suse screaming while Atra cheered, and plummeted onto the nearby sofa. Atra must have enjoyed the ride because she kept her arms around Suse's middle and wagged her tail like mad.

"Wh-What was that for?" my disoriented old schoolmate groaned, too kind to push the child away. "W-Wait, your mana is—?!"

So, she can tell what Atra is.

I motioned Stella into a chair and began spreading the old maps on the desk. Triangles, crosses, and other symbols dotted their surface, but someone had thoroughly erased the title and every other spot that must once have held

writing. Nevertheless...

“Suse,” I said, keeping my voice casual, “I haven’t reached any conclusions yet, but would you mind if I asked you a question?”

“Hm? Oh, enough! Take this and be satisfied!” Suse snapped, shoving a soft, cat-shaped cushion at the white-haired child who had taken quite a liking to her. Then she sat up straight, and a serious look entered her eyes.

“Suppose, hypothetically, you wanted to amplify a spell to cover the royal capital, or maybe about half of it,” I continued. “How much mana would that take?”

“It would depend on the potency,” Suse replied, cautious, while Stella scooped up Atra and joined her on the sofa. “Demisprite amplification magic can do a lot, but not everything. The skill of the primary spellcaster makes a major difference too. But why ask now?”

“So it’s finicky, then. One more question: can anything substitute for an amplification spell? Something like, say...” I dropped my gaze to the old maps and ran my finger over the crosses—places where those who contracted ten-day fever and later died had lived or collapsed. At first glance, they appeared to lack any pattern or central point. “A magical circle, for instance?”

I would never have noticed at the district level, but overlooking the whole extent like this, I started to get a hazy picture. Connecting the areas with the most deaths produced an arc—a slightly crooked crescent. Eleven years ago, whoever cast the curse called ten-day fever on the royal capital must have used this design to magnify its power.

“What a musty old design,” Suse muttered, looking grim. “But amplification doesn’t last long. You would need an awful lot of mana. Why do you think the demisprites wouldn’t keep to a backcountry corner of the west?”

As sorcerers, the demisprites stood head and shoulders above any other race on the continent. They possessed potent mana, long lives, and secrets no human could master. Yet they controlled only a portion of the kingdom’s western regions. It sounded as though they hadn’t necessarily chosen their obscurity.

I watched Stella, who gazed affectionately down at Atra as the child dozed off. A saint if I'd ever seen one.

I rolled up the maps, slid them into a storage tube, and started jotting a note to the professor.

"One last question," I said.

"Name it. For you, my liege, I'll answer as many as you—"

"Would you like to see Chieftain Chise? I have the connections to make it happen now," I asked offhandedly, darting my pen across the paper.

Suse froze.

I looked up, and she rose into the air, ashen-faced.

"N-No! A-Ask...ask me anything but that!" she wailed, on the point of tears, as she fled deeper into the lab. Once she'd put some distance between us, she set wards and cocooned herself within them.

Stella gave me a bewildered look. "Mr. Allen, um..."

"Suse ran away from home," I explained. "Although I think they just got off on the wrong foot. I send Chieftain Chise private updates."

Suse wasn't unique here; many of the professor's students had personal problems as well as talent. Fate had thrown me together with Teto's cohort and then Suse's, so I would do what I could for them.

A look of contentment came over the young noblewoman. A moment passed. Then, "I knew it."

"Stella?" I asked. But before I could articulate a question, the door opened.

In came a petite young woman with braided hair, wearing a witch hat and a sorceress's robe. The black-cat familiar Anko rode on her left shoulder. She hadn't noticed us.

"I can't crack it," she muttered, staring down at the paper in her hands. "Even though it's a favor for Allen. What's this scribble at the bottom? Multiple words? And, of course, the professor's never free to talk when I really need him. After what happened in the catacombs—"

She spotted us then. The paper—a copy of the young Duchess Rosa’s note—slipped from her grasp. I picked it up and smiled at her.

“Hi there, Teto. I haven’t seen you since the southern capital, when I asked you to do that decryption and investigation for me. Isn’t Yen with you?”

The girl—Teto Tijerina—opened her big eyes wide. Mana lifted her long hair, and she dropped into a crouch, clutching her head. Atra looked mystified.

“Mr. Allen, um...”

“Don’t worry. She’ll snap out of it in no time,” I reassured Stella and looked down at the paper. The final scribbled line did indeed resemble a string of words—words in a cipher even stronger than the parts we had already decoded.

One bit looks like “tree warden.”

While I mused, Teto slowly stood up. She took several deep, albeit ragged, breaths, then thrust her finger at me.

“This is one of the professor’s traps, isn’t it?!” she demanded. “No one said a word to me about your visit!”

I see she’s finally back to her old self, I reflected happily, sitting on the desk and crossing my legs.

“You never know,” I said. “He told Suse, so it might just have slipped his mind. I hear that he and the headmaster are dealing with positively murderous workloads. Aren’t they, Stella?”

“Yes. The headmaster has hardly been to the Royal Academy since it reopened...although I’ve been hoping to speak with him about who will lead the student council next semester,” the president supplied.

“I can’t blame either of them for feeling the strain,” I continued, noticing Anko’s weight on my left shoulder. “Hard-line nobles have lost considerable influence, but the conservative faction is alive and well with Crom and Gardner to lead it. The first prince has retired from politics, and the former second prince has gone missing. The war is over in the north and south, but we still have the Knights of the Holy Spirit on our eastern border. And let’s not forget

the demonfolk to our west. Worst of all, the church's self-proclaimed 'Saint' and her apostles are hatching schemes everywhere. But I can only speculate. Who knows how they're actually faring? Can you tell us, Anko?"

The masterful familiar, the department's highest and most revered authority, gave a single meow.

I see.

"As I thought, they couldn't be busier. It seems they're meeting with high dignitaries in the palace as we speak. Take your time decrypting Duchess Rosa's note, Teto, but make sure you get it right. Part of the last line might be related to 'tree warden.' With Niccolò still in the southern capital, I can't ask anyone but you."

"I appreciate all you've done to uncover more about my mother," Stella added, bowing deeply. I felt her resolve to face her mother's past. She really had grown strong.

The self-proclaimed "normal" young woman lowered the brim of her witch hat and gave a grudging nod. "How can I say no to that? Leave it to me. I'll crack it somehow. Suse! Where's the analysis of the cipher I asked you to—?"

Teto clicked her tongue as a crowd of figures slipped past her. The witchy young woman's talismans stopped more than half of them...but she would have to hope for better luck next time. All seemed to be decoys. As for the real escapee...

I looked up at the skylight, and my companions all followed my gaze. There fluttered the demisprite girl we'd thought snug behind her wards. Her peals of laughter floated down to us.

"You should never have left me an opening!" she shouted. "I bid you farewell! Oh, and Teto, I suggest you reconsider 'running a small artificer's shop' as your future career. I mean, you wouldn't last a week. Don't you realize Yen is worrying himself sick?"

Suse must have snuck a peek at the papers on the professor's desk too. Still, in this case, I had to agree. Teto was far too trusting to succeed in business.

Teto's jaw dropped. "H-How did you—? Wait right there! Suse Glenbysidhe!"

“My liege! I await your summons to the next great war!” my young school friend chirped, then opened the skylight and fled. A cold wind blew into the lab.

Teto trembled, eyes flashing, and pulled out a bundle of paper talismans. “You’ll have to excuse me for today, Allen! Till next time!” she shouted, throwing the door open and taking off in pursuit.

Business as usual, I see.

I got down off the desk and walked to the sofa. “That was a sample of what you can expect from our department, Stella,” I said, lifting the sleeping Atra in my arms. “I agree you should advance to the university, and I hope you’ll attend with Caren, but consider your options careful—”

“I choose here,” Stella interrupted.

“Yes, but—”

“My mind is made up.”

Dazzling white lights danced. I detected not a hint of darkness as Stella approached me and laid a hand on Atra’s sleeping cheek.

“I want to study here,” she said, with a radiant smile. “I like it just the way it is.”

“You do?” I said slowly. “Well then, I suppose that’s that.”

“Yes.”

Stella and I grinned at each other. And at that precise moment, there came a polite knock at the door.

One of the other students? But I thought the professor had them all out on other business.

We exchanged looks, and I called, “Please, come in. It’s not locked.”

“By your leave,” the newcomer responded. “Ah, I see the professor was right. I’ve been searching for you.”

“Lady Noa? What brings you here?” I asked as a beautiful elf entered, dressed in the formal uniform of a royal bodyguard. She had long pale-jade hair and carried a bow on her back and a rapier at her waist.

“Mr. Allen, please hurry to the palace!” Lady Noa replied, sweeping a deep bow. “Princess Cheryl Wainwright and Lady Lydia Leinster are dueling in the innermost courtyard. We have no way of stopping them.”



“A-Allen, sir! L-Lady Stella! Over here!” Ellie beckoned, spotting us emerge from the secret underground passages Lady Noa had led us through into the stone corridor just outside the heart of the palace. She wore her school uniform and would normally still have been in class.

Ellie had come to the palace without Tina, Lynne, or Caren so that she could hear the flower dragon’s oracle. The task of informing her had apparently fallen to her grandfather Graham, who had accompanied Duke Walter Howard to the city. An irregular arrangement, but “the Abyss” commanded respect even in the west of the kingdom. No doubt he’d had catching up to do with his granddaughter as well.

Elven lady bodyguards stood by outside the courtyard to protect the palace from the effects of the clash. Who knew how many buildings that pair’s squabbles had wrecked during their Royal Academy days?

As we drew closer, Ellie clung nervously to Stella’s sleeve and mine. The roar of battle echoed from up ahead.

“Did Mr. Walker fill you in?” I asked, sliding Atra off my back and passing her to Stella.

“Yessir,” Ellie replied. “I didn’t really understand, but I promise I’ll keep you soth bafe! Ah...”

The sight of the embarrassed young maid brought smiles to the bodyguards’ faces.

I hope I can enter the Sealed Archive with her, but I shouldn’t really even be in the palace.

“Mr. Allen,” Stella whispered and gave me a reassuring nod. Our gentle saint made a lovely picture with a beast-eared child cradled in her arms. I responded with a look of gratitude.

Just then, a gorgeous elf with a white floral clip securing the ends of her jade-green hair—Noa’s younger twin sister, Effie—strode up and greeted me with a deep bow.

“Mr. Allen, how good it is to see you again. I sincerely apologize for this inconvenience.”

“Please don’t mention it. I’m used to this. That said...” Spotting knights of the royal guard using greatshields to secure a perimeter around the courtyard, I gave a shout.

“Richard!”

The red-haired knight looked up from petting Cheryl’s familiar, the white wolf Chiffon, and waved. “Allen! This way! And hurry!”

I shot Stella and Ellie a look and directed them to stay with the bodyguards. For just a moment, I thought I sensed the platinum-haired noblewoman emit a flash of black mana, but it soon dissipated. Had I imagined it?

Dismissing the question, I proceeded along the stone corridor. “Why call me when you’re already here?” I ribbed the vice commander.

“I’m not exactly in the mood for jokes,” he said, with a nervous laugh, and gave me a hand signal. Following it, I noticed a white-clad Lia sitting on an inner wall and kicking her feet. Beyond her, a true battle raged.

“**Cheryl!**” screamed a noblewoman with flowing scarlet tresses.

“**Lydia!**” roared a princess with gleaming golden locks.

Their simultaneous high kicks collided in the dead center of the courtyard. A tremendous shock wave of mana snapped what few columns remained standing and cracked the stone-paved paths around them. The inner walls creaked. Craters pitted the ground. The combatants must have just come from a conference because they wore scarlet and white dresses, respectively.

Should I commend them for not drawing weapons?

Lydia shot into the air. A sharp cry rang out as she spun and slammed her heel down without mercy. But Cheryl hopped backward, dodging the kick.

“I could see that coming a league away!” she shouted, waving both hands.

Countless light spells took up positions surrounding Lydia. Not only did the shots launch with varied speed and force, but some even merged into swords, spears, and axes as they bombarded the scarlet-haired noblewoman.

Lydia sheathed her limbs in mana and batted them aside. “I’m sick of your timid little tricks!” she snapped, flashing her canines. “This is why I can’t stand schemers like you!”

“Oh? Did you forget Allen laid the foundation for my tactics?” Cheryl flipped her golden locks, making a show of taunting her best friend as the latter ran perpendicularly up a broken column. “We met every day in the café with the sky-blue roof to discuss— Oh! Silly me. You must be jealous that you can’t pull this off yourself! Aren’t you, Lady Crybaby-Who-Can’t-Sleep-at-Night-without-You-Know-Who?”

The temperature shot up. A whirl of fiery plumes filled the air, igniting even the blasts of light.

“Retreat!” the red-haired nobleman barked, then put his hand on my shoulder. “Allen, we leave the rest to you.”

The royal guard began falling back en masse. What had happened to the knights who stood and fought with me in the eastern capital?

Chiffon refused to desert, watching me with round eyes. What a noble creature.

The storm of flaming feathers covered the whole courtyard. Lydia scythed her right hand through the air, conjuring a fiery blade of pure mana.

“Cheryl,” she said, “begging won’t save you today. I’ll keep a video of you crying your eyes out and pleading for my forgiveness to watch in his room! Oh, speaking of which, you’ve never spent the night there, have you, Princess Schemer?”

Unbelievably, space itself gave an audible creak. Light concentrated in Her Royal Highness’s hands as her long blonde hair bristled with rage. Her lovely smile didn’t extend to her eyes.

“Lydia, hasn’t life taught you that some words are better left unspoken? You’ll be the one crying!”

They kicked off the ground at the same time, instantly closing the distance between them. Blazing sword met radiant fist once more.

“Save the fantasies for your dreams!”

“I could say the same to you!”

Fiery plumes and flecks of light collided, incinerating and slicing everything around the highborn combatants in a growing sphere of destruction.

“Lydia and Princess Skee-mer pretty strong!” Lia giggled and hopped down off her wall.

“Here now! Watch your language,” I scolded, catching her.

Just then, Atra ran over and hugged Chiffon, ignoring Stella’s cry to “Wait!” Seeing that, Lia clambered down and joined in with a “Squeeeeeeze!” of her own.

“Oh, honestly. What am I going to do with you two?” I groused, although the scene warmed my heart. “Lady Noa! Lady Effie! May I ask what caused the quarrel?”

The beautiful twins had hung back to prepare barriers. They greeted my question with frowns.

“Her Royal Highness met with an ambassador today. She sat down with Lady Lydia for a friendly chat afterward.”

“But then they started arguing. We don’t know precisely what about.”

“I see,” I said slowly, watching my former classmates bombard each other with blows too powerful to reasonably direct at a fellow person.

“Th-That does it, Princess Fisticuffs!”

“You’re one to talk, Lady Slice-and-Dice!”

Cheryl had chosen to challenge Lydia’s fearsome swordplay at close quarters, punching and kicking her way through one fire sword after another as she denied her opponent breathing room. A sorceress of astonishing skill, the Lady of Light could hold her own against the Lady of the Sword in a melee.

And they expect me to walk into the middle of that?

Unable to face the harsh reality, I looked down at my feet.

“Fluffy!”

“Fy!”

Chiffon had rolled over, allowing Atra and Lia to bury themselves in belly fur. Even Anko, whom I hadn’t noticed arrive, had curled up with them.

What I wouldn’t give for a video orb.

“Allen, I think you’d better save the escapism for some other time,” Richard called wryly from behind a wall of greatshields. “I need you to take a stand for the city, for the palace, and for me—the guy who has to stop our commander when he charges in bellowing for a piece of the action.”

“Fine. But you owe me one.” I forced myself to grin at the vice commander, whose attitude I found almost refreshing. To my students, I added, “Stella, Ellie, please lend me a hand.”

“Of course,” the noblewoman answered gladly.

The young maid, however, sounded nervous. “Y-Yessir. B-But what can my magic do?”

“You’ll do fine,” I assured her, advancing. “They’re only roughhousing. They used to do it all the time at the Royal Academy.”

An awkward silence fell.

“‘Roughhousing’?” Stella repeated gravely.

Ellie dithered. “U-Um...”

“Allen,” the red-haired knight called from behind his shield wall, “no one could look at them and come away with that impression except you, my mother, and my grandmother. Maybe Anna and my aunt too, but still.”

“You could always stop them yourself?” I offered, cocking my head.

“I think I’ll pass. For all my faults, I have a charming fiancée. I’m in no hurry to die.”

With that, the future Duke Leinster withdrew from the conversation. I gathered all was well between him and Lady Sasha Sykes, but I had bigger concerns at present.

“Stella, Ellie, let me explain our plan of attack.”

“We’re ready!” both girls responded, running up to me. Platinum and blonde hair fluttered in the wind.

“And that’s the plan,” I concluded moments later. “Leave the rest to me.”

“I’ll do the best I can,” Stella promised just as Ellie managed a “Y-Yes, sir.”

I stretched, running through a few warm-up exercises while the crash of shattering stone and the screech of severed air filled my ears.

“Mr. Allen, would you hold my hand?” Stella asked earnestly. “I won’t insist on linking mana.”

“Very well.” I saw no reason to refuse, so I took her hand. I could hear her pulse beating a little fast.

“Thank you,” Stella said shyly, then drew her wand and began preparing light magic.

Seeing her older sister’s rare display of initiative, the young maid tugged on my robe. “M-Mr. Allen, um...”

“Would you like to hold hands too, Ellie?” I asked.

“Y-Yes!” the angel chirped. No sooner had I taken her hand than her face brightened and she started deploying spells at a remarkable speed.

Meanwhile, Lydia and Cheryl separated, raising massive blades of fire and light above their heads. They planned to settle things. While the heavens strained and the earth rumbled, I watched for an opening.

“Stella!” I shouted a fraction of a second before the Lady of the Sword and the Lady of Light began their charge.

“Right!”

A blinding flash filled the courtyard. The combatants faltered. In Stella’s hands, even a basic light spell now made for an effective diversion.

“Ellie,” I called, magically shielding my own eyes and my companions’ from the glare.

“Yessir!” the young maid answered, and the ground shook. A floral aroma

began to envelop us all.

When the flash subsided, despite the early winter season, blooms covered the courtyard in a profusion of color. Lydia and Cheryl stopped in their tracks, amazed.

“Is this...?”

“Botanical magic?”

I released Stella’s and Ellie’s hands and clenched my own. The massive blades of fire and light disintegrated into glittering sparks.

“Any Ladies of Light or the Sword who care to join me for tea, please raise your hands,” I said, clapping for attention. “Or would you rather go on spoiling the winter flower beds?”

Lydia and Cheryl winced, finally noticing me. Then they crossed their arms and turned away with matching harrumphs.

What am I to do with Their Highnesses? They would have realized when I got here if they hadn’t let the blood rush to their heads. I mean, Lydia even has a pact with me.

“Thank you, Stella, Ellie,” I told my helpers.

“Don’t mention it,” our saint replied, smiling. “I’m glad I could help.”

“I’ll practice even harder from now on!” the cheerful angel added.

They really are wonderful girls.

Behind me, Richard and Ladies Noa and Effie barked orders.

“Repair the courtyard! On the double!”

“Bring tables and chairs. And prepare tea.”

“Record Chiffon and the young ladies! We haven’t a moment to waste!”

I surveyed what remained of the courtyard. My former classmates might have done more damage than the rebel army.

“So, what in the world happened?” I asked the culprits, who were currently pouting like children.

Lydia slipped behind me without making a sound. “This scheming princess won’t take time off, no matter how often I tell her to,” she pleaded, tugging at my robe. “And if she doesn’t rest, no one can. Now, take my side! What are you waiting for?!”

“So says Lady Lydia Leinster. Have you anything to add?” I asked the princess, still standing with her arms crossed.

“I’ll take time off,” she retorted, speaking rapidly. “Just as soon as I finish my talks with Imperial Princess Yana Yustin.”

“You don’t even know when she’ll get here, and you plan to go without a break until she leaves?”

“Well, I just rose in the line of succession, and I can’t take it easy at a time like this. My father has so much to do as well.” Her Royal Highness’s voice dwindled. I couldn’t even catch the last of her excuses. (“And most importantly, I’m working on something for you behind the scenes.”)

“Cheryl, you don’t need to overthink this,” I pressed our ever-earnest princess. “Lydia is simply worried about you. Remember how you used to get before exams? You’d study so hard you collapsed.”

Cheryl uncrossed her arms, dumbfounded. “What?” she murmured at last, staring at her best friend poking her head out from behind my back.

“What?! N-No!” Lydia protested. “Wh-Who’d waste sympathy on a schemer like her?! I just want time off! D-Don’t try to m-make this weird!”

“Yes, yes.”

“One ‘yes’ is enough! And you used my title earlier! Stop it! Jeez.” Lydia started fiddling with the bracelet on my right wrist, still fuming.

“Be that as it may!” I said, raising my left index finger. “Try not to butt heads so much—it causes a lot of worry and property damage. Cheryl, remember to take breaks. The cold is setting in, and I’d hate to hear that you collapsed.”

“Awfully bossy for my servant,” Lydia grumbled, pursing her lips.

“I-If you insist,” Cheryl said, touching her fingers to her blushing cheeks.

I turned to find that Ellie and Stella had already started preparing for a tea

party. And...

“Really, don’t *you* need a rest more than anyone?” Richard gibed as he strolled toward us through the fleeting field of flowers.

“He most certainly does!” chimed in the petite brunette beside him—the Leinsters’ head maid, Anna.

“Oh? Even my dolt of a brother says something smart once in a while,” Lydia crowed, prodding my cheek.

Cheryl’s smile turned frightening. “Allen, have you been neglecting your rest again?”

I let my gaze wander back to the less-than-curvaceous head maid.

“Splendid work, Mr. Allen!” she chirped.

“Anna, if you were here, I wish you would have stepped in,” I whined while my former schoolmates slowly closed in on me. Anna could have easily subdued them both.

“I’d rather not!” she giggled. “A message just came in from the eastern capital. Ms. Konoha, servant to Acting Duke Gil Algren, will arrive tomorrow afternoon, at the same time as Mr. Sui of the fox clan and his fiancée, Ms. Momiji Toretto.”

Anna must have come expressly to deliver the news. I expected no problems where Sui was concerned, but I still bowed to show my gratitude.

“One other matter.” Anna held up a finger. “Lily’s upcoming assignment to the royal capital has been postponed.”

“Has she fallen out with her parents?” I asked slowly.

Lily’s house name was Leinster. Her father, the under-duke, ruled the former principalities of Etna and Zana. I could imagine the constraints that were placed on her as his eldest daughter when it came to—

Richard was giving me a look of pity.

I have a dreadful feeling about this.

With a fond glance at Lydia and Cheryl, who had returned to menacing each

other, Anna replied, “Well, I suppose you could say so. Although only if we’re speaking of Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three.”

“What do you mean by—? Ah!”

Cheryl and Lydia seized me by the arms and hauled me off without warning.

“Come, let’s go inside,” the blonde princess said, inexplicably all smiles.

“Anna, keep me up to date on any new developments,” demanded the scarlet-haired noblewoman, whose mood could have been better.

The head maid spread her skirt and dipped an elegant curtsy amid the flowers. “Certainly, my lady! Leave everything to your faithful Anna.”



“Thank you for waiting. The girls were so worked up I had trouble getting them to sle— Sui? Are you all right? Your face is beet red. Remember, tomorrow’s your big day.”

I returned to a room in the Leinster mansion to find a pajama-clad Richard and a young fox-clan man wearing a jinbei already deep in their cups. The glow of a mana lamp and moonlight from the windows blended in a distinctive ambience.

Three days earlier, on Waterday, my fellow disciple had arrived with his fiancée. On the morrow, he would celebrate his marriage to Momiji Toretto.

“I told you, I’ll be fine,” he said, crossing his legs as he poured himself a glass of red wine. “You worry too much. Have since we were kids.”

“I pray you’re right,” I grumbled, taking a seat across from Sui. “Richard, please don’t let him drink himself under the table.” The vice commander looked thoroughly amused, but a hungover groom would be no laughing matter.

“You know how it is. I just can’t help myself.” Richard took out a fresh glass and held up the bottle. “I assume you’ll join us? We’ve got the finest vintage from Rondoiro, and not just to celebrate—more bottles came addressed to you personally. I can’t guess how the news got out.”

“If you insist.” I relented. Had the wine come via Niche? My erstwhile schoolmate knew the value of information better than most.

Richard handed me the glass. “Well then, time for another toast.”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Right,” Sui added after a slight delay.

We stood and raised our glasses.

“To our comrade in arms,” the red-haired nobleman began in the tones of a tragedian, “who tomorrow marches into marriage, that graveyard of life’s—Allen, what’s that you’ve got there?”

“A recording orb Anna lent me,” I replied. “Congratulations, Sui!”

Richard let out a stunned cry.

Sui drained his glass with a slightly embarrassed “Thanks,” then turned his attention to the handsome vice commander. “Y’know, Richard, you’re always leaving yourself wide open. But maybe that’s why the ladies fall over ’emselves for you. Allen! Remember his fiancée? Lady...”

“Lady Sasha Sykes?” I supplied.

“Yeah, her! As our master’s junior disciple, I’m givin’ you permission to send that lady a message: death to heartthrobs!” Sui declared—as any reasonable person would. I saw no cause to object.

While we nodded to each other, the vice commander chuckled. “It would take more than that to shake the trust Sasha and I share,” he said, flipping his bangs aside with one hand. “And anyway, Sui, you’re going after the wrong man! We have a far more serious troublemaker in our midst.”

Sui looked suspicious. “Huh? What do you—? Oh! We do, don’t we?!” he cried as though he’d just discovered some secret truth of life.

“I suppose so,” I said, nodding as I poured my fellow disciple a glass of ice water. “Now, be honest, Sui: how many militiawomen have professed their love for you so far?”

He took the drink and downed a mouthful, then scowled. “None, of course! Richard, he’s got all those dukes’ daughters wrapped around his finger, and he doesn’t even know it! He’s a menace! We’ve gotta take a stand!”

Sui took an indignant swing at me. I cast a levitation spell on both our glasses and flipped out of my chair, landing behind it.

“D-Damn it, Allen! Hold still!” he shouted as I bobbed and weaved around fierce straights and well-placed kicks.

“No. Why would I? You never learned how to pull your punches. Instead, how about...” I ducked under Sui’s fist, seized it, and flipped him onto a sofa. He flew face-first into the cushions with a startled grunt, then lay still.

“No holds barred, I see,” Richard said dryly, chipping ice with a knife.

“Our martial arts master always told us, ‘Lower your guard in battle, and you send death an invitation!’ I used to get thrown all the time myself,” I replied. The lesson brought back fond memories.

What do you know? Master’s training used to make Sui cry just about every day. And now that same Sui is getting married.

I sank into a chair and sighed. “Still, I can’t tell you how glad I am. When I got that first letter about the wedding from the southern capital, I honestly thought I’d never make it in time.”

If not for the Algren rebellion, Sui would have held the ceremony in the eastern capital. And I had promised Momiji that I would not only attend but also invite them to the royal capital for their honeymoon. After the disasters that had rocked both cities, however, the couple had found themselves with no choice but to postpone the wedding. Of course, one more cause had led—

My fellow disciple revived and sat up. “Momiji didn’t want to celebrate in the eastern capital after what happened,” he said. “She still minds about her past—growing up in the southern isles till she got sold to the Knights of the Holy Spirit as a slave. Same with Konoha. She’s all ‘The likes of me have no right to attend.’ You wouldn’t believe the struggle I had bringing her here. I couldn’t have done it without that letter you wrote.”

Konoha, Momiji’s younger sister, served my old university friend Acting Duke Gil Algren. She’d declined her invitation, making excuses about not wanting to stand in her sister’s way, until I’d finally settled the matter by writing to her lord.

“Thank Gil for that sometime,” I said, savoring the full-bodied wine. “And I dumped all the catering arrangements on Felicia.”

Sui lowered himself into a chair, brows furrowed. After a few moments, he muttered a curt “Right.”

Richard dropped the ice he’d chipped into spare glasses. It landed with a satisfying *clink*.

“And the Lebufera house is one hell of a venue. Color me surprised,” he said. “But I’m a little sore you didn’t go with our place. Care to explain, Sui?”

“I...I mean,” Sui faltered, “I only asked Allen to find ‘a cozy little place where we can get our friends and family together,’ not a duke’s mansion.”

The red-haired knight set a new bottle on the table—of northern spirits this time—and gave me a cold look. “Well, Allen? My house has a lot of rules, but ‘don’t do right by your brothers-in-arms’ isn’t one of them.”

“And I asked you to put up the guests before the ceremony,” I countered without missing a beat. “Please address all complaints to Duchess Letty. In her words, ‘To celebrate a brave warrior of the eastern capital in these days shall bring honor to my house.’ She would have called representatives from all the western houses if I hadn’t talked her out of it.”

Popping a few of the roasted beans we’d served as drinking snacks into my mouth, I recalled the conversation. “And why not?” she had demanded. “No one in my house would object. All beastfolk are friends to us, and still more those you hold in regard. If you cherish this fellow, let me give him some pomp.”

Who am I to argue?

“Sorry.” Richard gave me a slight bow while he poured glasses of liquor. “You know how it is in ducal houses. We all have a screw loose somewhere.”

“No, it’s fine.” I joined him in a sigh.

Then we both realized that the evening’s leading man had fallen silent. He was staring broodingly into his glass, hands clenched tight.

“Sui? Is anything wrong?” I asked.

“Problem, Sui?” Richard echoed.

The young fox-clan man moved not a muscle. Had I given him too hard a tumble?

No sooner had I started to worry than Sui drained his glass of spirits in one gulp, shot to his feet, and shouted, “Allen! What are you waiting for?! Go get yourself a title!”

“Pardon?” I gaped at Sui. Where had this come from?

Seeing me nonplussed, he tore at his hair and started stalking around the room. “Do you realize what you’ve done for me—a regular beastfolk merchant?” he demanded. “You borrowed rooms from the Leinsters and a venue from the Lebuferas. The list of food and drink for the ceremony has ‘Howard’ and ‘Algren’ on it. That’s all four of the Four Great Dukes! Allen & Co.’s running everything, and even it has a kingdom-wide reputation now. Do you have any idea how many times my father-in-law’s asked me about how I know you?”

“Felicia mentioned that she’d like to meet him for a ‘chat’ sometime,” I said.

Our work-loving head clerk had thrown herself into planning this wedding with glee. And since Momiji’s adoptive parents, the Toretos, had a strong presence in the kingdom’s eastern markets, while Sui knew all about commerce in the eastern capital, building rapport with them seemed like a smart business decision.

My older friend stopped pacing, then strode up and seized me by the collar. “Don’t change the subject! No normal person could pull this off! And you knocked everyone’s socks off in the city of water too, right? Every beastfolk in the eastern capital knows. Old Dag, Deg, and Rolo bring you up every time they start drinking.”

“What?!”

They knew what I’d done in the city of water? Had the otter clan spread the word? I knew the water dragon’s advent had drawn a lot of attention, but I’d taken steps to keep my own role quiet. Unless...

D-Did Niche stab me in the back?!

“Listen up, Senior Disciple Wonder Boy,” Sui growled, leaning close and shaking me. “Guys like you go places! They have to! I know I’m the junior disciple, but I’m still older than you, so listen to me for a change!”

Oh dear. “Go places,” huh? Well, raising the standing of beastfolk in general will do more good than any honors I earn. Yeah, I’ll go with that.

“Sui,” I said gently, “I really think you’ve had too much to drink. Let’s call it a night and—”

Without warning, he thrust an envelope into my hands. The seal on its front looked like wings.

The Lalannoyan national emblem?

“From our master,” Sui said. “Some eastern travelers delivered it. ‘For Allen’s eyes first,’ they told me.”

The master who had taught us martial arts as children wandered the world, writing to us once every few years. I opened the envelope and looked inside. The message seemed brief, but—

What?

I cast a wind spell, blowing the letter to Richard. The vice commander scanned it quickly, eyes sparking with intelligence.

“A sorcerer he fought used unknown ice magic that legend attributes to the Sage?” he murmured. “The same one who cast Falling Star at you in the city of water, you think?”

The mocking laughter of the “Saint” who pulled the church’s strings echoed in my memory. I shuddered.

“I don’t know,” I replied, shaking my head. “But the church might target Lalannoy next. For now, let’s focus on making sure the wedding tomorrow goes — Sui?”

Sprawled on the sofa, my fellow disciple had fallen asleep.

Richard carefully refolded the letter. “Let him rest,” he whispered, grinning. “Oh, and I agree with Sui completely. If you don’t come up in the world soon, Lydia really will flee the country next time. Actually, Stella and Lily might join

her. I doubt you have to worry about the younger girls yet, but you never know. They grow up so much faster than boys.”

I wouldn't put it past Lydia. But Stella? Certainly not. And even Lily wouldn't try anything that senseless. I trust that maid.

“Very funny, Richard,” I replied, sitting back in my chair and waving my left hand.

“I mean it,” he insisted. “A little birdie told me even Princess Cheryl is working behind the scenes to raise your status.”

Now *that* strained credulity. Even my brief visit to the palace a week earlier had drawn private protests. “How dare a houseless beastfolk,” et cetera, et cetera. The conservative faction might have lost influence, but it hadn't gone anywhere. Not even Cheryl could change anything *alone*.

“I hope you'll join me a little while longer,” I said, pouring spirits into my glass and Richard's.

“I'd be glad to, my good worry-ridden Shooting Star.”



The next morning brought a cloudless sky. And despite the onset of winter, the air had grown comfortably warm. If the weather held, we could look forward to a meal in the mansion's gardens after the ceremony.

I looked myself over in the Lebuferas' waiting room mirror and tightened my necktie. Then I addressed the girls watching me with stars in their eyes.

“Tina, Lynne, tell me, just...just to be clear. What are those things you're holding?”

The young noblewomen wore dresses of pale azure and scarlet, respectively, and elegant capes. They had glittering ornaments in their hair, spheres in their hands, and a flush in their cheeks.

“Video orbs!” Tina answered.

“We asked Anna to deliver them,” Lynne added. “Atra is with Felicia.”

All the while, both girls kept recording me in the formal suit I'd sworn to

never wear again.

I faintly overheard maids cheering out in the corridor. Felicia and Atra must have finished dressing.

“May I ask why?” I pressed, scratching my cheek.

Everything had gone dark that morning when Anna had turned up grinning from ear to ear, bearing this suit and a note from Lydia (“Wear it, or else!”). Since she wouldn’t be attending, I’d hoped to get through the wedding without any girls dressing me up. How quickly that dream had crumbled.

“To record the wedding, of course!” Tina boldly declared.

“Really?”

“Really. I swear it on my plants back in the northern capital.”

“And you, Lynne?” I asked, turning to the other young noblewoman—although I still entertained suspicions of her peer.

“Miss First Place has it right, dear brother.” Lynne nodded, her expression unchanged. “We certainly didn’t bring them to preserve a rare glimpse of you in formal wear. Of course, I doubt we can avoid recording that too.”

How silly of me. I almost forgot she’s Lisa’s daughter, Lydia’s sister, and as much a Leinster as either of them.



A wolf-clan girl in a yellow dress of a more mature cut walked through the open door. Fine embroidery on her cape formed a detailed image of the Great Tree.

“Don’t try to fight it, Allen,” she said. “We do need a recording for the people who couldn’t come.”

“But Caren...” I whined, letting my head droop.

My sister walked up and inspected my suit as if nothing could be more natural, then turned to the girls. “Tina, Lynne, I think the bride has finished dressing. Go get video of her before the ceremony. And watch your step. You wouldn’t want to get so caught up in recording that you trip.”

“We’re on it!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The young noblewomen threw exaggerated salutes and dashed out. They hadn’t been to many weddings, as they’d told me that morning, and they seemed to relish the opportunity.

Seeing them like this, I can really tell they’re still kids.

Caren moved beside me and leaned her head on my left shoulder.

“Where are Stella and Ellie?” I asked.

“They’ll be along soon,” she replied. “So, Allen...” My sister fidgeted, watching me with upturned eyes. Outside the window, a cheer erupted. The knights of the royal guard and Sui’s comrades from the beastfolk militia must have arrived.

I brushed a speck of dirt off Caren’s cape and smiled. “You look lovely in that dress.”

“Thank you,” she said haltingly. “Stella and Felicia picked it out for me. Mom sent the cape from the eastern capital. Y-You...look great too, Allen.” She forced a shy smile to hide her embarrassment, though her ears and tail quivered with delight.

“You think so?” I asked slowly, avoiding her gaze as I slipped the bracelet on my right wrist under my shirt cuff.

“I do. I wish you wouldn’t sell yourself short,” Caren replied, stepping in front of me and fussing with my collar. “Lydia and I have our many, many differences, but I can’t fault her taste, at least when it comes to dressing you. I bet the next wedding we attend will be Toma and Shima’s, and I can’t wait to see you there.”

Toma of the bearlet clan and Shima of the hare clan had also come for the wedding. They were like a big brother and sister to Caren and me, and to Sui too. Rumor had it they had finally become more than friends over the course of the battle for the eastern capital.

“Won’t you cut me a *little* slack?”

“No. No mercy!” Caren declared, releasing my collar just as a girl with long platinum hair entered the room. I suspected that her exquisitely refined dress and cape came from the same needle as Tina’s. Azure so pale it verged on white emphasized her saintly qualities.

“Thank you for joining us, Stella,” I said.

“Mr. Allen.”

The girl seemed more grown-up than she had when I first met her, but she still broke into a smile staring at my suit. I caught a glimpse of blonde hair in the doorway behind her. Approaching slowly, I made a theatrical bow.

“My dear Lady Stella Howard, more dazzling than any gem, may I ask what has become of that loveliest of flowers, Miss Ellie Walker?”

“D-Don’t tease me like that. I only wore this because the maids...” Stella frowned slightly and let her words trail off.

“Only joking,” I said, dispelling the beads of light that had begun to form. “You look wonderful. I almost took you for the real Saint herself.”

“I see you still have a mean streak.” Stella pursed her lips and moved beside me. “Ellie, stop hiding and explain things yourself.”

“Y-Yes’m,” the girl in the corridor murmured, flinching, then nervously crossed the threshold. Once she stood in front of me, she clasped her hands as if in prayer and looked down at the floor. “Y-You see, Allen, sir...”

She wore her blonde hair down with a small floral clip. Her dress was white and pale emerald.

“Caren, Stella, I’ve just had a revelation,” I confessed. “Angels do exist on earth.”

Ellie’s neck and cheeks instantly flushed bright red. “Oh, I’m r-really not...” She hid her face in her hands.

“Allen,” Caren said gravely, “I wish you wouldn’t spout nonsense.”

“Please don’t leave our side today,” Stella added, bringing her hands together with a bright smile.

I caved to the pressure and mumbled, “Yes” with an awkward nod.

Girls gain strength so quickly. Will Ellie end up the same way?

“W-Wait for me, Atra.” Yet another girl’s breathless cry interrupted my melancholy reflections. A moment later, a white-haired child bounded into the room, newly attired in a charming floral dress.

“Welcome back, Atra,” I said.

She piped a note in reply, tail waving in delight.

Felicia arrived a little later, wearing a purple dress and with her hair neatly arranged. She staggered over to me, sank into a nearby chair, and closed her eyes.

I gave the still bashful Ellie a pat on the head and turned to the head clerk. “Might I suggest a little more exercise?”

“Th-That’s not it,” she protested. “I’m just not used to fancy clothes and shoes.”

“Didn’t you wear a military uniform in the southern capital?” a voice chimed in.

“Although I hear you kept a maid uniform on hand too,” another added.

“C-Caren?! St-Stella?! How could you turn on me like—? Eek!” Felicia leapt to her feet in indignation and promptly tripped, so I caught her. Emma and Cindy poked their heads around the doorframe and gave me a thumbs-up.

So, they left her to chase Atra alone on purpose.

The bespectacled girl in my arms lowered her gaze and toyed with her bangs in embarrassment.

“Some exercise is definitely in order,” I said.

“All right,” Felicia sighed.

Caren cleared her throat.

“Is anything the matter, Mr. Allen? Felicia?” Stella added in glacial tones.

We hurriedly separated, and the maids took to flight. Was it me, or was Cindy blending in *too* well?

I let the sight of Atra poking Felicia’s cheeks soothe me as I checked my pocket watch. “We’d better take our seats,” I said. “The bride and groom will make their entrance soon.”

The marriage of Sui of the fox clan and Momiji Toretto went off without a hitch in an old temple reposing amid the Lebufera mansion’s inner courtyard. The attendees included the bride’s and groom’s parents, Konoha, and a few other relatives, as well as the militia delegation, the knights who had fought alongside them in the eastern capital, and us. Quite a force of Leinster and Lebufera maids seemed to have assembled for the occasion, and they saw to all the details.

I still can’t believe that the fox-clan chieftain came all this way.

“Now, honored guests, please exit the temple. You’ll find a lovely meal waiting for you,” Shima of the hare clan, who had nominated herself mistress of ceremonies, called from the altar. “Unmarried women, please gather round the entrance.”

The men stopped to thump Sui on the back and shoulders before leaving with an air of relief. My companions, who had just watched, spellbound, as Sui and Momiji exchanged vows of love and sealed them with a kiss, leapt to their feet with a start, eyes blazing.

“Victory is mine!” Tina shouted.

"You're daydreaming again," Lynne scoffed.

"D-Don't forget me," Ellie chimed in.

"I think Felicia had better sit this one out, don't you?" said Stella.

"True," Caren agreed. "She'd trip for sure."

"St-Stella, Caren?! Not again!" Felicia wailed.

I think I'd better excuse myself.

"I'll be outside," I told the girls and led Atra toward the entrance. Looking back once, I saw a black-haired young woman—Konoha—at the back of the temple, still shedding tears of joy and hugging Momiji.

Thank goodness. I must write to let Gil know.

Outside, I found tables laden with wine bottles and platters of food everywhere I looked. Guests chatted among them.

I could do with a drink of—

"Cindy!" Atra called, suddenly wagging her tail, and took off toward the milky-haired maid who had just exited the mansion. I met Cindy's gaze, entrusting the child to her care, then fetched myself a glass of ice water and took a nearby seat.

Before long, Richard joined me in all his knightly regalia. "Long day, Allen?"

A little ways off, I spotted Bertrand and several others with whom I'd braved death in the eastern capital, so I gave them a nod. The knights responded with a grandiose salute, which I returned before turning to their vice commander.

"Your eyes are all red, Richard," I teased.

"Whoops. I cry easier than I used to," he said, wiping his tears with a finger. Then he looked fondly at Sui and Momiji, who had just left the temple. The bride carried a bouquet, and her white dress made her raven hair shine.

"It was a great wedding, wasn't it?" Richard said.

"Yes, it was," I replied. When the rebel army and Knights of the Holy Spirit struck the eastern capital, I'd lost hope of seeing anything so joyous.

I spotted Tina and Lynne waiting eagerly at the temple entrance. Stella kept her poise, while Felicia was already on the verge of dropping out of the competition, and Ellie had been shunted to the edge of the group. I saw beastfolk women in the crowd with them. Tradition promised a happy marriage to whoever caught the bride's bouquet. The custom had spread to every corner of the continent, although its origin remained a mystery.

Momiji looked at Sui and Konoha and nodded slightly. "Catch!" she shouted and tossed her flowers high into the air.

"Well, I'll get back to the palace," Richard said breezily amid the ensuing cheers. "I'll leave Bertrand and the others, so take charge of them if you have any trouble."

An even louder cheer went up. Perhaps Momiji had thrown the bouquet too hard, because it broke apart in midair. Tina and Lynne caught a flower each, while Ellie seized about half the bouquet.

"I don't recall joining the royal guard," I grumbled, watching the elated girls.

"They'll obey you with pleasure, Supreme Commander." Richard clapped me on the shoulder and walked off toward the mansion.

That's one title I never want again.

I gazed down at the table just as a shadow fell across it. A parasol?

"Is this seat taken?" asked a quiet woman's voice.

"Oh, no, feel free—"

I looked up in a hurry and froze, staring at a beauty holding a pale-scarlet parasol and wearing a cloth hat and simple dress of the same hue. Her scarlet tresses hung free. Only the clip in her hair and the bracelet on her left wrist remained as normal.

I drained my ice water to steady my nerves and set the glass softly on the table. Then, haltingly, I said, "What brings you here?"

"Oh, just a little emergency." The beauty—whom I'd thought far from here in the under-duchy—let out a musical laugh and gracefully raised the brim of her hat. Her right hand reached out, and a dainty finger prodded my cheek. "So, Mr.

Allen, I hoped to avail myself of your help. You don't mind...do you?"

For all her silly affectations, she seemed genuinely distressed.

I shrugged. "Would you start by explaining your dilemma, Lady Lily Leinster?"

Chapter 3

“Thank you all for joining me. I need not remind you that our kingdom’s relations with the Yustinians, the League of Principalities, and Lalannoy have worsened or that the church’s schemes have left us on the back foot. The flower dragon has issued an oracle, and doubts have arisen concerning ten-day fever,” King Jasper Wainwright pronounced with dignity. “I wish to hear your frank opinions. Cheryl.”

“Yes, father.” I cast a light spell I’d learned from Allen in the city of water, projecting data into the gloom. My father’s blond hair gleamed dully, more streaked with gray than it had been before this string of crises.

I shared the place of honor with him at the round table, Chiffon curled up at my feet. To our right sat the imposing Duke Walter Howard, the red-haired Duke Liam Leinster, and the elven Duke Leo Lebufera. To our left, the professor studied the data with a weary air. The headmaster normally occupied the adjacent seat but was away investigating the catacombs beneath the Royal Academy. No one would tell me the details. Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera sat on a sofa by the wall, resting Blazing Qilin—Lia—on her lap and scanning the data with excitement.

For guards, we had Lydia and Commander Owain Albright of the royal guard. Graham “the Abyss” Walker and the Leinsters’ head maid Anna also stood ready. The four of them would make short work of any assault.

The professor looked up. “Of all the suspicions Allen brought back from the city of water, one stands out as the most serious: the church’s hand in ten-day fever.” A note of sarcasm entered his voice as he continued, “Our Record Keepers, Marquesses Crom and Gardner, could tell us if they have the data to support that, but their lordships have both taken ill and refuse to leave their estates, while the head court sorcerer has absented himself to persuade them in person. Your Majesty, could we not invite Prince John to join us? He would have some idea how matters really stand.”

“Not soon enough,” my father answered heavily. “He told me he wanted to renounce his right to the throne and live quietly. That was his reward for becoming the conservatives’ figurehead and ‘cleaning up’ the capital. He won’t return willingly.”

My half brother John Wainwright had departed the royal capital for an estate in one of its outlying townships, where he spent his days in quiet retirement. His chief defender, Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner, hadn’t stopped him.

“Yet the practical issue remains: we lack records of ten-day fever,” Duchess Letty interjected, stroking Lia’s scarlet hair. “I’m told agents of the church absconded with many ancient or forbidden tomes and secret documents after the city fell. We *must* search the Sealed Archive that Crom and Gardner keep. If the Church of the Holy Spirit had a hand in that plague, we cannot afford indecision. And forget not the oracle. The Record Keepers’ rights might date back to the kingdom’s founding, but a dragon has spoken. Stella, Ellie, and Allen must enter together.”

A heavy silence fell. The marquesses led those hidebound aristocrats who had weathered the recent storms, and they wouldn’t grant their approval easily. No beastfolk had ever set foot in the Sealed Archive.

You haven’t changed, Allen. You still always end up smack-dab in the middle of trouble!

My father shook his head slowly. “I can’t give you an answer as things stand, but I will command the marquesses and Gerhard to attend next week’s council. Let us proceed. Walter.”

“Sire!” Duke Howard barked and stood, his stern face radiating vigor. A projected map of the kingdom’s north split into colored regions. A deep azure hue seemed reserved for the northernmost territory. “We have concluded preliminary peace negotiations with the Yustinians. They will pay us no reparations but will cede control of the Shiki region. They have also agreed to share what they know of the apostle Edith, who colluded with their crown prince. Imperial Princess Yana Yustin will arrive in the royal capital next week for a formal signing ceremony.”

My father stroked his beard and chuckled. “The old emperor is putting on

quite a show, I see.”

“He *did* end decades of civil war with only himself and old Saxe to rely on,” the professor replied. “No prince who played into the church’s hands could ever hope to match him.”

“I left my younger brother back north in case of emergency,” Duke Howard added. “And given the strange developments in the Lalannoy Republic, I’ve assigned every Walker except Graham to espionage.”

We still have wars winding down on multiple fronts, and now we need to worry about Lalannoy? Did the church orchestrate this too?

While I brooded, my father gave an easygoing nod.

“I understand,” he said. “I leave the north entirely in your hands, Walter.”

Duke Howard straightened his posture and bowed.

“Peace is returning to the south as well. As I reported, we have already concluded a peace treaty,” said Lydia’s father, Duke Liam. The map shifted to show the kingdom’s south. “The league suffered heavy casualties, not only in their battles with us but in a church-led assault on their capital city. Staggering losses of life and matériel have left them in no state to prosecute a foreign war for the next ten years at least. Moreover...” The Avasiek Plain, a region of the northern principalities bordering the Duchy of Leinster, turned deep red. A domain to the southwest took on a lighter shade. “Atlas, one of the five northern principalities, has seceded from the league and become our vassal state. We also claimed the Avasiek Plain through peace negotiations, leaving the Principality of Bazel to our southeast an isolated projection into our territory. Given time, we’ll draw it into our kingdom’s economic sphere of influence.”

Studying the map, I saw a railway stretching from the under-duke’s seat to the Atlasian capital. Someone worked fast. I snuck a glance at Lydia and noted a hint of jealousy in her expression.

“We have nothing more to fear from the league,” Duchess Letty said, brushing her jade-green hair aside. “It matters little in the grand scheme of things—apart from the holy sanctuary.”

“Grandmother, please.” Duke Lebufera twisted his handsome features in a scowl, but my father raised a hand to silence him.

The legendary elf nodded her thanks and continued, grinning boldly. “The league’s people saw the disaster those church fools brought to their city. They saw a new legend in the making avert disaster. And they saw the water dragon descend to earth.”

My heart beat faster. A smile crept over my lips as I recalled the gentle face of the young man with whom I’d reunited in the city of water. He had meant a lot to me, and he still did...although I couldn’t help feeling that he treated Lydia with much more care.

“You can’t stop tongues from wagging,” Duchess Letty explained with glee. “Would any of *you* like to challenge one who bandied words with a dragon and lived to tell of it? They mustn’t be taken with the idea, or they wouldn’t have volunteered to cede their city’s sanctuary to Allen. To him personally, mind you. They meant that sincerely. Potent consecration harms people—fatally, in the worst cases. Small wonder that they came to revere one who can enter and leave sacred ground as he pleases.”

My father and the three dukes stared up at the ceiling in silence. They’d found yet another tricky problem to contend with.

Meanwhile, a smile stole over Lydia’s lips, and she swayed slightly, no doubt remembering her birthday. She refused to tell me what had happened, but one way or another, I *would* get it out of her.

The professor planted his elbows on the table. “As far as I can make out from these reports,” he said, looking positively wicked, “the new Atlasian government is off to a splendid start despite our recent hostilities. It seems Allen put forward a sharp fellow in Niche Nitti. The youngest—and only surviving—Atlas brother also has his approval as ‘a man we can trust.’”

A storm raged inside me.

It’s not fair. Why won’t he put that much trust in me? Oh, who am I to laugh at Lydia now?

“What do you mean, Professor?” Duke Leinster asked, puzzled. “You make it

sound as though Allen spoke with Ray Atlas in person.”

We had made our return via the southern capital, without stopping in Atlas.

“Hm? Oh, he told me he went to pay his respects at the grave of Robson Atlas, who fell at the Fortress of Seven Towers,” the great sorcerer answered breezily. “Not many people can spot him when he really wants to slip out undetected.”

The three dukes sighed, while my father let out an admiring “Oh-ho.”

“You could at least have invited me along, Allen,” I grumbled with unintended honesty.

Duchess Letty roared with laughter. “He has a stout heart! Yes, indeed. He pays respect to those who merit it, be they friend or foe. Now that’s what I call a man. Leo, I really do think he’d make a fine match for Effie or Noa.”

“Duchess Letty, I beg you to reconsider,” Duke Leinster pleaded, looking rather pitiful. “We might have another war if my wife and her mother found out.”

I made a mental note.

They’ve both grown so attached to Allen that— Why hasn’t Lydia’s mana changed?

I turned to the scarlet-haired lady. She brushed me off with a little wave of her left hand as if to say, “Pay attention.”

Suspicious. Most suspicious!

“We have matters to report as well, Leo,” Duchess Letty urged, breaking the peaceful atmosphere.

“Sire!” Duke Lebufera called, straightening in his seat. The map showed the kingdom’s west, where for two hundred years our armies had faced down the Dark Lord’s forces across Blood River. “In the course of this disturbance, we moved troops from Blood River and informed the demonfolk on the far shore of our reasons for doing so. Following our return, we availed ourselves of the Tijerinas’ connections to relay our thanks, and...”

Duchess Letty surveyed the gathering. Locking eyes with my father, she

announced the inconceivable news.

“A reply came from the Dark Lord personally.”

Consternation spread through the chamber. Even the professor became lost in thought.

The living legend set Lia down so as not to wake her and turned to face a window. “The message was simple,” she continued, looking back at us. “‘I congratulate you on fulfilling your pledge. In consequence of which, I desire words with the new Shooting Star.’ Now, what do you make of that?”

An oppressive silence fell. Personally, I felt overwhelming joy and reverence. Allen needed more recognition—much, *much* more. But as the first princess of this kingdom, I found the dilemma far from simple.

The professor spoke first.

“Allen distinguished himself beyond compare in our recent difficulties. Conservative influence is waning. Even so, we won’t find it easy to confer rank or status on him just yet. As for why, put simply—”

“He would refuse any appointment,” Duke Howard finished, turning his face heavenward.

“The speaker for the beastfolk is considered a viscount,” Allen and Lydia’s teacher, feared abroad as the kingdom’s most devious sorcerer, explained calmly. “Allen will never accept a greater peerage while prejudice remains so strong even in the royal capital. Even the ancient champion who slew a maddened dragon rose no higher than viscount. Gardner and Crom will hammer on that point. You know how they are. ‘There’s no precedent.’ And an audience with the Dark Lord? Out of the question.”

Groans of agreement dominated the council chamber.

Although Gardner and Crom were only marquesses, their houses had occupied a unique position since our kingdom’s founding. Not even the royal family or the Four Great Dukes could force their hands.

“Yet he cannot be allowed to go empty-handed,” Duchess Letty snapped. “Surely these upheavals have taught you all to fear the church’s ‘Saint,’ as she

calls herself. The kingdom needs Allen.”

It's now or never, I thought, recalling the proposal that the vice commander of the royal guard had brought to me mere days ago, during a pause in his duties.

“Father, if I may—”

“I will consider Allen’s treatment with great care, including the Sealed Archive and the sanctuary.” My father forestalled me. “Cheryl, thank you for joining us. You may excuse yourself with Lydia and Owain.”

I never time anything right, do I? I made the same mistake when I met Allen.

Careful to hide my mocking self-reproach, I left my seat.

My comrades are counting on me. I can't let a rash move on my part threaten the common cause we bonded over in the city of water. Lydia mustn't suspect a thing.

While the lady in question cradled Lia in her arms, I curtsied to the pillars of the kingdom. “If you’ll excuse me,” I said. “I pray that you’ll do well by my old school friend.”





The heavy doors swung closed. Her Royal Highness and Chiffon had left the chamber, followed by Lydia cradling that child, and finally Owain Albright.

The professor started in on me immediately.

“You ought to look at your face in a mirror, Liam. Don’t worry. Lia’s not your granddaughter.”

“Professor,” I replied, “I’d like you to join me for a little sword practice. It’s been too long.”

“I’ll let Walter have that honor. The shock hit him even harder than it did you.”

“Shock? No, no. Stella and Tina aren’t ready for...” My other old friend, Duke Howard, the “Wolf of the North,” kept shaking his head, looking even more rattled than I felt. I might have been looking at myself a few years in the past.

“Catch up later. We have adult matters to discuss,” Duchess Letty said from her place by the window, drawing the curtains. The room darkened, and words appeared before us.

Stella: Strong indications of future mana awakening. If true, she will be the first candidate in a century.

Ellie: Extremely high aptitude for botanical magic. A Walker and yet not a Walker.

So, these were the Flower Sage’s comments that had merited special mention in the reports. She had remarked on Allen’s sister as well, but I supposed the girl gave us no cause for concern.

“First,” the elven legend said, “O Abyss, who was Ellie’s father? Chise suspected she descends from the Great Tree wardens after instructing her, and the Hero called her ‘the youngest daughter of the tree wardens.’ Now we have the flower dragon’s oracle. Was the man truly human?”

“I cannot offer many details,” the elderly butler replied from his place behind Walter. “My late friend’s origins were never clear to me. But my son-in-law was human—of that, there can be no doubt. Nevertheless, my daughter did

mention that he employed strange powers.”

The title “Great Tree warden” belonged to the distant past. Not even my own house preserved a record of its origins.

Duchess Letty closed her eyes. “I had heard that Remire and Millie Walker were physicians who succumbed to ten-day fever while treating patients. Yet Allen’s reports and Chise’s appraisal shake even that assumption. If Ellie is as we suspect, then we have cause for alarm. A Great Tree warden does not die easily.”

We fell silent and looked to Leo, who sat with his arms folded. He nodded gravely. So, someone had most likely murdered the Walkers.

The Abyss, famed for his unflappable composure, let out a faint groan.

I knew an urgent summons to the capital didn’t bode well. Still, out of the frying pan...

“And Stella presents even graver concerns,” Duchess Letty continued, turning to His Majesty with a harder look than she ever wore in front of the children. “I trust all of us here understand why.”

Members of the royal family, the Four Great Ducal Houses, and a few other notable lines inherited state secrets upon assuming their titles. Mana awakening, the qualification for the mantle of White Saint, was among the most closely guarded. Only a handful of people in the whole kingdom knew the particulars.

His Majesty folded his hands on the round table. “You mean,” he said hesitantly, “that we could face a repeat of one hundred years ago? That the White Saint could become an angel and finally a devil?”

“Not immediately. *She* was over twenty, and she proceeded by stages. Stella’s condition isn’t urgent yet. Unlike in the past, the flower dragon’s oracle arrived in time. And...” Duchess Letty’s voice took on a slight edge as she spoke. “We have a new Shooting Star. I shan’t allow the tragedy of a century past to recur. I’ll see the oracle fulfilled even if I must browbeat Crom and Gardner with spear in hand!”

Silence filled the room. Walter and Graham looked even grimmer than the

rest of us. But I also glimpsed hope in their faces. “Maybe he *can* do it,” it seemed to say. “Maybe Allen of the wolf clan can!”

“Even so, sire, we have a duty to prepare for the worst,” the professor said, with a faint smile. “I realize Scarlet Heaven will prove difficult, but may I proceed with summoning the other ladies we discussed?”

“You may.” His Majesty gave a magnanimous nod. Then he frowned and looked at me. “But on what pretext? Lisa, I can understand, but the other has hardly ventured a step from the under-duchy’s capital since her marriage. Considering her military reputation, any move she makes is bound to have ramifications.”

The professor and Leo eyed me too. Even Duchess Letty and Walter joined in.
Forgive me, Lucas.

“You needn’t worry,” I said, sitting up straight, my head held high. “My brother seems to have gone a bit wild out of concern for his daughter. I plan to take advantage. It should furnish a pretext to deploy the Scarlet Order as well. Expect favorable tidings.”



“Mmm! It feels so good to be back in these clothes!” the scarlet-haired maid crowed, doing pirouettes in the president’s office at Allen & Co. “Although of course, a maid uniform is second to none! That goes without saying! Don’t you think so too, Miss Fosse?”

“Huh? I—”

Our bespectacled head clerk squealed as her interlocutor seized her little body in a bear hug, nuzzling her cheek to cheek. Atra watched them with rapt interest.

Lily had tied her hair back with a black ribbon and traded her dress of the day before yesterday for a foreign jacket patterned with interlocking arrows, a long skirt, and leather boots. I agreed that the ensemble had come to suit her.

She had spoken like a proper young noblewoman at first. “We may be in danger at the Leinster residence. I would prefer to discuss matters at your

lodgings—tomorrow, if possible. You don't mind, do you?"

Tina, Lynne, and Caren, who wouldn't be able to join us on a weekday, had quashed that idea. And I'd been too busy to spare time right then, what with explaining the honeymoon to the western capital that I'd arranged to surprise Sui and Momiji, picking out gifts for Konoha to bring back to Gil on the eastern frontier, and so on. In the end, we had adopted Ellie and Stella's suggestion and agreed to meet at the company. I had just taken Atra to see off the newlyweds and Konoha at Central Station and returned only to find Lily making merry the moment I set foot in the office.

She had also forbidden me to share our discussion with Lydia. Even Emma, Cindy, and the other Leinster maids at work in the next room couldn't know right away.

Positively chilling.

"Allen, help m-meee!" the head clerk wailed, her white blouse and long skirt flapping. The girls *had* warned her to "under no circumstances let her guard down."

"Aw, come on. Where's the harm?" The maid giggled, prodding Felicia's soft cheek. "Boop!"

"Boop?" Atra repeated while the head clerk groaned.

Fed up with these antics, I dashed off a signature and tossed the paper into the outbox. "All right, Lily, that's enough," I said once I had seated Atra in the chair set aside for her exclusive use. "I'll thank you not to disturb our precious head clerk."

"D-Did you say 'precious'?" Felicia's face relaxed into a blissful grin.

"Aaw! I'm not bothering her!" the maid whined, still clutching the now limp girl. "I just thought I'd like to get to know her better!"

"Yes, yes," I said. "You can ensnare Felicia with your wiles, but Anna and Romy still have the final say when it comes to maid uniforms. I don't recommend trying any tricks with *them*."

With a startled cry, Lily released the bespectacled girl and staggered off to

collapse on a couch. Felicia yelped again, but I had predicted she would fall and cast a levitation spell ahead of time. Atra followed the gently floating girl with her eyes.

Lily turned over on the couch and started flailing. “I...I should have known I couldn’t fool you, Allen,” she fumed. “I spent two whole months thinking up that plan while I was back home chatting with my mom, drinking tea, eating scrumptious treats, and playing with my little brother and sisters, and you saw right through it. W-Wait, could this be true lo—?”

“So, what do you want my help with?” I cut in flatly. “And why can’t Lydia find out about it?”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Allen.” The maid pouted, hugging a bird-shaped cushion. “You won’t get any girls that way.”

“Sometimes, Lily, words can kill, and yours just cut my heart to the quick. You also lose points for sounding a little like Richard. Now, tell me the whole story.” I signed another paper and flapped my left hand.

Lily sat up, puffing out her cheeks like a child and still holding the cushion, then hid her mouth. Was it me, or was she in an even merrier mood than when we’d parted ways in the southern capital?

A musical laugh escaped her. “Well, you see...”

“Don’t tell me the under-duke took your joke about only considering suitors who can beat me seriously, and now he’s handpicked the strongest he can find.”

Time ground to a halt. The room fell silent save for the ticking of my pocket watch on the desk. Lily refused to look me in the eye as she leaned coquettishly and let out a belated giggle.

At once, I turned to the bespectacled girl still floating through the air. “Felicia, your verdict, please.”

“Just say no!” shouted the head clerk, newly returned to consciousness. “Why would you let yourself get roped into the under-duke’s family squabbles?! It’s ridiculous! A complete waste of time! And you already have so much on your plate as it is! If you collapse from exhaustion, who will—?”

“Oh, Miss Fosse!” Lily lilted, scarlet hair fluttering as she caught Felicia in another hug that made the head clerk squeak. By the time I caught the falling cushion, they had moved into a corner.

“What do you think you’re doing?! I...I’ll call Emma and Cindy!” Felicia snapped. Could I count her taking this tone with someone other than Stella, Caren, or me as a sign of growth?

Then Lily whispered something in her ear (“Don’t you see a problem with the way things are?”), and Felicia lowered her own voice without prompting. I couldn’t make out their words, but she looked surprised.

“Kitty!” The white-haired child tugged on my sleeve, demanding a cushion.

The look in the maid’s eyes turned serious. (“Don’t you want to lift up Mr. Allen?”)

Then the bespectacled girl blinked repeatedly and glanced at me, shaken. What had she just heard?

Lily held her close, whispering. (“You can’t stand on the battlefield, but you still want to do more for him—something no other girl he knows can. And you want to win at it. You want to be number one. Don’t you ever feel that way?”)

(“W-Well...”)

I watched Atra sink into her pile of cushions while I picked up the documents Lily had brought from Niche. Apparently, they had only recently turned up among the effects of Robson Atlas. One was an old book, *Apocrypha of the Great Moon*. Its soot-stained cover bore an intricate crest.

Where have I seen this shape before?

While I puzzled this, I scanned a sheet of stationery that had been sandwiched between the pages of the holy book. It was in a man’s hand and unencrypted. The title read, “On Artificially Inducing Sacred Ground.” Both finds seemed well worth reading.

The scarlet-haired maid pressed her forehead against the bespectacled girl’s and clasped her hands. The latter seemed deeply conflicted, but the former giggled. (“You really are charming, Miss Fosse. Don’t worry! I want the same

thing. And I let Lady Lynne and her friends in on the plan last night.”)

(“Lily, I had no idea.”) The beginnings of tears pricked Felicia’s eyes. At last, the pair exchanged an emphatic nod and pressed their fists together.

I don’t like the way the wind is blowing.

The maid released her bespectacled captive. “We’ve just sealed an ironclad alliance!” she declared, head held high.

“I beg your pardon?” Dumbfounded, I looked to the trusty head clerk.

She cleared her throat affectedly and said, “Allen, it seems like Lily is in real distress. It wouldn’t hurt to meet the under-duke and hear His Highness’s side of things.”

“F-Felicia?!” I spluttered, taken aback, and gave the triumphant maid a cold, hard stare.

H-How on earth did she win over our best businesswoman?!

“Now, what will it be?” Lily asked, with a sinister chuckle. Then she diffidently touched her floral hair clip and her left ring finger. “If you abandon me—I mean, I know you wouldn’t, but...”

She doesn’t look like she’s acting. Maybe she really is caught between her house and her work, like I first thought.

I shook both arms and sighed. The ring and bracelet on my right hand caught the light. “Oh, all right,” I said. “But I’m only promising to hear him out, okay?”

The newly minted allies looked at each other and let out a cheer, joining hands as they jumped for joy. Their hair bobbed up and down, and Atra’s eyes followed suit.

I exhaled.

“I could do with a cup of hot tea,” I told Lily. “Do you know any maids who would make me a good one?”



The next day found me in Under-duke Leinster’s mansion. The drawing room, while somewhat plainer than the duke’s, nonetheless combined virile strength

with dazzling ostentation. With me were Lily, the cause of the commotion, and Felicia, whom the girls had appointed to keep an especially close eye on me once they'd heard what was afoot. Atra had stayed behind with the maids. Thank goodness we had Cindy on hand.

Seated in a wooden chair of palpable antiquity, I cast a sidelong glance at the bespectacled girl to my left, who kept toying with her bangs. She wore a formal dress in a reserved shade of dark purple, the result of Emma's finest efforts. But while the maid had presumably hoped to convey poise...

"Calm down, Felicia," I said. "You know, I think this tea comes from the free cities. I can't quite describe its aroma. Lily, do you know where your family bought it from?"

"One of the big merchant houses, I think," came the lilting reply. "I'll ask next time I get a chance!"

"I'd appreciate that."

"No problem!" Lily answered cheerily, giving her long scarlet hair a carefree shake. She wore her usual outfit, evidently determined to defy the under-duke.

Felicia timidly reached out and tugged on my sleeve. "A-Allen," she groaned, "I...I must look so out of place here."

Who would believe this fearful voice belonged to the girl who had single-handedly run the logistical side of the whole southern front? I knew I had no right to judge, but she really took humility too far.

"Not at all," I replied, shaking my head. "But... I know! If you're feeling nervous, imagine you're here to cut a deal with the Toretos."

"You mean...a business negotiation?" Felicia looked confused.

I gazed into her eyes—their tendency to hide behind her bangs notwithstanding—and raised my right index finger. "Your goal is to stop the plan to marry off Lily. And for your reward..." I winked at the scarlet-haired young woman who had already finished her own pastry and started in on mine. "How about a chance to put a highly capable maid to work at the company for a while? She needs to work off my dessert, for one thing."

“Did someone ask for a maid? I’ll bake you anything you want once this blows over! I’ll even make enough for Atra!” Lily chimed in. She must have gotten the better of a young Lydia in much the same way.

Felicia fell silent for a moment and finished her tea with gusto. “Not bad,” she said, setting down the cup painted with little red birds and smiling like only a merchant confident of great profits could.

“I know, right?” I replied.

“Grr! Just let me at those jobs!” added Lily.

As the tension faded, there came a solid rap on the door. It opened to admit a large, red-haired, bearded man in military uniform. Felicia gave a shiver, and Lily assumed a look of blank composure.

The man turned his stern gaze on the scarlet-haired maid and muttered, “That outfit again.” Raising his massive hand slightly, he added, “Forgive me. I see I’ve kept you waiting. Oh, don’t get up on my account.”

“Thank you very much,” Felicia and I replied—she with a slight stammer—and returned the man’s nod.

“I suppose this is our first meeting face-to-face,” the man said, taking a seat across the table and folding his hands. “Lucas Leinster. I serve as under-duke.”

“Allen, at your service. And this is—”

“Miss Felicia Fosse, I presume? You did me quite a service in the recent war. We couldn’t have held the line so long without you. Let me take this opportunity to express my gratitude. If you ever find yourself in need, don’t hesitate to call on me. I’ll assist you as far as my authority allows.”

“M-Much obliged,” Felicia replied. Even polite men unnerved her.

“Now, what brings you here today?” His Highness asked, stroking his red beard and narrowing his eyes. “Or so I would say if my eldest daughter weren’t here with you instead of at the family seat where she belongs.” He shot a piercing glare at Lily. Felicia let out a silent shriek, but its target went on placidly sipping her tea. “Seeing that she is, however, I assume you’ve come about a matter I meant to broach with you in the next few days.”

So, things had already gone that far. Resisting the urge to grimace, I shot a chilly look at Lily, who sat on my right, but to no avail. She went on gobbling pastry.

“Well then, I hate to be abrupt,” I said, heaving a mental sigh, “but is it true that you plan to marry off Lily?”

“It is, although I didn’t plan on her slipping away and running off to join you here,” the burly red-haired man replied, massaging his temples. I could hear the anguish in his voice. “My daughter is nineteen. I think it’s high time she stopped her little maid games and settled down.”

“‘Maid games’?” Lily murmured—the first words out of her since the under-duke had entered the room.

Felicia must have overheard her too, because she tightened her grip on my sleeve and said, “W-With all due respect...”

“Your Highness considers becoming a maid to the Ducal House of Leinster a mere ‘game’?” I finished the bespectacled girl’s sentence for her, staring the under-duke straight in the eye.

“Little maid games”?

I couldn’t take that lying down. The Leinster maids bore far heavier responsibilities than those of any other house, and they always rose to the challenge.

His Highness lowered his hand, shamefaced. “I believe I misspoke,” he said. “Naturally, I think no such thing. Anna and the maid corps she organized have become an indispensable asset to my house. We all recognize their contributions.”

Hearing that, Felicia worked up the courage to venture an opinion.

“Th-Then, it hardly seems proper to describe Lily serving as a maid that way, e-especially when she holds such an important position as number three!”

In spite of myself, I felt overcome with emotion. The timid girl who’d fallen down at our first meeting was standing up to an under-duke!

While I made mental notes of some plans for the near future, the nobleman

in question crossed his arms, as big around as logs. “Miss Fosse, Lily has a right to be styled ‘Highness’ on public occasions. Her ability also qualifies her to inherit our house’s title.”

Felicia bit her lip, faced with talk of a world she didn’t know. It sounded as though Lily had high hopes pinned on her.

His Highness rose and faced the window. “When my daughter suddenly declared her intention to become a maid, I couldn’t understand it. I won’t look down on any work as lowly, but Lily is a Leinster. She has a duty to defend the realm and its people! I can’t indulge her whims forever.”

“Her ‘whims’?” I repeated, sensing something out of place. The Duchess Lisa Leinster and Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster I knew weren’t so small-minded. In fact, I suspected they’d approve.

His Highness gazed out at the early-winter cityscape, then turned his head. “I want to introduce you to someone,” he said. “Enter.”

“By your leave, sir!” came a crisp reply as the door opened and a dapper aristocratic man entered, wearing a red outfit in a knightly style. An elegantly chased longsword hung from his belt.

“I don’t believe it! *You?*” Lily exclaimed in surprise.

“A-Allen,” Felicia whined, tugging my sleeve and looking as though she wanted to hide behind me.

A handsome dandy from a southern house, outfitted from head to toe in red? He can only be...

“Meet Lily’s new suitor,” His Highness said, giving the young aristocrat an affectionate pat on the shoulder. “He bested every other candidate—and there were many—and put his own name forward.”

I rose without thinking and turned to face the man, who had never taken his eyes off me.

“Tobias Evelyn,” he said, letting me glimpse the steely force behind his mild manners. “I hold an earldom, though I can hardly claim to merit it.”

“Allen, at your service. It’s an honor to meet the courageous leader of the

Scarlet Order.” I held out my hand, and the earl squeezed it in an almost painful grip.

“The honor is mine.” He chuckled. “I’ve longed to meet you, Brain of the Lady of the Sword, Shooting Star, Emissary of the Water Dragon.”

“Y-You don’t say...” I murmured, more slowly than I’d meant to. I doubted I could put my feelings into words.

Bam!

Lily struck the table without warning. Then she walked up beside me, leaving an alarmed and confused Felicia.

“Father, I have no intention of going home!” she snapped in a harsher tone than I’d often heard from her. “And I won’t marry Lord Evelyn! I am a *maid!*”

“I’ll hear no more such talk,” His Highness growled. “You told me to bring you a man who can best Allen. Well, I’ve brought Tobias. Now, keep your word! Although I hate to impose on Allen, I insist he accept the challenge. A duel, man-to-man! If you can’t accept that, then quit the maid corps and go home!”

Lily gritted her teeth, squared her shoulders, squeezed her eyes shut, and took deep breaths. “Oh, very well,” she said, wrapping herself around my left arm. “Pretty please, Allen?”

“Lily...” I wanted to complain but couldn’t bring myself to finish in the face of such a bright smile.

From her perspective, this must be a disaster. But for some reason, she doesn’t seem down about it. In fact, she almost looks like she got just what she wanted.

No, I’m reading too much into it. Felicia’s panic is real enough, for one thing.

I decided to address the young nobleman who had become a party to this affair. “Lord Evelyn—”

“‘Tobias,’ please,” he interrupted. “I hope you’ll permit me to call you ‘Allen’ as well.”

His friendly manner caught me a little off guard. I had never met the earl before. Even if he knew me by reputation, that would hardly explain such warmth.

“Thank you,” I said, shaking off my doubts. “Tobias, I have no desire to compete with you. A humble private tutor has no business meddling in an under-duke’s family quarrels.”

“What?! Don’t you care about losing me, Allen?!” Lily fumed, shaking me for all she was worth—which in turn made me keenly aware of her ample chest touching me.

His Highness scowled and cleared his throat, while the earl narrowed his eyes.

“Allen, don’t forget we came here to *talk*,” Felicia added frostily, which I hardly thought fair.

“But I would like to ask you one thing,” I said, stopping the scarlet-haired maid with a look.

“And what would that be?” asked the earl, fighting spirit in his golden eyes. I couldn’t afford to let appearances mislead me—no mere dandy could lead the most elite fighting force in the south. I only needed one answer from him, but that answer would change everything.

I hurled my question:

“Suppose you marry into the under-duke’s house, but Lady Lily insists that she wants to continue working as a maid. How would you answer?”

I felt Lily stiffen slightly and grab my sleeve with both hands.

“You need to ask, Allen?” one of the finest commanders in the south answered without hesitation. “I would talk her out of it! Wouldn’t anyone?”

Oh well. I guess I have no choice.

After all, I’d seen her. On a hill overlooking the southern capital, I’d seen a girl who’d promised to show me around the city and instead gotten us both lost beam as she said, “You know, I’ve never told anybody before, but I’m gonna be a maid!”

“I understand,” I said dryly. “I accept your challenge.”

“Oh?” the under-duke murmured.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way!” declared the earl.

“Allen,” Lily whispered happily, although her innate good sense came through in a touch of unease.

I showed her the bracelet on my right wrist and named my terms. “If I win, give Lily another chance to argue her case—in front of the whole family this time. Felicia, do you have anything to add?”

The head clerk had been watching in silence. After a brief pause for thought, she said, “As a matter of fact, I would like to make one request of Your Highness.”

What followed took my breath away.



“I guess this should do,” I mused, inspecting myself in a large, full-length mirror. I couldn’t help feeling ill at ease in an outfit so far removed from my usual clothes. Still, I couldn’t avoid wearing it—not after Anna had gone to the trouble of delivering it to my lodgings.

I could hear people cheering through the large second-story window. Military barriers already enclosed a large area in the under-duke’s inner courtyard, where today’s duel was to take place. Members of ducal houses seemed fond of spectacle—including Duchess Letty, who had put herself forward as referee.

I pulled out the note from Lydia that had accompanied my clothes and reread her message. She had written it after our meeting with the under-duke, which at least partly explained the rough handwriting.

Wear this to your duel today.

Yana Yustin arrived in the city yesterday. The plan is to hold private talks before the signing ceremony.

You’re fighting Tobias Evelyn? Don’t go overboard. If you throw the fight, we’re eloping to another country!

My lady was in an ill humor.

Ellie poked her head into the open doorway, the white ribbons in her blonde hair bobbing. In place of her maid uniform, she had on a duplicate of Lily’s foreign outfit like her classmates had worn in the city of water. I thought its

gentle greens suited her perfectly. Lily seemed determined to make this getup proper maid attire if it was the last thing she did.

“A-Allen, sir, are you rea—?”

“I just finished,” I replied. “I’m not used to these clothes, so I took a little longer than— Ellie?”

The girl had frozen in mid-question. I picked up Silver Bloom from where I left it and approached her.

“Ellie, is anything wrong?” I asked, peering into her face.

The angelic maid started awake. In fact, she quite literally jumped.

“N-Nosir!” she answered, gazing up at me with her hands on her cheeks. “O-Only, you look so, er, dashing. A little like Ms. Lydia when she’s dressed for a sword fight.”

I scratched my cheek, embarrassed. Lydia had indeed prepared a swordsman’s outfit for me in secret. Quoth Anna: “The young ladies’ matching outfits left her beside herself with jealousy!” I supposed the black, white, and red ensemble really might resemble her usual attire.

“I feel more self-conscious than anything,” I admitted. “You look lovely, though.”

“Lily made enough for me and Felicia too. I was so jealous of Lady Tina and Lady Lynne, so I’m glad to have my own! And it’s much easier to move around in than I thought.” The young maid did a twirl. Her leather boots struck the floor with a satisfying *tap*. Air filled her long skirt, which she held down with a shy giggle. “What a wonderful day! I get a new outfit and the first look at yours too!”

I recoiled and covered my eyes, struck by her pure heart. It hadn’t changed one bit since the day we met.

I must keep her safe. Even if the others are too far gone, I won’t lose her!

“Allen, sir? Is anything wrong?” the angel asked, blinking in charming surprise as I renewed my resolve.

“Ellie,” I said, “please hold on to your pure heart, even if you’re the only one.

I'll strike down anyone or anything it takes to help you do that."

"Um... Yessir."

No sooner had we emerged into the courtyard than Tina and Lynne spotted us from the newly arranged seats for guests of high standing. Ellie must have come to fetch me because her friends' dresses—pale azure and red, respectively—didn't lend themselves to running about.

"Sir! Over he—"

"Dear brother, come qui—"

Both young noblewomen fell silent in mid-wave.

Huh?

I looked to Caren and Stella, who sat beside the girls in dresses of a more mature cut. My sister froze, ears and tail bristling. The future Duchess Howard covered her mouth and lowered her eyes. As for Felicia, she seemed to have taken command of the force distributing drinks and light refreshments.

The other spectators, members of southern houses stationed in the royal capital, eyed me with intense interest. The elite Scarlet Order appeared to be running security. What an overblown spectacle.

Magically crafted stone walls and dozens of barriers enclosed the courtyard on all sides. Chairs and small tables ringed this arena, interspersed with heaters employing spellstones of fire. Between these and the barriers, I felt not a hint of cold.

Still, why did Felicia ask Under-duke Lucas to invite all the southern houses as witnesses? I can't call it a bad move, since it will stop anyone from disputing the result, but still.

I crossed the courtyard with Ellie and stopped before the seats of honor.

"You know," I said sheepishly, "that reaction stings. Maybe I should change back into my normal clothes after a—"

"No!" Tina, Lynne, Caren, and Ellie shouted in unison. Stella blushed faintly.

“You look amazing! But...” Tina clenched her fists and bit her lip in frustration. “Oh, why couldn’t Roland have moved up his travel plans?! He won’t get here until tomorrow, but he could have dressed you like a *Howard* swordsman!”

“Hold still, dear brother! I need to take a shot for my dear sister,” her red-haired peer demanded, orb in hand, cutting short my sympathy for the Howard butler’s plight. Looking behind the seats, I spotted Cindy cradling Atra. So, *she* had supplied the recording device.

With little hope of success, I ventured, “Really, Lynne, d-don’t you think—?”

Caren rose from her seat and took my left arm, as if nothing could be more natural. “Whatever your reasons, Allen, you agreed to the duel, and now you’re even dressed for it. You can’t back out now, so stop fighting it and face facts. Lynne, get me in the shot, if you please.”

“Of course. Take one with me next.”

“What?!” Tina cried.

“Oh, m-me too,” added a flustered Ellie.

Before I knew it, I found myself in the middle of a commotion. Atop the dais, Under-duke Lucas Leinster looked increasingly grim, while Duchess Letty roared with laughter. Only one person in the courtyard remained unruffled—the red-uniformed knight standing in its center.

“Would you say something to them, Stella?” I appealed to the only duke’s daughter who had yet to break her prim silence. “People are watching, and—Stella?”

Our resident saint’s mind appeared to be elsewhere. Only when I waved a hand in front of her face did she finally snap out of her trance.

“F-Forgive me!” With a bashful look, she added, “You look wonderful. Like a fairy-tale prince.”

I resisted the urge to bury my head in my hands. “I prefer magicians myself. Are you more of a prince person, then, Stella?” I replied with difficulty, looking from the girls, up to their usual antics, to my sister, who looked calm and was anything but.

“No, I find magicians much more— Ah.” The noblewoman turned bright red under the girls’ and Caren’s stares. Lights flitted through the air.

A sinister laugh struck my ears. Moments later, Lily landed in the center of the makeshift arena, scarlet locks and black ribbon fluttering. Naturally, she wore her usual ensemble.

“L-Lily, ma’am! I don’t know if jumping from the third floor is such a good idea!” Sida Stinton, a Leinster maid in training newly assigned to Allen & Co. in the royal capital, wailed from indoors.

Lily paid no heed.

“My eyes didn’t deceive me!” she crowed, flashing the flower in her hair and the bracelet on her wrist in victory. “I *knew* you’d look good as a spellcasting swordsman! That advice I gave Lady Lydia paid—”

“Cindy, please watch Atra for me,” I said.

“I won’t let you down!” the milky-haired maid replied from behind the girls. “Come on, Miss Atra. Time for a hug!”

“Hug!”

With the child in her dependable hands, I finally started toward the center of the courtyard.

“Humph! Fine. I see how it is. I’m number three, and I can’t even get a maid uniform, so of course you choose a time like this to pick on me. Wink wink,” Lily fumed, crouching down and doodling on the ground in a show of dejection, although she kept shooting ostentatious glances at me.

“Tina tried that impression too,” I pointed out, exasperated. “Is mimicking Cheryl a new fad?”

Both noblewomen answered as one.

“She taught us in the city of water, sir!”

“Her Royal Highness said it gets you every time!”

Lydia and I will need to have words with them later.

I gave my rod a twirl and struck its ferrule on the ground. Tina, Lynne, and

Ellie stood to attention.

“Sir!”

“Dear brother!”

“Allen, sir!”

“Don’t let him beat you!” they finished in unison.

“I’ll do my best,” I said. “Caren, can I count on you?”

“Leave everything to me,” my sister replied. “I’ll keep hold of Tina and Stella and make sure they don’t interrupt the duel.”

The Howard sister gave a start, visibly shaken.

“C-Caren?!”

“I...I would never.”

I chuckled at their amusing expressions.

Finally, I met Lily’s gaze and held up the bracelet on my right wrist. The maid showed the bracelet on her left and dipped an elegant curtsy. The girl with whom I’d shared that day of grand adventure had a dream, and I would do my level best to keep it alive.

I advanced to the center of the dueling ground and bowed to the earl who’d shown such patience in waiting for me, his magnificent longsword lodged in the ground. He had kept everything he wore impressively red, down to the last detail.

“Forgive me for keeping you waiting, Tobias,” I said. “I’m truly sorry things have come to this.”

“No need to apologize, Allen,” he replied. “I hold myself to a knightly standard. I cannot let such trifles faze me. Besides, everyone is eager for a glimpse of you.”

A cheer rose at the earl’s words. Southern aristocrats loved any excuse for a party.

Without a sound, an elven beauty landed in the arena, unarmed. “I applaud

your resolve, O child of Evelyn,” she said. “I mark you worthy to lead the Scarlet Order, tip of the Leinsters’ keen blade.”

“You do me honor, Emerald Gale,” the earl replied.

“Duchess Letty...” I murmured, shooting a reproving glare at the former duchess who should have been attending to business in the palace.

“I’ve had naught but tiresome councils of late,” she said frankly, with an airy wave of her hand. “Your doings here seem much more enter—*ahem!* The future of the Under-ducal House of Leinster is a serious matter of state. Surely it demands a witness of appropriate standing? Let us begin.”

I would have liked to say more, but I could hardly take a living legend to task. Resigning myself, I stepped away from Tobias. When I turned to face him again, he drew his sword from the ground and held it ready.

Duchess Letty surveyed the whole courtyard.

“Silence.”

That one word from her quieted the raucous nobles, knights, and other attendees. A veteran of the War of the Dark Lord commanded a dignity not to be trifled with.

“I hereby declare a duel between Tobias Evelyn the Red Knight and Allen the Shooting Star. But let there be no taking of life. I won’t tolerate death off the battlefield. I trust you don’t object, Lucas?”

“Naturally not,” the under-duke replied.

“Good. Now...” The spectators’ cries faded into the distance. Someone had reinforced the wards. Duchess Letty raised her left hand high, then swung it down. “Begin!”

The legend vanished, swallowed by a magic circle—short-range tactical teleportation.

“Allow me to strike the first blow!” Tobias roared while I admired the spell. The knight sped toward me, every muscle in his body magically enhanced several times over.

A merciless slash scythed toward my neck!

I dodged, hopping backward and arching my body under the blow. He immediately followed up with a second strike, a third, a fourth. I marveled as each slash I evaded scarred the ground. I should have expected nothing less of the Scarlet Order's young commander. He moved nimbly despite his heavy gear.

I sidestepped an overhead swing of Tobias's longsword.

"Impressive!" he shouted, canine teeth bared. His handsome face betrayed the joy of battle.

"Tobias," I said, "you didn't look like you were holding back that time."

The Red Knight possessed considerable reserves of mana and a potent barrier. Though his techniques and swordplay lacked elemental properties, he'd polished both to a mirror sheen. If he closed distance and forced a quick, decisive showdown, not even the girls would stand a chance against him.

Tobias thrust his blade into the ground. "My apologies, but I can't afford to go easy on a sorcerer who makes dodging my charge look simple!"

The arena shook violently, and slashes of mana flew at me from the ground under my feet. I deflected the barrage with my rod and struck back with a spell of my own. His mana told me where he would strike next.

Several dozen shining blasts of magic surrounded Tobias, hemming him in.

"Little spells like this won't—"

The knight grunted and pulled back at the last moment. Rather than meet my shots head-on with his sword, he turned and shattered only the direct hits with his barrier alone. The remainder burst against the ground, freezing it where they struck.

Looking around, I saw not a scratch on the arena's wards, let alone its stone walls. Slash marks on the ground remained the only damage.

"So, you noticed," I said. "Even Lydia fell for elemental camouflage the first time she saw it."

"Allen," the Red Knight replied, sinking into a low stance, "the phrase 'exceeds expectations' was made for men like you!"

His feet barely kicked the ground before he took off like a shot, lunging at me with a lightning-quick thrust from below.

He's calling on wind to aid him! He must have held off during his first charge to force me into making a mistake.

While admiring the knight's masterful offensive, I still found time to activate the experimental spell I'd kept in reserve: Ice Mirror Shower. A cloud of frozen flecks blunted the strike's momentum just enough for me to block it with my rod.

"Brain of the Lady of the Sword!" Tobias shouted. "I've been hearing stories of the sorcerer Lady Lydia met at the Royal Academy since she brought you home for summer vacation!"

I grunted as a whirlwind formed around the knight's sword. Added to his own strength and magical enhancement, it knocked my rod aside. I knew Lydia's keen edge, Stella's grace, and Lily's solidity, but this swordplay rooted in battlefield experience was unlike any I trained with.

I activated the elementary spell Divine Ice Vines directly beneath the oncoming longsword. Contriving to entangle it for a moment, I kicked the weapon itself, propelling myself backward.

Tobias switched to a two-handed grip, cut free of my vines, and launched a ferocious charge. He refused to let me gain distance—proof of his experience battling sorcerers. I conjured a blade of lightning on my rod and blocked his longsword.

"Ever since," he continued, "not a day has passed in my house without rumors of you! I still don't know whether to believe that you drove off the black dragon, slew a devil, and battled a pure-blooded vampire and a millennium-old monster! It sounds like a tale out of myth!"

Sparks flew as I struck back, taking the offensive, but the Red Knight blocked every blow. I imbued my feet with wind, hoping to slip behind him. But while I gained mobility, Tobias swiftly did likewise. A slash I'd failed to see coming shaved a few hairs from my bangs.

"Then came this last war and the glittering array of honors you won! I'll be

frank: I feel more than a twinge of envy! What knight can stand to see any man outshine him in valor, let alone one a decade or more his junior?!"

"Then, you accepted this duel because...?" I panted, hammering him with Divine Light Shots at point-blank range and wrangling a bit of breathing room. I wouldn't give Tobias the edge in all martial arts, but his swordplay far outclassed mine.

"Precisely!" the earl cried, looking gallant as he took a great swing. "When will I ever get another chance to measure myself against a legend in the making: the new Shooting Star?! So I used the talk of marriage to claim this one! Oh, but don't misunderstand me." To my surprise, the self-assured knight turned diffident and scratched the tip of his nose. "I truly do c-care for Lady Lily as well. I swear it on my sword!"

For better or worse, the Red Knight wore his heart on his sleeve.

"Allen!" the scarlet-haired maid shouted, loud enough to pierce the wards. "Try a psychological attack! Say, 'I hate to break it to you, but she has a prior enga—'"

From the sound of things, the girls had clamped her mouth shut before she could finish—although not as quickly as I would have liked. Turning apprehensively back to Tobias, I found the nobleman's eyes ablaze with jealousy.

"So you see," he said, flourishing his sword aloft, "I also have a grudge to settle! I'll not hold anything back!"

A jolt shook the arena. Everywhere I looked, pillars of mana rose from the marks of his slashes, each one taking on the form of a longsword. They numbered six in all.

"Did you imagine I was attacking without a plan?" Tobias asked as his own longsword began to glow. "Taste a lost art my grandfather revived: the Seven Slashes!"

The light from the six blades of mana and the sword in the knight's hands was converging. I happened to spot the diminutive Sida Stinton among her senior maids, brandishing an unfamiliar sigil. In my mind, something clicked into place.

Of course! No wonder I thought I recognized the design on that book! It looks like the distorted patterns I found in the map of ten-day fever victims! Does that mean the Church of the Holy Spirit and the cult of the Great Moon share some kind of connection?

While Tobias's potent mana buffeted my body, the gears in my head turned ever faster. "Laying groundwork unbeknownst to one's opponent, only to ultimately concentrate all one's power in one place," I muttered. "Do the apostles' Eightfold Divine Seal and ten-day fever follow the same basic principle? They set their pieces one by one, until finally..."

All at once, the dots connected to reveal a hidden picture.

I need to enter the Sealed Archive. For Stella, but most of all for Ellie.

"Prepare yourself, Allen!" Tobias roared. "Try to take this head-on, and I can't guarantee you'll sur—"

I gave Silver Bloom a wide, left-handed swing. The bracelet on my right wrist flashed, and fire flowers whirled through the whole arena.

"What?! Flowers?! But that's Lady Lily's—"

The fire flowers brushed the longsword poised to strike, and the self-destruction formula I'd laced them with took effect. Spell formulae peeled away from the massive blade as it crumbled.

Tobias trembled, dumbfounded. He had infused his technique with a staggering quantity of mana, but I had spent the past several years updating the basic formulae underlying the Leinsters' spells and those of the southern houses. With no encryption to interfere, I could counter a derivative of my own handiwork—even one I'd never seen before.

"Thank you, Tobias," I said with feeling, raising my right hand high as the knight gaped, wide-eyed. "You helped me get my thoughts in order. Consider this a token of gratitude."

Fire flowers spiraled from six directions, coalescing around Silver Bloom. The Red Knight raised his sword but soon lowered it again.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

“I’d like to call it ‘Seven Burning Blade Blossoms’ in honor of your technique. Prepare yourself!”

I swung my right hand down, instantly engulfing the nobleman. Tobias soared high into the air, his magical defenses in tatters.

With a snap of my fingers, I dismissed my spell and cast levitation on the Red Knight. He came to rest lying on the ground, battered but hardly bleeding.

“Halt!” Duchess Letty shouted. No sooner had she reappeared than the wards weakened and the noise of the crowd returned. A pair of military griffins flew overhead with every appearance of enjoyment.

Before I could issue instructions, healing magic on a jaw-dropping scale enveloped Tobias. I recognized Stella’s handiwork.

“Hm? Wh-What have I...?”

Hearing the knight regain consciousness, the living legend announced her verdict: “This duel ends in Allen’s victory!”

For a moment, silence reigned. Then an explosion of cheers shook the air.

Well, at least that’s o—

“**Not yet!**” a deep voice boomed before I could even let out a sigh of relief. An enormous fireball burst on the ground, creating a field of fire.

“Your Highness?” I asked, bewildered, as I kept the blaze from spreading.

Amid the flames stood a large, well-built man, red-haired and bearded: Under-duke Lucas Leinster, in the flesh. He hadn’t drawn his sword, but he struck his fists together and bellowed, “Not yet! I...I won’t give away Lily’s hand in marriage yet! I refuse to!”

After a long pause, the best I could manage was a stunned “Pardon?”

“Oh-ho?” Duchess Letty murmured with unmistakable amusement.

Wasn’t this about whether he accepts Lily as a maid?

“Perhaps His Highness has latched on to a false assumption?” Tobias suggested, picking himself up. “Our under-duke is a famously doting father.”

“I see,” I said slowly. “Duchess Letty—”

“Worry not, Allen,” the living legend interrupted before I could leave the rest to her.

Two maids leapt into the arena, poised to defend me. Tina, Lynne, Stella, and Caren grimaced in frustration—their dresses had evidently caused delays.

“That’s quite enough!” Ellie snapped.

“I wish you’d just make peace with my leaving the nest already,” added Lily.

The noise of the crowd continued to grow. And was I imagining things, or were more of them pointing outward than inward? I turned to Duchess Letty and saw unbridled delight on her face.

The under-duke faltered, but his warrior spirit still burned. “S-Say what you will, I refuse to retreat a single—”

“Goodness! Lucas, darling, don’t say that! You can’t go back on your word!”

A friendly, lilting voice filled the air. The color drained from His Highness’s face, and he started quivering like a leaf.

That sounds just like the maid who joined me on my trip to Atlas.

I looked behind me. There stood a brightly smiling woman with hair of palest scarlet just long enough to hide her ears. She wore a dress of a slightly darker shade and boasted a magnificent chest despite her small stature.

I knew it! The maid who wouldn’t tell me her name! But wait, didn’t she just address the under-duke awfully casually?

While Ellie and I tried to make sense of the situation, Tobias dusted himself off and saluted the woman. Meanwhile, His Highness and Lily shrieked in unison.

“F-Fiane?! Wh-What are you doing in the royal—? No! Th-This isn’t what it looks like!”

“M-Mother?! You never told me you were coming to the city!”

“Mother”?

Before I could process the word’s meaning, fiery plumes filled the air.

I...I recognize this mana.

A scarlet-tressed beauty—Duchess Lisa Leinster, the Bloodstained Lady—made her appearance amid a gout of flame. She wore a magnificent dress, cut like Fiane’s but in bright crimson. Anna and her second-in-command Romy followed in her wake.

“I take it you want a fight.” Lisa smiled at the under-duke’s bloodless face. “Well, Lucas, we will be happy to give you one.”



“She’s late. She should easily have been here by now. And no sign of the professor and Anko either. Oh, jeez! Cheryl, have you heard anything?!” my best friend fumed, pacing the room. The Lady of the Sword had donned a scarlet dress to greet our honored guest.

Chiffon lay curled up on the carpet before the crackling hearth fire. Darling little Lia had joined the white wolf for a nap.

“Calm down, Lydia,” I said soothingly from my chair by a window, running my eyes over a report from my comrades watching the duel. “Why not take a leaf from Chiffon and Lia’s book?”

Lydia took the chair across from me, miffed by my mocking tone. I saw my white dress reflected in the window glass and felt a chill draft. Winter had arrived in the royal capital.

“They just wore themselves out playing around,” Lydia countered, resting her head in her hands. “Listen.”

“Yes?” I looked up and stared at her. Her scarlet hair and eyes caught the light, so striking they made me jealous. Even as a fellow woman, I had to acknowledge her beauty. If only her personality were as charming.

“You *do* realize he’s dueling Tobias today? I don’t think for a moment that he’ll lose, but would it kill you to show a little—? Oh, don’t tell me you’ve finally given up?”

I sighed. She had completely missed the mark.

Give up on Allen? To whom did she think she was talking? I was only feigning composure because I’d already exchanged messages with Lily and my other

like-minded allies. I knew this was all part of our plan to show the world what Allen was capable of. Of course, I didn't think any of us had expected the under-duke to seriously put forward a potential husband.

But how would I answer my best friend? She wasn't in on the plot. Before I could decide, she spouted more nonsense.

"Yes, I can see it now. You've gained a more mature perspective. To borrow a phrase from my sister-in-law, 'Allen and I belong together. It's the way of the world.'"

Words failed me. After graduating from the Royal Academy and the university, becoming a court sorceress, and even joining my personal guard, Lydia still cared more for Allen than for everything else put together. She would fight the whole world if he told her to, without hesitation. At times, her straightforward devotion dazzled me—and filled me with envy.

"Lydia, won't you please come clean and tell me what you got Allen to do for you?" I said at last, toying with my blonde hair as I changed the topic. The question had been bothering me for some time. The old Lydia would have demanded the day off, even if we were awaiting Imperial Princess Yana Yustin.

"Nothing," Lydia replied joyfully, lightly stroking her right ring finger with her left hand. "Nothing at all."

"By the way, Lydia," I said, struggling to keep my voice calm as I reached out to her with a smile, "would you let me see your right hand for a moment? I want to check something."

Sure enough, she pulled her hand back and cradled it. "No!" she snapped, turning her head away.

"Let me see."

"N! O!"

We glared at each other, then leapt to our feet as if stung, squaring off. Blossoms of light and plumes of fire collided all over the room, destroying each other.

"I've thought something was strange for a little while now!" I shouted,

weaving spells. “Ever since that morning you slipped out of the palace! What did you get Allen to do for you?! That wasn’t playing fair! I demand equal opportunity, Lady Crybaby!”

“Don’t you mean ‘using my natural rights’?” the Lady of the Sword scoffed, brushing her scarlet locks aside and glaring suspiciously back at me. “What have *you* been cooking up behind my back, Princess Schemer?!”

So, she’d caught on. But our plan was already complete. All we needed was an opportunity.

“Whaaat? I’m not ‘cooking up’ *anything*,” I taunted, pressing my hands together. “Well, a certain devotee of the Church of Hogging Allen might not like what comes next, but it will make everyone *else* happy, so who really cares?”

Crack! A log on the fire split, and Chiffon looked around in alarm. Seeing Lydia and me, the wolf curled protectively around Lia with a look that said, “Keep it within reason.” Anko had joined the group while I wasn’t looking.

Lydia and I chuckled, shifting into combat stances. The walls and furnishings groaned and our hair rose under the force of our mana.

That was when the door opened to admit a bespectacled gentleman: the professor, one of the kingdom’s finest sorcerers, who had taught both Allen and Lydia. He looked us over, then casually raised his left hand. “Your Royal Highness, Lydia, I hope you’ll leave it at that. You wouldn’t want to frighten our imperial guest.”

We fell silent and dismissed our respective spells. The tension in the room dissipated, and the young man and woman hiding behind the professor spoke up.

“Might I suggest you introduce yourself, Your Imperial Highness? Weren’t you just saying, ‘I wonder how strong the famous Lady of the Sword really is! I’d love to challenge her and find out!’?”

“Huss?! H-How could you stab me in the back like that?! You heartless monster! Don’t expect any promotions when we get back to the empire!” a girl with a faint tinge of violet in her blonde hair raged at her tall companion.

He replied matter-of-factly while she shook him. “I already rank higher than I

de—”

“You oaf! How do you expect to stay by me like—? Ah.” The young woman froze and broke out in a cold sweat, having presumably recollected her position.

I stood up straighter and took the initiative. “We appreciate your journey from the northern capital. I am Cheryl Wainwright.”

“Lydia Leinster,” the scarlet-haired aristocrat added as the professor quietly closed the door.

“Yana Yustin,” said the young woman who’d just lost her escape route. “This faithless man is my aide, Huss Saxe.”

My next moves would change considerably depending on what she knew. So would the future of the young man currently dueling the Red Knight.

“Princess Yana,” I said cordially, “I summoned you here before the signing ceremony for a reason. I assume the professor has told you about the flower dragon’s oracle. Please tell us what you know.”

“He did,” the Yustinian princess answered diffidently. “But I don’t know if anything I say can help.”

“Why talk standing up when we can talk over hot tea?” the professor interjected, motioning to us. “This city may be warmer than the northern capital, but it’s still quite chilly. The kingdom and the empire aren’t enemies—at least, not in this room.”

Chapter 4

“Sh-She’s too strong,” Tina groaned.

“D-Dear Aunt Fiane,” Lynne pleaded, “couldn’t you hold back a *little*?”

The spectators had left the under-duke’s inner courtyard. As evening drew near, the girls slumped onto ground cratered by stray spells from their special sparring session, leaning on their rod and sword for support.

Stella and Caren shot me looks from behind stone walls a short distance away. “Mr. Allen, please,” the future duchess seemed to say. To which my sister silently added, “Ellie and I will take over.”

I swiftly nodded from the seat of honor I’d been forced into.

“Goodness! Over already?” said a petite, unarmed woman with pale-scarlet hair. Under-duchess Fiane Leinster noted the girls’ movements and mine with a puzzled tilt of her head, but her smile never faltered. She also still wore her dress, although her opponents had changed into everyday clothes, and her rapier remained in its sheath. She hadn’t moved a single step since the sparring match began, and not one crater marred the ground around her. Even after sending Under-duke Lucas to the infirmary by way of punishment, she showed no trace of fatigue.

While I shuddered, Stella waved her wand and cast a healing spell. Light showered Tina and Lynne as Ellie set about filling in craters with earth magic. Caren strode into the midst of them, having changed into her purple version of Lily’s outfit, and gave Tina and Lynne a light rap on the head before helping them to their feet. The silver wing-and-staff insignia on her school beret glinted in the sunlight.

“Time to trade places,” she said. “Take a turn watching with Stella.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Despite the frustration in their tone, the pair bowed deeply to the under-duchess and obediently trotted off toward the stone enclosure. I thought sparring with an opponent out of their league had been a good

experience for them.

Ellie and Caren would fight the next match against an enthusiastic Anna. Almost every officer in the Leinster maid corps had gathered to watch. They took turns babying Atra and erecting barriers.

What could possibly justify gathering them all here? This is obviously too much force for—

“I suspect they’ll rope you into the final round, Allen,” a man’s wry voice called from behind me. “Against Lisa and Fiane, perhaps?”

“Is that any way to greet an old student, Professor?” I shot back over my shoulder, grimacing. “I found Teto in tears, you know.”

“Only because you’ve been driving her to them. I’m sorry I was out when you called. I’ve had nothing but meetings, meetings, meetings, day in and day out. I just came from one, in fact. What a fool I was not to retire when I had the chance,” my teacher grumbled, taking a seat beside me and pouring a glass of ice water from a metal pot.

Down in the courtyard, the next sparring match began. Caren and Ellie seemed intent on melee combat.

The smiling under-duchess walked toward us, cradling Anko.

“Tell me, Professor,” I said. “Who on earth is she?”

“Gladly,” he replied. “There are three Leinsters you should never challenge. I needn’t remind you that Lindsey Leinster, Scarlet Heaven, is a great sorceress. Then you have Lisa Leinster, the Bloodstained Lady and former Lady of the Sword. No one on the continent can match her swordplay. And third is—”

“Fiane Leinster, the Smiling Lady,” a calm yet proud voice interrupted. “My closest friend since we were children together, although she’s older. She’s also my sister-in-law and the architect of griffin warfare. I see I’ve kept you waiting, Allen.”

A wooden tray laden with a teapot came to rest on the table, and a scarlet-haired beauty in a magnificent dress—Duchess Lisa Leinster, the Bloodstained Lady herself—took a seat across from me.

“Stay put,” she commanded when I reached to lay out the tea things.

“Yes, listen to Li-li,” Under-duchess Fiane chided, sitting down beside me.

She doesn't look Lisa's age, let alone older. But more importantly... "Li-li"?!

Shaken, I turned to the professor, only to find him cool as a cucumber. My teacher drained his glass of ice water in one gulp, then placed a letter on the table. It bore the Wainwright royal seal.

“I trust Duchess Letty has kept you informed,” he said, eyeing me with unwonted gravity. “Tomorrow, the Leinster mansion will host a council concerning the flower dragon’s oracle. We’d like you to attend, and to bring Stella and Ellie with you. You won’t find it comfortable, especially as Marquesses Crom and Gardner are scheduled to attend, as is Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner. However...” The professor shifted his gaze to the courtyard, where Ellie frantically wove spells even as Anna’s offense thwarted her at every turn, and Stella watched breathlessly. “We can’t send those girls into the Sealed Archive alone. No one can predict what the flower dragon will do if we don’t follow its oracle to the letter. But more than that, the archive is too full of mysteries. Not even the marquesses know what it’s like inside.”

“I don’t mind attending,” I replied, “but surely the church looted the archive?”

We knew that the rebels had seized countless ancient books, magical tomes, and other precious artifacts to spirit out of the country during their brief occupation of the royal and eastern capitals. I found it hard to believe that they would have left only Crom’s and Gardner’s treasures untouched.

“The marquesses and the head court sorcerer insist they didn’t,” the professor replied, scowling, while Under-duchess Fiane set out cups and Lisa poured tea. “Lord Rodde actually inspected the grounds and failed to find any trace of a breakin. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.”

In the lead-up to the Algren rebellion, the headmaster and professor had failed to see through a clever forgery and missed their chance to sound the alarm. I could imagine how careful they must have been this time. And Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner prized order above all else. Despite his many private goals, I couldn’t imagine him delivering a false report.

So why do I feel so uneasy?

Pushing the feeling aside, I broached another question that had been bothering me.

“Professor, why is His Majesty concentrating so much force in the capital? I realize the flower dragon’s oracle constitutes an emergency, but it still seems excessive.” Reviewing the snippets I’d heard from various quarters and the threats I could surmise from them, I met my teacher’s eye and said, “Might it have something to do with the eight-winged devil Duchess Letty and the headmaster fought and sealed beneath the palace a hundred years ago?”

A heavy silence fell over the professor, Lisa, and Under-duchess Fiane. In the courtyard, Anna moved faster than Lightning Apotheosis, toying with her opponents while Tina, Lynne, and Stella cheered feverishly from behind their stone walls.

My teacher heaved a deep sigh. “I see we can’t keep secrets from you. But I can’t say more here. Forgive me.”

“You needn’t apologize.”

A cup came to rest in front of me, and a gentle aroma tickled my nostrils.

The professor rose with an air of exhaustion. “Well then, Allen, Lisa, Fiane. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Yes,” said Lisa.

“We simply *must* chat while I’m in the city!” the under-duchess chirped.

The professor waved his left hand in lieu of an answer. I sensed sadness in his retreating back.

He did seem tired. I ought to treat him to a nice meal when this is all over. Especially with the job of reinvestigating ten-day fever still hanging over our heads.

While I made plans, Under-duchess Fiane sipped her tea.

“Delicious!” she declared. “Al— May I call you ‘Al’? I’m Fiane Leinster. They

call me an ‘under-duchess,’ if you can believe it.”

“Allen, son of Nathan and Ellyn of the eastern capital wolf clan, at your service,” I replied. “I owe Your Highness—”

“Really!” she interrupted, pursing her lips like a child. “Did you forget we shared a moonlit griffin flight all the way to the Atlasian capital? Just call me ‘Fiane’—although I’d like ‘mother-in-law’ even better!”

What a request! She’s Lily’s mother, all right.

“Are you trying to provoke me, Fia? Allen is slated to become *my* son-in-law,” Lisa said, elegantly savoring her tea. Any normal person would have raised the white flag at that, but Under-duchess Fiane giggled.

“No one knows what the future may bring,” she answered breezily. “But be that as it may... Al.”

“Y-Yes?” I replied, startled by the abrupt change in her manner.

Caren and Ellie had started deploying advanced spells. Their match was nearing its conclusion.

“My husband and daughter put you through a great deal of trouble. I will tender my apologies to Earl Evelyn as well,” the under-duchess said, bowing low to me, a nobody with no official standing.

“N-Not at all! I have only myself to blame for accepting the duel,” I demurred. Despite my experience with Lisa and Duchess Letty, she had nearly given me a heart attack.

“My darling Lucas simply dotes on Lily,” Under-duchess Fiane continued, slowly raising her head. “He kept me in the dark about this plan of his. You see, he already intended to visit the royal capital about that matter the professor mentioned. But you know, that girl really does insist every chance she gets that she ‘won’t even think about anyone unless he’s at least a match for Allen,’ so —”

“I’ve returned,” a young woman with a head of lovely scarlet hair announced as she suddenly took the seat to my left. Lady Lily Leinster looked fetching in a mature dress of pale red. And she had decided to act the proper lady here, if

her formal tone was anything to go by.

I couldn't suppress a grin, which earned me a reproving stare.

"What do you find so amusing? Do I cut such a ridiculous figure in a dress?"

"Of course not. Just— No, never mind. I'd better not say. It would only upset you."

"Speak your mind. I won't lose my temper." Lily leaned closer. Our shoulders bumped, but she showed no concern.

Under the glare of Lisa's and Fiane's smiles, I said, "I only wondered if, in front of the under-duchess—"

"Fiane," the impossibly youthful noblewoman chirped reproachfully. A shiver ran through my shoulders. The way she applied pressure reminded me so much of Lisa and Anna that I couldn't imagine defying her.

I brushed a bit of dust off Lily's hair with my hand, then blurted out, "I only wondered if you're embarrassed to be seen working as a maid in front of Fiane."

Instantly, a flush rose in the young noblewoman's cheeks. She dropped her gaze, reached under the table, and started toying with my bracelet.

"Not at all," she finally replied. "I think you should get your eyes checked, Allen."

"What?" Fiane interjected. "These past two months have been nothing but 'You wouldn't believe what Allen can do,' 'I want to do what I can for Allen,' 'I'd never dream of marrying anyone but'—"

"M-Mother!" Lily's shriek cut through the roar of Ellie and Caren's lightning spells. "Sh-She's making it all up! Don't let her fool you!"

"Oh, goodness. Whatever happened to my little girl who never stops crying for 'mother'?" Fiane let out a musical laugh, seizing the chance to poke fun at her beloved daughter. "You wouldn't be trying to look good for Al here, would you?"

"Wh-What do—? Ooo!"

I wish you wouldn't glare at me like that.

I had only just met the under-duchess, but I could already tell I was no match for her. If my mom had been here too, the mood alone would have had me ready to surrender.

The flash from Stella's healing magic dazzled me once more. Anna heaped praise on Ellie and Caren while Tina and Lynne milled excitedly. I finished my tea.

"Lisa, Fiane," I said quietly, "I've come up with a theory about ten-day fever. Would you mind giving me your opinions on it before tomorrow's council?"

"Yes, of course."

"If you think it would help."

"In that case—"

A tug on my sleeve cut me short. I looked down to find Lily's nervous face staring back at me.

"Am I intruding?" she asked.

"Lily the maid might have been," I replied, grinning ruefully, and gave her forehead a gentle poke. "Don't try to make a name for me any more than you already have, and certainly don't use your own marriage to do it. I thought something was funny when the girls didn't object to the duel."

Lily gave a start, then bowed. "I'm sorry. I'll apologize to Earl Evelyn as well." I couldn't quite catch her last words. ("Everything's ready now, anyway.")

It was time to shift gears.

"I encountered an aspect of that mysterious illness in the city of water," I began, choosing my words with care. "It turned out to be not an infectious disease but a curse linked to the Church of the Holy Spirit. And an unknown one, capable of afflicting many people over a wide area."

I placed the old city map from the lab on the table. The scattered crosses that marked deaths seemed random at first glance.

"I had every document the university still has from that time checked, but

most are either lost or proscribed and unobtainable. Nonetheless, the search did turn up this map and a list of the deceased from which several names had been deliberately erased. They seem to be copies compiled by an individual investigating the cause of the outbreak. The deceased's age, race, and social standing show no discernible pattern." I recalled my former underclassmen, who had done most of the searching. I would have to thank them later, I thought as I closed my left hand, recoloring the map. "But when you divide the deaths by date and plot them on a map..."

All three noblewomen's eyes widened. Crosses spread across the city as the dead piled up in every quarter. Little by little, they formed arcs, crooked crescents. A colossal, city-spanning magic circle emerged with a certain mansion at its center—and suddenly collapsed. After a rash of deaths throughout the city, the outbreak subsided. This chaotic finale masked the preceding pattern, no doubt explaining why the latter had gone unnoticed until now.

Something happened. Something that ruined the caster's plans.

I recalled something one of the old schoolmates I'd asked to investigate had murmured: "It's almost like...like someone's last will and testament, begging us to notice."

I pulled a piece of paper from my pocket and drew a design on it in pen: the magic circle for "artificially inducing sacred ground" that I'd gleaned from Robson Atlas's treatise and the *Apocrypha of the Great Moon*. It took the form of a flower with eight crescent arcs for petals.

"Seeing Tobias's technique made me wonder," I explained. "If ten-day fever was a far-reaching curse, what was its ultimate objective—the target to bring the sword down on?"

Delay and convergence. I'd even lectured Lynne on the subject. How could I have been so slow on the uptake?

I tapped three spots on the map: the Crom and Gardner mansions...and the Sealed Archive. The marquesses' residences clearly stood in the center of the circle. And the surge of deaths followed the addition of a cross marking their archive.

Lily squeezed my left arm, trembling. Seeing Ellie smile as she hugged Caren

and Stella out in the courtyard brought a pang to my heart.

“I believe whoever cast the curse had their sights on the then Marquesses Gardner and Crom,” I continued. “I don’t know why. But their names are missing from the casualty list. Something unexpected must have interfered before the caster could assassinate them.”

I closed my left hand again, and a name appeared over the cross on the Sealed Archive—the cross marking a *single* victim.

“The last casualty bore the house name ‘Walker.’ Their given name has been erased. I suspect that one of Ellie’s parents, Remire and Millie, fell in battle with the caster.”



I spent that evening at the Leinster mansion on “strict orders” from Lisa. Naturally, the girls joined me. My room beside Lydia’s chambers had played host to a constant stream of magical messenger birds, bearing comments on my ten-day-fever hypothesis from every house under the sun. Now, however, only the sleeping Atra’s healthy breathing broke the silence.

The memory of the tears that had streamed down Ellie’s face after my explanation weighed heavily on my heart. I had gotten Mr. Walker’s permission before telling her, but perhaps I should have kept my ideas to myself. I still hadn’t informed Tina and Stella of their mother’s suspected assassination.

An extremely reserved knock interrupted my brooding.

“Come in. I’m awake,” I answered, casting a spell of silence so as not to wake Atra.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

The door slowly swung half open, revealing a glimpse of a nightgown-clad Stella. The young noblewoman wore a thin cape, and her hair hung loose.

“Good evening, Mr. Allen,” she said, with an enchanting smile.

“Stella. Did you forget something?” I asked. Ellie had stuck close to me until just before she retired, and the other girls had stayed chatting in my room out of concern for the young maid. They were all sharing a room for the night.

“I can’t seem to sleep, maybe because of the council tomorrow,” she replied bashfully, then hesitated. “May I join you?”

She must have felt unsettled, for all that she acted grown-up in front of the others. She had mentioned that she remembered what Ellie’s parents looked like and that they had taught her magic.

“I’ll heat some milk for you,” I said, rising and winking at her. “Have a seat.”

Opening the icebox, I retrieved a glass bottle of milk. The appliance hadn’t been here on my first visit, but the room had accumulated furniture and conveniences over the course of my many stays. I set a small pot on a spellstone of fire, added milk, and lit a flame. Then the young noblewoman stood beside me. I could feel her warmth.

“Yes, Stella?” I asked.

“I feel lonely on my own,” she murmured, ever so slightly coaxing. “Would you add honey?”

I took a little ceramic jar off a shelf and spooned honey into the pot. “How has Ellie been? After all we talked about, I mean.”

“Tina and Lynne never let go of her hands. They’re all sleeping in a row now. Caren and Felicia went out like lights too. All that running around today must have caught up to them.”

“You don’t say.” I stirred the pot to keep it from boiling, then extinguished the flame once I judged the time was right. Getting out two mugs, I poured milk into each.

“Here you are. But be careful—it’s hot,” I said, passing one to Stella. “Shall we sit?”

“Yes!”

I tidied up the documents, half-written reports, and assignments for the girls that littered the table and deposited them in wooden boxes. Then we settled into chairs by the window.

Stella gaped at spell formulae I’d conjured in midair. “Are these...?”

“New assignments for you all,” I confirmed. “I finally have a chance to check

your progress every week.”

The girl frowned, then blew on her hot milk before taking a sip and depositing her mug on the table. Flecks of light and darkness scattered under the glow of the mana lamp.

“Mr. Allen,” she said softly, “I’d like to have words with you.”

“Y-Yes?” I avoided her gaze, rattled in spite of myself. The calmer the person, the more alarming their anger. That was what Caren might call “the way of the world.”

“I appreciate that you work on spells and assignments for us late into the night. Truly I do. However...” I sensed the noble jewels of her eyes waver.

I guess I really ought to face her head-on.

Turning back, I met Stella’s gaze. Her eyes held strength, but fragility and weakness as well.

“I couldn’t bear to see you push yourself until you fall ill or collapse. I simply couldn’t. Just how many problems have you taken it upon yourself to investigate?”

“Well...” I faltered.

Stella lowered her gaze. “When you used your favor from the dragonfolk chieftain to help cure my condition, I trembled with delight. I felt so...so truly glad.” She pressed a hand to her heart and continued, as if swearing an oath, “But please, show more concern for yourself. Ask for my—for all of our help if you need it. I’ll do all I can for your sake. As much as Lydia or Caren or Lily!”

I looked out the window without giving a clear answer. A hazy moon floated, cloaked in clouds.

“Stella, do you remember when we went to look out over the city at night?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I could never forget it.”

A few short months ago, the girl across from me had nearly been crushed under all the stresses in her life: Tina’s, Ellie’s, and Lynne’s shining talent, combined with a lack of faith in her own; her best friends Caren’s and Felicia’s

strength; and the heavy burden she bore as the future Duchess Howard. Back then, anyone could see that Stella was at her breaking point. And I had taken her to the cathedral that towered atop a hill to the west of the capital.

“I told you then that I want to see where the girls will go,” I said. “Tina’s, Ellie’s, and Lynne’s growth really does take my breath away. Caren’s made a name for herself as the champion who rode west alone, and Felicia runs a fast-growing merchant empire.” I turned back to the moonlit beauty and smiled. “And the girl who stood by me that time, just a little sulkily, has learned to walk too. Not to toot my own horn, but I consider her a pupil to be proud of.”

“Mr. Allen,” Stella murmured nervously. I could sense her hands clench as tears welled in her eyes.

I took out a handkerchief and gently dried them. “But you know, I can’t watch you all without getting a little greedy myself. I don’t just want to watch. I want to walk with you as far as I can, leading you by the hands and even giving the occasional push. Of course, I know it’s more than I deserve.”

“What?” Stella blinked as she digested my meaning. Then her face lit up. I much preferred it to her tears.

“Before I took my Royal Academy entrance exam, my father told me, ‘Allen, you can’t change other people. You can only change your own will. But someone is always watching you.’”

He was right, although I didn’t think I’d find her the very day of the exam.

The pocket watch on the table caught my eye.

“So I want to do the best I can for my ever-improving students as long as they ask me to teach them. Ten-day fever and young Duchess Rosa’s note and even my measures against the church’s apostles and their so-called ‘Saint’ are all part of that, when you get down to it.”

A hand reached out, and fair, dainty fingers brushed my left cheek. They seemed nervous, yet I could feel their desire to hear what came next in plain words.

“When you say you want to lead us by the hands and even give ‘the occasional push,’” their owner said, “do you include a Howard who’s lost her ice

magic?”

Oh, I knew it. It has been bothering her.

“Of course,” I replied with deliberate cheer. “We shared my secret nighttime view. I promise I’ll cure you. And I suppose I’d better plan something for your birthday too.” We were coming up on a string of birthdays, in fact. After the flower garden in the city of water, I was feeling the pressure.

Stella studied my face, then covered her mouth for a genteel chuckle. “Yes,” she said, with a happy nod. “Thank you, my one and only magician. I can hardly wait for my birthday.”

“I...I’ll do my best.”

We shared a little laugh. A lull in the conversation followed, allowing us to hear Atra’s regular breathing—and a small impact on the window.

“Wh-What was that?!” Stella exclaimed with a start. She wasn’t aware of the situation. “Don’t tell me...?”

“It could be a ghost,” I replied matter-of-factly, silently casting a barrier of wind around the bed.

Stella’s hair drooped. Unnerved, she stood and circled to my side of the table. “M-Mr. Allen,” she whispered, clutching my sleeve.

Her frightened expression looked so much like Tina’s that I burst out laughing in spite of myself. They were sisters all right.

“R-Really, Mr. Allen!” Her Highness snapped, realizing that I’d been teasing her.

“Allow me to reveal the trick. It’s cold outside, so I suggest you put on my coat, if you don’t mind,” I said, rising and opening the window wide. The wind seemed on the stiff side.

“You’re awful,” Stella grumbled, joining me with my overcoat around her shoulders. “But I do feel warmer.”

She must not be as cross as her tone implies.

I cast a botanical spell, swiftly conjuring footholds from the garden to my

window. The lovely young woman who had signaled to me with a thrown pebble ran up them in a flash. She wore a cloak and carried the equally scarlet-haired child on her back. My partner, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, stepped inside, set down Lia, and only then cast a glance at Stella.

“You took your sweet time letting me in,” she said, rounding on me and prodding my chest with her finger. “And what’s this? An affair? Do you *want* to die by the sword?”

“Of course not. And I know you could tell Stella was here,” I replied. “Now, step away from the window so I can close it.” I shunted the snarling beauty aside and suited action to word.

The child had already shed her cloak and clambered onto the bed. “Allen! Lia here!” she shouted gleefully.

“Good evening, my charming little lady,” I replied. “Atra already went beddy-bye, so *shh*. Okay?”

“Okay!” She peered at her white-haired friend, ears and tail twitching, then slipped under the covers and curled up herself.

While I savored the warm fuzzies, Lydia started grilling Stella without even bothering to remove her cloak. “So, what’s your excuse for visiting his room alone? Just to be clear, I won’t give you Allen even if the world ends. And take that off this instant! *I’m* going to wear it.”

“Really, I didn’t plan to dress her in—”

I dispelled the fire dagger that flew at me in mid-excuse. It could have killed anyone but me. But while I felt exasperated, Stella had a different reaction.

“You don’t play fair, Lydia,” she murmured, still wearing my coat.

“*Excuse* me?” Angry plumes of fire collided with glittering blossoms of light.

“I...I want to throw pebbles at Mr. Allen’s window in the middle of the night too,” the platinum-haired noblewoman complained, pouting intensely. “It’s like something out of a storybook!”

“Oh, really?” Lydia chuckled. “I’ve done the same thing at Allen’s lodgings, and *he’s* thrown pebbles at *my* window too.”

“Not a shred of fair play.”

Their Highnesses had started trading (what I hoped were) friendly gibes. I doubted they would escalate into a real fight.

Lydia casually picked up my mug and took a drink from it, watching her platinum-haired peer gasp “B-But that’s...!”

“Since Stella’s here,” she said calmly, “I assume you broke the news about Ellie’s parents.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “And you? What did the Yustinian princess say?” Lydia had already informed me that she, Cheryl, and the professor had arranged an informal meeting with Yana Yustin. Naturally, they had discussed the flower dragon’s oracle.

The scarlet-haired young woman’s eyes blazed with fighting spirit. “Yana didn’t know anything to speak of herself, but we did get an interesting tidbit—a rumor whispered in select corners of the imperial palace when she was little. Would you believe me if I told you that a ‘Sage’ who wielded fearsome ice magic and *carried a sigil of the Great Moon* tried to sneak into the imperial archive of forbidden books, and the former Hero, Aurelia Alvern, fought him off? And guess what he said when he retreated.” Lydia looked me in the eye and quoted, “‘If I can’t take this one, I’ll just go elsewhere. The Record Keepers’ copies will do just as well.’”

Clouds hid the moon again, and darkness stole into the room.

“When was this?” I asked.

“Fourteen years ago,” Lydia replied. “Three years before ten-day fever broke out in the royal capital.”

“Fourteen years.”

“Mr. Allen,” Stella called, concerned.

Suppose the Sage had cast the curse. What had happened in the kingdom after he had failed to get what he wanted from the imperial capital? The former earl Rupert had been exiled after killing a beastfolk girl called Atra with his carriage in the eastern capital. Ten-day fever had struck the royal capital,

causing mass death. Ellie's parents had passed away there, and Duchess Rosa Howard had soon followed. After entering the Royal Academy, Lydia and I had faced the black dragon, a devil, and a pure-blooded vampire in the city one after another. And in the south, the millennium-old Stinging Sea. Just recently, we had suffered a rebellion, albeit one led by our own Ducal House of Algren. I couldn't forget the incidents in the city of water either. Surely disasters were coming too fast and frequently for—

A shudder ran through me. I stared at Lydia.

She set my mug on the table and nodded. "Makes you wonder if everything that's happened all over the continent is connected, doesn't it? Including what we're dealing with now."



The next day brought us to the Leinster mansion's great council hall.

"Allen, Stella, Ellie, join me," the professor called from his seat near the door as soon as we stepped through it. Chiffon and Anko must have been waiting in another room. I knew the other girls were, and they had Atra and Lia with them.

Beside the throne at the far end of the round table sat a blond young man—His Royal Highness John Wainwright, the former crown prince, who had used himself as bait to draw the less aggressive of the hard-line nobles out of hiding. Next to him, a middle-aged man in a loose sorcerer's robe maintained an icy stare. Who could mistake Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner's white beard or the monocle over his left eye? But I saw no sign of Marquess Gardner or Marquess Crom, although I'd been told both would attend.

Will they miss the council? After all that's happened?

Cheryl, seated nearest the throne, noticed me in my everyday clothes and walked toward us. Lydia followed, her face impassive.

The professor motioned me to sit near him, so I took a chair between Stella in her white sorceress's garb and Ellie in her Royal Academy uniform.

"I didn't want to thrust you three into a situation like this," he said. "Oh, the old one is providing security. You couldn't be safer on a first-rate skyship."

“A fairy-tale vessel isn’t my idea of reassuring. Also, skyships can fall,” I replied sardonically, feeling for mana.

What exceptional stealth. I’d love to let Ellie study it.

“My father earnestly requested that those most involved be present,” Cheryl added, resting her hand on the back of my chair. “Though attendance ought to be voluntary, if you ask me. Till later, Allen.” Her Royal Highness reluctantly withdrew her hand.

“Of course.” I nodded to the young blonde woman over my shoulder. “I have a lot to discuss with you too. And I suppose I ought to make up for last night.”

Cheryl half turned, pristine white skirt fluttering. “A-Allen,” she murmured, fists clenched and eyes shining. “Count on me! I’ll sweep all my appointments aside and overcome any obstacle to make time for— L-Lydia! L-Let go! Let go of meee!”

“Your Royal Highness has a seat over there. Let’s be on our way,” the scarlet-haired noblewoman said without feeling, dragging the crown princess away to her magnificent chair.

I exchanged looks with Ellie and Stella, grinning ruefully. Then the young knights of the royal guard standing watch opened the doors. As one, we all rose and bowed low.

“Be at ease. This council is too important for fretting over protocol. All of you, be seated,” said a voice whose calm could not mask its dignity.

I looked up to find a brawny man taking his seat on the throne. Gray streaked his blond hair, and a crown surmounted it. White dominated the palette of his resplendent finery. His Royal Majesty King Jasper Wainwright had arrived.

Three dukes—Walter Howard, Liam Leinster, and Leo Lebufera—entered behind him, as did Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale. Gil must not have been summoned. In defiance of tradition, they brought no guards. Only Lydia might count as an exception.

His Royal Majesty met my gaze. “It’s been too long, Allen,” he said amiably. “I’ve heard of your exploits.”

“Your Royal Majesty is too kind,” I replied briefly. One wrong word could cause trouble later.

The three dukes raised wary questions.

“I don’t see Lords Gardner and Crom.”

“We’ve gathered today to discuss their houses’ connection to the flower dragon’s oracle and to ten-day fever. Why are they not in attendance?”

“Head Court Sorcerer, I request an explanation. I believe you met with them last week?”

I could hear the chill in their voices. Ellie and Stella tensed. But Gerhard was unmoved.

“Their lordships have contracted a sudden illness and are unable to attend,” he replied without a trace of emotion. “First, you question the two houses’ connection to the outbreak of ten-day fever eleven years ago, but I categorically deny that any exists. And no intruder could *possibly* have entered the Sealed Archive while the royal capital was in rebel hands. No person has set foot there since the marquesses succeeded to their titles *more than fifty years ago*.”

Duke Walter looked speechless.

“How strange,” Duke Liam murmured, flames dancing in his eyes.

“So, they’d go that far to avoid facing us,” said Duke Leo, his graceful features twisting in a scowl.

His Royal Majesty raised his left hand. “Walter, Liam, Leo, stay your anger. If the church hasn’t gotten its claws into the archive, so much the better for our kingdom. And besides, what good will blaming Gerhard do?”

“Sire,” the three dukes responded in unison and desisted.

“My sincere apologies,” said Gerhard, although I couldn’t believe he meant it.

No wonder the professor didn’t want to bring us here. He can’t enjoy showing us the political struggles behind the scenes.

“Letty, repeat the words of the oracle for us,” His Royal Majesty commanded, resting his hand on the arm of his throne. “You may speak as usual.”

“Gladly.” The elven beauty rose with a smirk and recited, “‘Question the daughter of the Star Shooter, and in the City of the Shield, let the final key, the White Saint, and the youngest of the Great Tree wardens descend into the Record Keepers’ archive. In its depths will you face, unlooked for, the paltry obsessions of mortalkind.’ Such was the message revealed to Athena Io, oracle of the dragonfolk, in the Valley of Flowers.”

“We have already conferred with the ‘daughter of the Star Shooter’—Imperial Princess Yana Yustin, the sole heir to her house’s talent for archery. You will find her answers in the papers before you,” the professor added. As His Royal Majesty’s magic tutor, he didn’t modify his tone for an informal council.

I skimmed the documents. They matched what Lydia had told me the night before.

The three dukes rounded gravely on Gerhard.

“Head Court Sorcerer, you have long since left the House of Gardner, and we do not mean to blame you.”

“However, we hear that the flower dragon revealed itself to the oracle directly.”

“The like hasn’t happened in a century. We have no common revelation to consider! As the Flower Sage interprets it, the persons named are Stella Howard, Ellie Walker...”

“And Allen the Shooting Star,” Duchess Letty concluded with an air of pride. “Admit them to the Sealed Archive. I understand that Crom and Gardner abide by precedent and law. If they object, I will join in persuading them.”

“What do you say, Gerhard?” His Royal Majesty swiftly added. “‘Record Keepers’ is an ancient title, almost unknown these days. It makes a forgery seem unlikely.”

The hall grew so thick with tension that I found it hard to breathe.

“I have no objection to admitting Lady Stella Howard and Ellie Walker,” Gerhard reluctantly replied at last. “Both marquesses have given their permission as a special exception.”

The girls on either side of me went wide-eyed.

The head court sorcerer, his hair considerably whiter than I remembered it, fixed me with eyes almost devoid of feeling. “However, I steadfastly refuse entry to the other person named.”

A commotion filled the hall.

So, I’m not even worth naming.

Furious hellfire blazed up in Lydia’s eyes. “Relax,” I told her through mana. “Don’t lose your head.”

“Please do not misunderstand me,” Gerhard continued, shaking his head. “I harbor neither resentment nor hatred toward the person seated there. Yet even in the face of the flower dragon’s oracle, law is law. The Houses of Gardner and Crom have overseen the Sealed Archive since this kingdom’s founding, and never has one of the houseless or the beastfolk crossed its threshold, much less one who holds no office. The marquesses agree that this, at least, will not stand.”

Dukes Walter, Liam, and Leo hammered the round table, their rage on full display.

“You dare?”

“Oh?”

“You’ve no idea of what you speak!”

Duchess Letty held her peace, but her eyes shone freezing cold. Even the normally accepting Ellie muttered, “Horrible” under her breath.

I myself had heard so much of the same since my Royal Academy days that I could sit back and mull over this latest rehash. The marquesses had forbidden entry to beastfolk and the houseless since the kingdom’s founding. But why?

Stella clenched her fists white-knuckle tight, while Lydia stared down at the floor and started trembling. Through our pact, I could distinctly hear her mutter, “I’ll slice you to ribbons, burn you up, then slice you some more.”

I’d better be ready to step in and stop her when—

“In other words, you refuse to admit Allen under any circumstances?” the professor demanded. “May I take that to mean, Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner, that you refuse to recognize his achievements whatsoever?”

“The smallest hole can collapse a sturdy dam, as you, my predecessor, well know. Even *if* his achievements merit consideration, he must obtain a title first,” Gardner retorted in tones even more glacial than before. He practically spat the final few words.

This will never work. Now that Ellie and Stella have permission, our time would be better spent negotiating to send Lydia or Lily along to guard them.

I turned to tell the professor as much—when Princess Cheryl Wainwright entered the fray. “You would be satisfied if Allen held an official post, then?” she asked without warning.

Gerhard looked disconcerted for a moment, but the expression soon passed. “Precisely so,” he replied. “Elevating a houseless beastfolk, however, would require the endorsement of not only the Four Great Dukes but many other peers as well. The law does not prescribe an exact number, but although long disused, it remains in force. On such short notice, it hardly seems—”

“Please pardon the intrusion.”

The doors opened wide, and a scarlet-haired beauty entered wearing a dress in a lighter shade of the same hue. Behind her followed...the maids assigned to Allen & Co.? She dipped an elegant curtsy, and the floral clip in her hair caught the light.

“I, Lily, eldest daughter of Lucas Leinster, have come to deliver a few documents by order of Her Royal Highness,” she said. “If you would be so kind?”

“Yes, my lady!” the maids chorused and began piling armloads of papers onto the table in front of Cheryl.

Confusion appeared on my face, as well as on Lydia’s, Gerhard’s, His Royal Majesty’s, and Prince John’s. The others, Ellie and Stella included, remained calm, as if they had expected this turn of events.

What did the maids just deliver?

Suddenly, Lydia let out a startled cry, hands over her mouth and eyes wide in realization.

“Cheryl, what is all this?” His Royal Majesty asked curtly.

My former classmate rose, blonde locks shining, and surveyed the hall. “These letters contain recommendations for Allen’s appointment from the Four Great Dukes and the heads of every house under their banners. The chieftains of each beastfolk clan in the eastern capital have also presented petitions to the same effect.”

Thunderstruck, I let out a strangled cry.

“Impossible,” Gardner muttered, his composure slipping.

“I knew it,” Lydia groaned, pressing a hand to her forehead.

I suddenly recalled Under-duchess Fiane’s and Duchess Lisa’s faces.

Don’t tell me they knew?!

The head court sorcerer gritted his teeth in the face of this political surprise attack. “If I may—”

“Give it up, Gerhard,” an amused Prince John interrupted. “Law is law.”

“His appointment requires careful consideration,” Cheryl continued, head held high. “At the same time, if you insist on barring him due to his lack of a post, you will owe every house who signed these recommendations and the beastfolk of the eastern capital an explanation. Allen has shown peerless valor time and again in these trying times. Society at large is watching how we repay him. The beastfolk, in particular, have shed blood. If you still wish to quibble about titles, Gerhard...” Her Royal Highness’s long hair gleamed golden as her beautiful eyes settled on me.

“Allen the Shooting Star of the wolf clan, I, Cheryl Wainwright and heir apparent to the crown, hereby name you my personal investigator.” There was a pause before she added, “Will that suffice?”

After a silence that seemed eternal, Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner finally relented. “Certainly it will. By the authority delegated to me, I authorize that person to enter the Sealed Archive on this occasion.”

Cheryl and Lily pressed their hands together and exchanged nods. Color rose in Ellie's and Stella's cheeks.

"That's settled, then," His Royal Majesty pronounced, declining to acknowledge that the rapid change of fortunes had left Lydia and me in the dust. "Allen! You are to descend into the Sealed Archive with those two young ladies and report all that results! Gerhard, make preparations at once. Excepting my good dukes, Letty, and the professor, you may all go. I thank you for your time."



"Mr. Allen, we'll be arriving shortly," the aging gentleman in the driver's seat—Graham "the Abyss" Walker—cautioned as our destination came into view.

Colossal stone walls surrounded the old-fashioned mansion ahead. Light gleamed dully off a metal front gate, and iron bars blocked every window. The edifice made no attempt to mask its solemn severity. It stood out even among the mansions of other great nobles. And so did the knights of the Scarlet Order standing guard, especially as few passersby ventured so near to the palace.

It's practically a fortress. I'm glad I decided not to bring Atra.

Such was my first impression of the Sealed Archive under the joint stewardship of Marquesses Crom and Gardner, who normally kept its doors shut tight.

"L-Lady Stella," a young maid murmured in the seat behind me.

"It will be all right, Ellie." The platinum-haired noblewoman squeezed her hand and reassured her.

Tina and Lily must have been talking as well. They rode behind us in a second car, having drawn the winning lots and earned the right to stand by near the archive as an "urgent response team." Still, I worried for their driver—Roland Walker, a lesser Howard butler. He'd turned white as a sheet when he set eyes on a furious Lydia and triumphant Cheryl.

Really, though, an investigator? I have to hand it to Her Royal Highness.

The car stopped in front of the mansion, and the Leinster knights and men-at-

arms saluted as one. Who should stand at their head but Earl Tobias Evelyn. Once I left the car ahead of my companions and awkwardly returned the greeting, he went cheerfully back to his post.

I heaved a little sigh, then opened the door behind me and offered my hand. “Ellie, Stella, if I may?”

“Y-Yessir,” the maid replied. Stella’s “Of course” followed a moment later.

No sooner had I helped the girls out of the vehicle than Tina and Lily ran up, calling their names. Warmed by their concern, I bowed to the gentleman who had been last to leave the car.

“Thank you for driving us, Mr. Walker. And—”

“If I may, Mr. Allen.”

My half-finished apology vanished into empty air. While the forbidding front gate creaked open, the head of one of the finest families in the north, famed for long years of service to the Ducal House of Howard, bowed to me more deeply than I’d believed possible.

“You have my sincere gratitude,” he said. “Truly, sir, I cannot thank you enough.”

“Pardon?” I stammered. I could see Roland’s shock, although he stood some distance off, where he’d parked the second car. “No, I owe you an apology for telling Ellie about her parents and—”

“Someone needed to tell her eventually. In which case, the sooner, the better. My wife would agree.”

“But...”

Telling the truth sounded laudable at first blush, but it also meant laying loved ones’ pasts bare. Zel must have felt the same dilemma.

While I brooded on my late friend, Mr. Walker looked up at the gray sky. “As I believe Shelley once told you in the northern capital,” he said, “after our daughter and son-in-law passed, we sought out all the news of them we possibly could. Naturally, not even a memento of them returned to us, let alone their bodies. Only the words ‘both deceased.’ Even the place and time were

hazy.”

Ellie’s parents had practiced medicine. Despite escaping the epidemic-ridden royal capital once, they had returned to fulfill their professional duty and laid down their lives—leaving their infant daughter.

“Yet we failed to uncover a single new fact! Not even one!” Fury broke through Mr. Walker’s usual composure. “Mr. Allen, you brought us what my wife and I sought for so long in vain. The university houses so many records slated for disposal, the word ‘numerous’ hardly does them justice. And combing through all of them? What a feat! Who but you, sir, could have overseen it?”

“My old schoolmates deserve all the credit. I didn’t do a thing,” I demurred, and not out of modesty. I had merely offered suggestions and asked for help.

Mr. Walker’s face contorted. “My wife and I...” He faltered, straining to voice feelings he’d held in for long years. “We just want to know! To know how our children really died! No matter how hard the truth proves for us—and most of all, for Ellie—to bear. I believe she’s grown strong enough to face it.”

Graham “the Abyss” Walker straightened his posture. “If we can assist you in any way, sir, just say the word. We Walkers know the weight of a debt owed.”

I gave a short nod. At the same time, watching Tina and Ellie talking under Stella’s and Lily’s watchful gazes, I wished with all my heart that I would have no reason to call on the Walkers’ aid. But I permitted myself only the briefest moment of prayer before I replied:

“By my father’s and mother’s names, I swear to do all I can.”

“You never do less, sir.” The head butler shook his head, keeping an affectionate eye on his granddaughter and the Howard sisters. “It would be a dark day for the kingdom if any ill befell you. Please look after yourself. And after my ladies and Ellie as well.”

The moment I approached the gate, Tina and Ellie raced up to me, cloaks fluttering.

“Sir!”

“A-Allen, sir!”

The gate already stood open. An elf in sorcerer’s robes and a large red-haired and bearded man strode into view; the headmaster and Under-duke Lucas Leinster had arrived ahead of us. I’d heard that Richard and the royal guard would join us as well, but I didn’t see them. Indoors, no doubt.

“What were you and Graham talking about?” asked the platinum-haired noblewoman with a rod slung on her back.

“W-Was he angry about me?” the young maid added as they both came to a halt in front of me.

“Not at all,” I answered, forcing a grin and speaking loud enough for Stella and Lily to hear from where they walked a little way ahead of us. “He merely implied that I’ve been working myself too hard.”

“Oh, of course!”

“Grandpa’s right about that!”

How did my students get such strange opinions of me?

While I mulled over that question, Stella offered a suggestion.

“I *would* like to make certain you take some rest—even if I need to keep a watch on you.”

“Get ready for a few days of rest once this all settles down—whether you like it or not!” Lily added. “I’ll stay at your lodgings to cook and clean and take care of *everything* else you need!”

“G-Guilty!” Tina shouted, matched by Ellie’s “O-Out of the question!”

“I beg your pardon, Lily?” Stella said slowly, and before I knew it, their usual banter had begun.

I must stop Lily from visiting me at home. She seems likely to linger.

“You always bring a commotion with you,” the headmaster remarked, meeting us as we passed through the front gate.

“I forbid it!” Under-duke Lucas shouted, hot on his heels.

“It beats silence,” I replied. Then, in a hushed voice, “Was it wise to station

this many guards?”

To my concern, Bertrand and many more knights I recognized had begun forming ranks in the mansion’s grounds. The royal guard had won new respect in the retreat from the royal capital and the defense of the eastern capital. Add to them the renowned Scarlet Order, the Archmage, and an under-duke, with the Abyss, Tina, and Lily waiting in the wings. Officially, we were merely to enter the Sealed Archive. Wouldn’t such a show of force put Crom and Gardner on their guard?

Both men grimaced.

“This is after we pared them down.”

“We had no end of volunteers. And remember who we’re dealing with.”

So they don’t think we can trust Gerhard Gardner, even if he did give his permission.

Mr. Walker approached bearing a long object wrapped in cloth. “Lady Stella, I hope that you will carry this with you.”

“Me?” murmured the white-clad noblewoman, hesitantly lifting it. The cloth came away to reveal a wooden staff set with an orb of light. Even without touching it, I could recognize its quality.

“Graham, where did this come from?” Stella asked, taken aback.

“The master had it prepared in light of your condition, my lady,” the head butler replied. “He felt that you would require more than a wand.”

“My father said that?” The girl lowered her gaze and hugged the staff. I basked in tender feelings until I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Sir, sir.”

“Yes, Tina?” I responded, bringing my ear closer to her.

“Would you link mana with me? If anything goes wrong, I could—”

“I think not.”

“What?! Why?!” Tina demanded. Icy feathers whirled as the mark on her left hand flashed.

I dismissed them with a snap of my fingers. “We’re not going off to war. And I’m bringing a communication orb, anyway,” I said, showing the insignia pinned to my collar.

“But...but— Eek!”

“Lady Tinaaa!” Lily crowed, fully back to her usual self as she went in for a hug. “Wait your turn,” she added, smiling as she smothered the young noblewoman with her chest. “Don’t worry. We’ll both rush to the rescue if they run into trouble.”

“You’re right, Lily,” Tina admitted sheepishly. “B-But don’t squeeze me like that!”

“Whaaat? No way! Squeeze!”

“Oh, if only...if only my comrade were here for this!” Tina cried out for the Hero as the maid’s grip tightened.

“Well then,” said the headmaster.

“We’ll see you inside,” added Under-duke Lucas as both men turned and retreated into the fortress of a mansion.

“Ellie, Stella,” I called, clapping my hands. “We should go too. Tina, Lily, we’ll see you later. Mr. Walker, please keep an eye on everyone for me.”



Inside, the mansion seemed deserted, and a chill pervaded the air. The headmaster and the under-duke walked in the lead as we proceeded through vast, empty galleries lit by the bare minimum of mana lamps. I’d heard people rarely used this place, but it was so well maintained that I saw not a speck of dust.

The neatness actually makes it more unsettling.

Ellie had been walking behind me. Now she broke into a trot and drew level.

“A-Allen, sir,” she murmured, looking nervously up from my right, “would you mind holding my hand?”

“Of course not,” I replied, taking the little maid’s hand. “And let’s do

something about this chill.”

“Y-Yessir!”

I warmed the air around us and surreptitiously cast a detection spell. Twenty-odd knights of the guard patrolled the mansion. I also sensed Richard, another knight at his side...and Gerhard Gardner. The head court sorcerer hadn't brought a single subordinate. I was still wondering about that when my spell bounced off an unknown barrier underground.

Not even major military bases have defenses on this scale.

While I put the pieces together, Stella came up on my left. Without a word, she took a very slight hold on my sleeve. She evidently hesitated to do more in front of our guides or her little sister in all but name.

At last, a stone hall came into view beyond open heavy doors. It occupied the mansion's heart. In the center of the hall, the royal guard's red-haired vice commander was conversing calmly with one of his knights, while Gerhard Gardner awaited us, staff in hand. The vice commander was the first to mark our arrival.

“Allen, over here,” he called as soon as we crossed the threshold.

“Richard,” I replied. “Thank you for taking all this trouble.”

The stones of the floor were obviously ancient. Had they built the mansion over this place, taking care to leave it untouched? Ellie and Stella stared at the damaged stone walls, evidently sharing my impression.

“I see we're all here,” Gerhard said, making no effort to conceal his bitterness.

He thrust his staff at a stone slab embedded in the floor, and the whole hall gave off a faint light as a spiral staircase leading down appeared in its center. I felt carefully for mana but could detect no trace of the apostles or any other threat. The headmaster seemed to have done likewise.

Were the marquesses right when they claimed no one had opened this place in fifty years? I could have been wrong about Ellie's parents getting involved in —

“First, let me warn you: the Sealed Archive is alive,” Gerhard announced.

“Now, let us enter.”

He started descending the spiral staircase. We exchanged nods and followed. Only our footfalls and the thump of staves on stone echoed in the stairwell as it took us ever downward, to the depths.

Could this be...?

“What a pretty place this— Allen, sir?” Ellie asked, seeing me stop dead.

“Is something the matter?” Stella added, looking up at me with her.

A circular hall ringed by seven columns. And that mana I sensed from where Gerhard stood. All reminded me of the Old Temple in the city of water.

“There’s nothing here,” Under-duke Lucas said, surveying the underground chamber. “What part of this do you call an archive?”

“I must admit, it doesn’t look like one,” the headmaster murmured, lost in thought.

The vice commander gave a few bewildered looks, earning a reproving glare from his composed knight.

“Richard? What is it?” the latter demanded.

“Renown,” the red-haired lord said slowly, “this place reminds me of the one underneath the former Earl Rupert’s house. The one we raided while we were on Gerard’s track. Not that I see how they could be connected.”

“Rupert,” I murmured, feeling a dull ache in my chest. The house name belonged to the man who had run over my childhood friend with his carriage. I’d never expected to hear it in a place like this.

Ellie and Stella called my name questioningly, quick to sense my mood. I would need to do better. But before I could respond, Gerhard’s voice echoed in the vast chamber.

“Step back.”

Again, he touched the center with his staff, and the seven columns blazed with light as a hazy door materialized. I shot the headmaster a look, and he shook his head slightly. So, not even the Archmage knew this magic. I felt for

traces of mana myself but found nothing.

“Beyond this point lies the realm of records that the Crows have gathered from all corners and the Gardners have preserved,” Gerhard continued, looking back at us. “Would Lady Stella Howard, Miss Ellie Walker, and...”—I felt a gaze on me that went beyond cold—“their young attendant step forward?”

“Head Court Sorcerer, you’ve no cause to address him like—”

“Richard.” The knight called Renown silenced his vice commander’s fury.

“After passing through the gate, you will descend to a vast hall,” Gerhard continued dispassionately. “I am told one summons documents using the stone slab in its center. Query it concerning Lady Stella Howard’s condition.”

“Remember, Allen,” the headmaster said gravely.

“We will await your return here,” the under-duke finished for him.

“Whatever you do, keep your communication orb on,” Richard added, clapping me on the shoulder. Having a comrade from the battle for the eastern capital on hand buoyed my spirits.

I exchanged looks with Ellie and Stella, then gave a firm nod. Just as I made to step through first...

“I...I’ll go first!” the young maid shouted, tense with nerves as she took the lead.

“And then me.” The platinum-haired noblewoman followed, staff in hand. They’d beaten me to the punch. I could sense both of their mana, so the device presumably hadn’t warped them out of normal space.

I stepped forward to give chase, then paused. “One last thing,” I said, looking Gardner in the eye over my shoulder. “I have a question for my lord the head court sorcerer. Why do you take such a dislike to beastfolk and the houseless? I can’t recall ever doing anything to you.”

Tension filled the hall. Prejudice against both groups had a long history, but I had yet to meet a person who could justify theirs. The old man met my gaze...but lowered his before I did.

“I swear I hold no personal enmity,” he said, forcing the words out. “I abide by

the last words of my house's founder: 'Trust not the houseless nor the beastfolk. They are the sworn enemies of mortalkind.' No more and no less."

A deathbed injunction?

The Gardners were an ancient family. Not even history books could trace their line back to its founder.

I let out a deep sigh and bowed. "Thank you for telling me. I'll be on my way now."



"Huh?"

The moment after I stepped through the hazy door, I found myself standing on a large circular stage. The seven columns that ringed it presented a sorry sight, their top halves demolished. The whole space looked as large as the Royal Academy's training ground. And although Ellie and Stella had entered ahead of me, they were nowhere in sight.

I drew Silver Bloom from thin air and cast the intermediate spell Divine Lightning Detection in a circle around me. The place was deserted.

Floating mana lamps—or so I guessed—flickered like the emerald glows beneath the Great Tree in the eastern capital. The stage seemed to be made of hard stone, but roots and branches poked through it in places—feelers of the city's Great Tree. I felt nearly as I had in the city of water's sanctuary.

Noting more traces of major destruction, I could only conclude that a fierce battle had been fought here. The spells cast must have been immense, because I could still detect the slightest vestiges of mana. Two combatants had clashed. No, three. Their stealth beggared belief. No one could have uncovered this intrusion from the outside.

All of a sudden, Shelley Walker's words came back to me: "My daughter and her husband wielded extremely quiet magic."

Then, who was the third person?

Looking around, I saw that rows of towering shelves, shelves, and more shelves surrounded the stage on all sides, separated from it by a gap in the

floor. Tightly packed books filled them from below my feet to the ceiling high overhead. A maze of stairways and passages threaded between them, and I noted clear signs of workmanship on the walls and ceiling as well. But the damage extended everywhere. Most of the shelves had toppled, leaving fallen heaps of old tomes and reports.

Unease stirred in my chest. Could anyone call this archive “alive”?

Two girls’ squeals rang out behind me. I spun around to find Ellie and Stella holding hands as they lay in a heap on the floor.

“I’m so glad to see you both. You’re not hurt, are you?” I asked, breathing a sigh of relief.

At my approach, the girls looked around, nonplussed.

“A-Allen, sir.”

“Mr. Allen, where on earth are we?”

“In the Sealed Archive, I suppose,” I replied. “That ‘gate’ flung me here as soon as I entered it.”

“W-We ended up somewhere pitch dark,” Ellie said. “We couldn’t see a thing above or below.”

“Except more of these faint glows than I could count were flitting through it,” Stella added. “Mr. Allen, it felt like being inside that celestial globe you demonstrated when you taught at the Royal Academy. Ellie and I stepped forward together...and then we were here.”

“Like a celestial globe?” I murmured. Had they seen what I had when Atra led me through that ruin on the Four Heroes Sea? The “seal of the Fire Fiend”? But no sooner had the phrase resurfaced from a nook of my memory than the ring on my right hand flashed as if to say, “Don’t blame me!” In any case, we had more pressing concerns.

“I’ll test whether the communication orb works,” I told the girls. “Ellie, search the area. Stella, please stay close to me. Once we make certain it’s safe, let’s check whether this is as deep as we can go.”

“Y-Yessir!” Ellie answered with enthusiasm and sprinted off to the edge of the

circular stage.

Stella, who'd lost her command of strength-enhancing magic, clung tightly to my left arm and whispered, "Sorry." I thought I heard her grind her teeth in frustration at her inability to contribute.

"Can you hear me, Headmaster?" I called into my orb, keeping an eye on Ellie as she peered into the gap.

A moment passed. Then, "I hear you, Allen, but you sound so far away. What's your situation?"

Stella and I looked at each other. It seemed we could get through.

The white-clad noblewoman swung her staff and cast Light Mirror Shower. Minute beads of light danced across the stage. I had devised the spell for Tina, but I could see that Stella had already mastered this minor variation. I gave her an admiring look, and a smile at last broke through her tense expression.

"Simply put, we're in a labyrinth of bookshelves," I answered the headmaster. "I was thrown onto a massive circular platform surrounded by a seemingly bottomless ravine. It bears a striking resemblance to the hall you're in. Ellie and Stella were sent somewhere else. We managed to reunite, but I see signs of a fierce battle, probably between three people."

The orb erupted in a clamor of voices.

"I'll go in too."

"Please don't be ridiculous, Richard."

"We must summon Gerhard."

"Are you certain?" the headmaster demanded urgently. "If we both failed to detect it, they must have been sorcerers of dreadful—"

"Headmaster?" I called. "Under-duke Lucas? Richard?" Nothing got through. Contact had cut off without warning.

Stella raised her staff and cast Light Mirror Shower again. "I'll use a long-range detection spell," she announced in a tone that brooked no argument.

"I'd appreciate it," I replied. Saint Wolf had anticipated me.

She swung her staff in a wide arc, and rays bounced between the dancing lights, feeling out every nook and cranny of the stage. Ellie, back from reconnaissance, covered her mouth in admiration. Given Stella's current command over light magic, I doubted anything that remained to be found could elude her.

At last, the lights faded.

"No luck. I didn't find anything," Stella reported, shaking her head weakly as she squeezed her staff tight.

I touched her hand. "It's all right," I said, slowly loosening the noblewoman's white-knuckle grip. "If your magic didn't find anything, then—"

A patch of ground hidden by the Great Tree's branches glowed almost imperceptibly for just a moment, then went dark again.

The girls gave me curious looks.

"Sir?"

"Is something the matter?"

Quietly, I tapped the butt of my rod on the floor. Mana rippled outward, and superlative perception-blocking wards began to crumble. Ellie and Stella clapped their hands over their mouths, this time in shock.

"A-Are those..."

"Footprints?"

Tracks appeared, radiating a mystical glow as they advanced toward the platform's center, and vanished just as quickly. Repurposing Light Mirror Shower for detection must have provoked a faint reaction from them. Before the footprints disappeared completely, I seared the ground under some of them with fire.

"A man and a woman, judging by their size and stride," I murmured, dropping to one knee. "And..." I followed *both* sets of tracks toward the center.

A man and a little girl. There weren't three people here—there were four. Residual mana shows they were all here at the same time, although probably not on the same side.

“Let’s have a look at the center of this hall,” I said, rising. “It may tell us something.”

“I’ll lead the way!” Ellie declared. “You’ll be safe with me, sir! And you too, Big Sis Stella!” Learning to assert herself marked a big step forward for her.

“We’ll be counting on you,” I replied. “Stella, you bring up the rear. I trust you to guard our backs.”

The platinum-haired girl looked down, ever so slightly put out. “Of course,” she muttered.

I doubted we had anything to fear, but better safe than sorry. I couldn’t let Stella fight while she couldn’t even enhance herself. I had come here to cure her.

I colored the footprints with mana, making them easier to spot as we advanced. The tracks halted in the center of the platform; then the man’s and woman’s strides lengthened, diverged to either side...and vanished. I had seen this agile footwork before, in the Howards’ northern mansion. It was a perfect match for Graham and Shelley Walker.

I knew it. These two must have been...

Silently, I knelt again and brushed away the dust. Ellie and Stella peered over my shoulders.

“A stone slab?”

“The one the head court sorcerer mentioned?”

From the debris emerged a stone tablet no larger than a person could hold and covered in carved writing. It reminded me of the one that the church’s “Saint” had carried in the city of water. As for the text, I couldn’t read it. It didn’t seem to be a language of the Old Empire, but something even more ancient. And thick, dark stains clung to the stone surface.

Human blood.

I stood and extended my hand. A frayed and partially collapsed spell formula projected itself into what should have been empty air.

“The original control formula’s been destroyed?” I muttered. “And

repurposed to activate...a grand-scale spell? Are Lords Crom and Gardner holing up in their own domains because they *know* someone broke in here?"

My bad feeling kept getting stronger. Hidden in the control formula, I spied messy writing and a formula much like Mr. Walker's. It cut off partway through.

Whoever is reading this,

Please, complete our spell and release the Great Tree's shackles—its chains. The Sealed Archive died a hundred years ago. Funneling power into it will only cause stagnation and rot.

A little curse like ten-day fever shouldn't have given me any trouble, but I noticed it too late! Although we fought off the Apostate of the Great Moon, I, the Great Tree warden, am at death's door. Unless you unbind the tree, he'll get his way, and the fallen angel will return in the near future, causing slaughter on an unimaginable scale.

Ah, Millie. Please, go alone if you must. Ellie needs—

There was no doubt in my mind. I had found the testament of Ellie's father, Remire Walker. This place had most likely become his—

"Sir! Above you!" Ellie shouted, swiftly casting Imperial Storm Tornado.

Stella and I looked up in alarm as a magic circle flashed on the ceiling: the flower with eight warped, crescent petals I'd seen inscribed on the *Apocrypha of the Great Moon*. Ellie's advanced spell scored a clean hit on the monster that had just emerged from it, but a potent barrier deflected the blow.

Clouded ink-black eyes surmounted a long, thin body of stone from which countless legs writhed. Icy blades formed its wings, and razor fangs lined its jaws. Above all, it was enormous, rivaling the water dragon in size.

A Stone Serpent with wings of ice?!

Had they blended the great elemental with witches' secrets? And I recognized the mana from the city of water—it belonged to the Sage and the Saint.

"Ellie, take Stella and—"

Before I could say "run," the airborne serpent let out a piercing screech. Only a hasty wall of wind-resistant barriers allowed us to weather it.

Lifeless eyes rolled. The rocky snake fixed us with a baleful glare, then launched into a breakneck dive. Shards of sinister ice tore at the ground with each beat of its wings. I conjured stone barricades in rapid succession, shielding Stella while I prepared a spell to intercept.

All of a sudden, branches sprouted from the floor, growing high into the air. Ellie ran atop them and took a massive leap.

A simplified flight spell?!

“Oh no you don’t!” she yelled as she slammed her wind-armored fist into the Stone Serpent’s face. However...

“What?! M-My magic!”

Ellie’s magnificent strike broke against an unknown barrier. Was the monster impervious to wind?

The serpent opened its great jaws wide to snap the young maid out of the air, and—

“Close your eyes and cover your ears, both of you!”

The girls gave a start as my flash and noise spells went off, engulfing the whole cavern. The snake took both full in the face and plummeted, its writhing body striking walls and toppling bookshelves as it fell. Everything that touched its wings froze.

I fell back, carrying Stella under my left arm and manipulating the plants to retrieve Ellie. Earth magic put more walls between us and the monster while I explained what I’d learned from the skirmish.

“If that snake’s mana is anything to go by, the sorcerer who cast Falling Star at the city of water and the so-called Saint created it. They mixed vestiges of the great elemental Stone Serpent with some of the witches’ magical secrets that Twin Heavens showed me. Considering the conditions that triggered the magic circle, it must require summoning. And the way it stopped Ellie’s punch shows that it has powerful resistances to its component elements—earth, of course, but also wind, water, and darkness, which make up ice. Ice itself goes without saying.”

Ellie looked shaken, and Stella's expression hardened.

How were we supposed to prepare for a monster like this underneath the royal capital? When did they even set this trap? I don't know about the Saint, but the Sage's mana is relatively fresh. Don't tell me they foresaw someone coming down here and laid an ambush?

"My dearest Allen—mine, and mine alone."

I felt a girl's cold hand brush the back of my neck.

The serpent rose, blowing over bookshelves and conjuring whirling frozen spears of stone. Ellie and Stella noticed I wasn't myself and shook me, nervously calling my name.

"I can't come up with an answer yet," I said, lifting my right hand slightly in apology. "I only know— Ellie! Take Stella!"

"Yessir!" The young maid took charge of the white-clad noblewoman while I leapt in a different direction and cast Ice Mirror Shower.

I sprinted across the hall, deflecting frozen stone spears while my walls fell one after another. The serpent paused its magical barrage, irritated by its inability to bring me down. Instantaneously, the creature deployed eight new spells around itself.

It's going to hit this whole area with wind!

I clicked my tongue and changed course. I hadn't deciphered the magic quickly enough to dispel it in time. No tactic gave me a harder time than a head-on, brute-force assault backed by the sheer volume of my opponent's mana.

The serpent's cloudy eyes flashed, and its eight spells followed suit. Slaty tornadoes shot out parallel to the ground, gouging chunks out of the platform as they closed in on me.

I've got no chance of dodging them all. I'll have to rely on Silver Bloom's mana to—

"You won't touch Mr. Allen on my watch!"

Ellie flung herself between me and the serpent, blonde hair fluttering, and octuple-cast the advanced spell Imperial Earth Ramparts. Her school beret flew

high into the air. Stella's light magic pelted down from behind us, overlapping and reinforcing her defenses.

Only after weathering the storm did Ellie look back at me.

"Are you all right?!" she shouted, suddenly panicked. "You aren't hurt, are you?!"

"Y-Yes," I replied. "I'm fi— Ellie!"

"Yessir!"

We leapt to opposite sides, evading the icy fangs of the serpent, which had charged in after its spells. I kicked off the wreckage of a stone wall with all my might and conjured a shard of silver-snow on Silver Bloom's tip. As the snake struggled to turn itself, I sliced through its writhing legs along with the gray shields that protected them. The monster flailed in midair and drew back, spewing slaty blood. Gray light flickered as it regrew.

So, they gave it vestiges of Resurrection and Radiant Shield too.

My feet had barely touched the floor when the girls rushed over to me.

"Allen, sir!" Ellie cried. "We'll never win at this rate!"

"She's right, Mr. Allen!" shouted Stella.

I read desperate urgency in their eyes. They understood that we faced no ordinary monster. If we kept fighting like this, it would crush us under the sheer volume of its mana sooner or later. Not even linking mana with both girls would put us on even footing.

What about that formula I got a glimpse of earlier? If I use water from the sanctuary as a medium to channel the Great Tree's power, then perhaps...

I shook my head, watching as the grotesque monstrosity rose on the far side of the gap, toppling yet more bookshelves. I couldn't complete the spell we'd inherited while contending with that thing.

I guess I'll have to believe in them.

I glanced at the brave young maid and noblewoman, who responded quizzically.

“Allen, sir?”

“Mr. Allen?”

I unleashed Silver Bloom’s mana and trapped the serpent with a cordon of fire flowers. Once I’d seen the monster start thrashing amid the inferno, I turned back to the girls and said, “I’d like to ask a favor of you both. Will you hear me out?”

Ellie and Stella looked at each other and nodded emphatically. Heartened, I swiftly explained that Ellie’s father had most likely left the spell formula and that I wanted them to repair it for me.

“I know you can do it,” I concluded. “I’ll hold off the snake while you work!”

I was about to leave our stone shelter when I felt warmth on my back.

“Whatever you do, please don’t die,” Ellie pleaded tearfully.

“I don’t need a world without you in it,” Stella practically sobbed.

I can’t call myself much of a man if I keep making girls cry.

“Dying isn’t on my to-do list.” I smiled, gently tousling their hair. “Now please, get going!”

The young maid silently dried her eyes.

“Ellie!” the noblewoman called, giving her sister in all but name the final push she needed. I watched them start running toward the slab lodged in the center of the hall, then raised my rod.

The serpent shook off my fire flowers and glared down at me with lightless eyes, radiating palpable hatred. Its mana had grown since that initial charge—perhaps it had forgotten how to wield its power during a long sleep. It now rivaled—no, surpassed—the corpse dragon I’d fought in the city of water.

“I see another angry lecture from Lydia in my future. And from Caren too,” I muttered ruefully, unleashing my rod’s mana and forming blades of fire and lightning on its tip. I was fighting the great elemental of earth, albeit only a shard. I couldn’t afford to hold back.

“KEYS THAT HAVE SERVED THEIR PURPOSE,” the serpent roared in halting

mortal speech, **“MUST DIEEE!”**

Hardening its icy razor-wings, it charged through the air.

My “purpose,” is it?

Silver Bloom’s orbs swayed, and lances of fire and lightning shot toward both wings at breakneck speed. My dismantling formulae activated on contact, forcing the monstrosity to crash into the floor. It landed with a silent scream. I called up a hail of the intermediate spell Divine Light Spears, blasting off the downed creature’s legs and tearing chunks out of its trunk.

That ought to buy a little time for—

The snake rolled its lightless eyes, regrowing its wings and legs through sheer force of mana. It then called up innumerable gray “Radiant Shields.” Every time I collapsed one, it made more to fill the gap.

Whoever this thing serves knows exactly how to fight a sorcerer.

The serpent rose amid the rain of spears, opening its maw wide in triumph as it unleashed a downpour of icy stone bolts. I cursed, drawing on my rod’s mana to manifest my secret weapon: the supreme spell Firebird. Answering overwhelming quantity with raw firepower, I just barely fended off the assault. My rod only had enough mana left for one more cast.

“Ellie! Stella!” I shouted, but I kept my eyes on the monster. My job was to keep it busy until the girls finished their preparations.

“We almost have it fixed!” Ellie hollered back. “B-But Big Sis Stella is...!”

Her mana shook as her voice did. The situation sounded urgent.

Without hesitation, I discharged all the mana left in my rod, simultaneously conjuring shards of true ice—silver-snow—and a Blizzard Wolf. Snowy gusts raged, and the icy wolf howled. Then it barreled forward, pinning the serpent. The thing might be invulnerable to ice, but that wouldn’t save it from silver-snow.

“EVIL! WICKED!” the snake shrieked. **“THOU WOULDST BRING THE WORLD TO RUIN!”**

Ignoring its abuse, I retreated to the center of the platform, where a young

noblewoman had fallen to her knees, head lowered and shaking all over.

“Stella!” I called as I reached her, adding my voice to the maid’s softer cries.

“Mr. Allen? Ellie?” she responded weakly, looking up.

Words failed us. Stella’s eyes were red with weeping, and painful sobs racked her body. What could have—?

“Mr. Allen, what—?!”

I swung my right hand, grunting as I conjured fire flowers for all I was worth. They narrowly deflected a desperate lance of ice and stone, longer than a giant was tall.

“Everything will be fine,” I reassured Ellie. “Now, Stella—”

“Oh,” the noblewoman groaned, “I’m...I’m just a burden to—”

“Stella!” I seized her left shoulder and looked her in the eye.

Didn’t Tina act like this once, when Blazing Qilin went berserk in the eastern capital?

“We’ll be fine,” I repeated. “I’m not dead, and I won’t let Ellie or you die either. We’ll all be fine.”

Tears spilled from Stella’s eyes. “This formula,” she sobbed. “It’s built on one of my mother’s.”

I gave a start.

“Y-You mean, D-Duchess Rosa wove this beautiful spell?” Ellie gasped. Her hands stopped in the middle of repairing the formula that would return the mana from the Great Tree that powered the Sealed Archive to its source.

I had blundered. Although I’d never seen one of Duchess Rosa’s spell formulae, I had learned the ice spells she’d left for her daughters in the northern capital. I would have spotted the signs if I’d kept a cool head.

Stella’s in no mental shape to fight. I owe her an apology later.

Shaking off my doubts, I held out a hand. “Ellie, please lend me your help. Whatever else happens, we need to stop that thing now! Stella, take slow, deep breaths and try to calm down. It will be all right. I promise!”

Before Stella could respond, the young maid seized my hand. “Yessir!” she shouted, deadly earnest, and I forged a mana link as shallow as I could manage. Under her breath, she murmured, “I finally got Mr. Allen to link mana with me. It feels so warm...” as she resumed mending the formula with astonishing speed.

Our platinum-haired saint looked taken aback. Even so, she wiped away her tears, striving to regain her—

“INSIGNIFICANT CREATURES!” the serpent boomed, emerging from the pulverized remains of my Blizzard Wolf. Baring its fangs, it started deploying a circle of crescent-shaped formulae. Mana concentrated in this ominous “moon flower” as a gray blizzard raged.

It wants to wipe this whole place out!

I swung my right hand wide, surrounding the serpent with six pillars of fire flowers. Then I lifted my rod high and brought it down with all my might. Seven Burning Blade Blossoms engulfed the monster in a tempest of blazing petals, plunging it into a scorching hell. I had to squint against the glare of the inferno as a wordless scream tore from its maw and the moon flower began to disintegrate.

I was still gasping for breath when Stella gave my left wrist a firm squeeze. “I’m sorry I worried you,” she said. “I’m all right now. Please, use my mana too.”

Her face bore the marks of sorrow. Just standing must have been a struggle for her. I looked from the inferno to the platinum-haired noblewoman with tears still streaming down her face.

“Stella, you mustn’t force your—”

“Please!” she repeated.

I hesitated. “Very well.” Touching Stella’s cheek, I started to form a shallow mana link...and reeled back as something severed it without warning. Raging flakes of darkness filled the air.

Nothing like this has ever happened before.

Stella gasped, as shocked as I was. Her staff slipped from her grasp.

At last, I ventured, “Stella—”

“Allen, sir! The spell won’t hold!” Ellie shouted.

As the fire died, the whole platform shook, and...

“PERISH! PERISH! PERIISH!”

The serpent emerged, screaming. In midair, it started redeploying the same spell I’d just quashed.

“Ellie!” I shouted, scooping up the dumbfounded noblewoman.

“If you’re with me, sir,” the maid replied, “nothing can ever scare me!”

I pulled my water out of thin air and unsealed it. Then, exchanging a look with the unflappable Ellie Walker, I activated the spell that Remire Walker had left to posterity.



The sound of chains being broken rang out, the whole cavern shook, a sacred aura surged...and branches swarmed up from below, seizing the serpent, binding it tight, and tearing away its wings and legs.

The Great Tree answered us?!

“Ellie, keep an eye on Stella for me.”

“Yessir!”

I passed the speechless noblewoman to the maid and cast Black Cat Promenade.

“That’s enough of you!” I shouted, fashioning a shard of silver-snow into a blade on Silver Bloom as I teleported above the serpent. While it struggled against the branches, I thrust my rod at the nape of its neck.

The snake let out a cry, its lightless eyes locked on Stella. As it began turning to ash, it roared, **“BLACK-AND-WHITE AN—”**

Landing on the ground, I cut my mana link to Ellie and fell heavily to one knee.

“S-Sir!” The flustered young maid raced up to me, dodging boughs of the Great Tree. Stella had yet to recover from her stunned silence.

“You’re not hurt, are y—?”

Before I could finish the question, our platinum-haired saint crumpled.

“Stella!” I yelled as Ellie turned in shock.

The platform cracked, unable to bear the strain of botanical magic so powerful it had reshaped the terrain. Unable to enhance herself and mentally shaken, Stella had no way of outrunning the fissures. I tried to levitate her, but alarmingly potent mana disintegrated my spell.

“Artificially inducing sacred ground.”

By releasing the Great Tree’s “shackles,” I had allowed years of stored-up mana to erupt. The Walkers must have planned to use it to cleanse ten-day fever in one fell swoop.

My body moved on its own, kicking hard off crumbling wreckage and catching Stella over the bottomless chasm she’d been hurled into.

“Mr. Allen?!” she cried.

“Ellie, report back to the surface! And use this!” I shouted, shifting position to toss a vial of water to the stunned maid.

Snapping back to her senses, Ellie practically shrieked after us.

“Allen, sir! Big Sis Stella!”

I couldn’t answer as the pitch-black darkness swallowed us both.

Epilogue

“N-Not so fast!” I called after my best friend as she strode through the halls of the Lebufera house, scarlet hair swaying. “Wait a moment, Lydia!”

“D-Dear sister, please wait!” Lynne echoed frantically.

Beyond the windows, lowering clouds lent an oppressive air to the nighttime cityscape. Lydia’s profile radiated the razor wit she only let show when Allen wasn’t around. Even Chiffon, trotting at our feet, seemed scared of her. And yet — The duke’s daughter turned, hand on the enchanted blade at her hip. She wore a communication orb and a military greatcoat over her swordswoman’s garb, fully prepared to storm the Sealed Archive.

“Don’t you ever stop whining, Cheryl?” she snapped. “I’m on my way to quickly drag him back and then give him a piece of my mind over dinner. What could *possibly* be more pressing? Effie and Noa can keep you safe without me.”

She sounded completely on edge, although some unusual spell of Allen’s had curbed her temper lately. Was the situation that serious? Cracks formed in the rigid self-control driven by my rational mind and royal duty.

How could Allen, my dearest, go missing in the Sealed Archive with Stella?!

I wanted to shout, but the sight of Lynne anxiously clenching her fists and Chiffon wandering aimlessly helped me claw back my composure.

None of that, Cheryl. You’re the first princess of the House of Wainwright. You need to keep a cool head.

“What has you in such a panic?” I asked, gathering up my sorcerous sleeves, crossing my arms, and striving to keep my tone gentle. “Allen can handle anything! And the professor called off his meetings to help the headmaster. We can always take action once they find out a little more about—”

“Arguments like that turned the eastern and royal capitals into battlefields,” came the uncompromising retort. “And if we believe Ellie’s initial report, the church’s ‘Sage’ set this trap. Common sense doesn’t apply.”

I shut my mouth, unable to argue. Allen had warned us of a potential Algren rebellion, yet the kingdom's leaders had still misread the available data and invited chaos. My father had sanctioned that.

"As we speak, we've lost all contact with them," Lydia continued, piercing me with a gaze sharper than her sword. "We can't even sense their mana thanks to the Great Tree's sanctification. And they're in the Sealed Archive, under the eye of people who want Allen gone. Will you give me a good reason *not* to mount a rescue, Your Royal Highness Princess Cheryl Wainwright?"

"Th-That's still no excuse." I faltered. As a princess, my common sense opposed the Lady of the Sword intervening in this situation. But...as just plain "Cheryl," I couldn't agree with my best friend more. I wanted to join her. I wanted to save Allen and Stella.



While I struggled, Lydia's expression softened a little, and she turned to her school-uniformed sister.

"Lynne."

"Y-Yes, dear sister?!" Lynne answered, snapping to attention. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd thrown a salute while she awaited Lydia's next words. I could tell she was an earnest, upright girl at heart—unlike a certain other scarlet-haired noblewoman, who tended to turn delinquent the moment she left Allen's sight.

"It looks like Ellie's pulled ahead of you," the latter said nonchalantly. "How do you feel about that?"

A shiver shot through Lynne's body, and her eyes snapped wide open, as though she'd been struck by lightning. Then she swiftly moved beside Lydia, eyes blazing with jealous hellfire.

"Your Royal Highness," she began, "I hope you'll pardon me, but I agree with my dear sister. There are fights a girl can't back down from! And it should be my turn next. Yes, it should! If Lily pulls ahead of me too, I'll never recover!"

"L-Lynne?! What on earth?!" I exclaimed.

What does she—? Don't tell me...Allen linked mana with Ellie?! E-Even I've only gotten him to do it once!

A wolf-clan girl wrapped in a cloak came walking toward us from up ahead. I had it on good authority that that was Allen's old school beret on her head.

"Lydia, I ordered a carriage," she said. "Let's wait outside."

"Thank you, Caren," Lydia replied. "Of course, I'd expect no less of my sister-in-law."

"I don't *have* a sister-in-law...but I'll help you talk some sense into Allen."

"I'll take that answer."

After that bit of well-matched banter, Lydia and Caren fell into step with each other. I felt a slight—just a very slight—twinge in my heart. In our days at the Royal Academy, I had been the only person other than Allen who got to walk

beside her.

Lynne took off after the pair, crying, “Ah! Dear sister! Caren! Wait for me!” Even Chiffon broke into a run.

“Oh, jeez!” I grumbled under my breath and trotted to catch up.

Two beauties in scarlet military dress awaited us in the entry hall, a sword and rapier hanging from their respective belts.

“You’re late, Lydia,” said one.

“Whatever are we waiting for?” lilted the other.

“Duchess Lisa, Under-duchess Fiane,” I murmured in confusion. “Not you too.”

The Bloodstained Lady and the Smiling Lady ranked among the finest sword fighters on the continent. Did Allen and Stella’s predicament really call for such force?

“Ellie’s returned to the surface,” the former informed me.

“Tinaboo’s keeping her company,” the latter added.

We all gave a start. We’d heard that she’d made contact, but her safe return was cause for celebration. Even so, Lydia and Caren scowled.

“Mother.”

“Lisa, what about my brother and Stella?”

The scarlet-haired duchess got a faraway look in her eyes and sighed. “According to Ellie, they won the battle, but the floor collapsed under them.” Reluctantly, she added, “Ellie herself is in quite a state. She just cried herself to sleep.”

“Tinaboo and Lily threw a fit too,” said her companion, “but I had Romy put a stop to that. And the Scarlet Order’s main force and the royal guard were nice enough to wait on the city outskirts until now, but they’ve finished deploying around the Sealed Archive. We’ll let Fee-fee worry about keeping everyone fed.”

They're already considering a full military operation?

Even Lydia froze and fell silent.

"Your Highnesses," I said frankly, "what are you—no, what are all of you and my father so frightened of? Losing Allen and Stella would be a blow to the kingdom, but..." I couldn't find the words to continue. As one of Allen's old classmates, as a woman he'd saved, I refused to say it.

"I'll let you worry about the fussy parts," Lydia announced heartlessly, running a hand through her long scarlet hair. "What do you say, Caren, Lynne?"

"We'll go rescue them, of course," the wolf-clan girl replied. "The battle for the eastern capital taught me—hesitation does nothing but harm where Allen is concerned. I'll do what I want, when I want, and make him sort out the rest."

"I wholeheartedly concur," added the young noblewoman. "And I've found a new issue to take up with my dear brother."

Wh-What is wrong with these—? Allen! What have you been teaching them?!

While I mentally cursed my old classmate, a pair of white-and red-haired children descended the stairs under the watchful eyes of a Leinster maid named Cindy. Atra and Lia looked charming in their matching cloaks—a far cry from the mighty elementals they actually were. Once they reached the first floor, they hugged Chiffon, who stood beside them.

"Allen, trouble!" Atra cried, looking up from the wolf's belly.

"Nice girl, but scary!" Lia warned us.

A pall fell over the gathering. The children's words were as good as prophecy.

"What's this? I see you're all here," a new voice remarked as the front door swung open to admit the professor, back from the university. He'd brought a girl recognizable by her witch hat—Allen and Lydia's old schoolmate Teto Tijerina—who entered with a resigned sigh. Anko had taken up a perch on Chiffon's head while I wasn't looking.

"Professor?" Lydia frowned. Fiery plumes swirled warily. "And you've enlisted Teto. Don't tell me you plan to seal off the Sealed Archive?"

"Wait. Don't be hasty, Lydia. I'm on your side—although I don't know if I can

say the same for Teto. She never stops griping about you and Allen,” the kingdom’s most devious sorcerer replied, raising his hands in surrender even as he casually sold out his student.

I caught a muttered “He hasn’t changed a bit” from Under-duchess Fiane. Caren, who I’d heard would be taking the university entrance exam next year, looked thoughtful.

“Professor?! L-Leave me out of this! I’m just a normal girl!” Teto protested. “I may be your most forgiving student, but even I have my limits. I’ll use every connection I’ve got to make sure would-be brides start banging down your door in—”

“Why, Teto, I always have your best interests at heart,” the sorcerer interrupted, laughing. “The sky could fall, and I’d still never stand in your way—except when you set your sights on running an artificer’s shop that will never turn a profit.”

Teto paused. “We’ll have words when this is over.”

What went on under the professor’s tutelage? He was said to run one of the kingdom’s most exclusive laboratories, but I found that hard to square with what I’d just witnessed. Allen never said much about it either.

The professor adjusted his glasses—and a change came over him. “I assume you know that Allen asked Teto to decipher that note of Rosa’s he found in the city of water?” he began. “We’ve finally made sense of it. Well, I say ‘sense,’ but it seems to be a string of short phrases—reminders to herself, no doubt. Here they are.”

We all leaned over the notepaper.

“Living descendants of the Great Tree wardens?”

“Artificial angels”

“Master’s nemesis: the Apostate of the Great Moon”

I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. And yet...

“It’s a bit of a long story,” the professor continued, raising his left hand slightly, “but allow me to explain what makes us so wary...and to tell you about

the candidate for ‘White Saint’ who appeared in our kingdom one hundred years ago—a girl who fell from angelic heights to become a devil. Allen and Stella may encounter her. I had concerns, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine things would come to this. Will you hear me out, Cheryl? I won’t force you. Duchess Letty is still wrangling with His Majesty about releasing this information. I’ve chosen to share it on my own initiative.”

All eyes turned to me. As a princess, I ought to decline. Whatever the professor had to say must have been considered a state secret. And yet... I pressed my hand to my heart and closed my eyes.

Allen.

“I...”

Beyond the windows, thunder crashed, and heavy rain began to fall.



I groaned. The first things I felt were a warmth on the back of my head and the ticklish sensation of someone stroking my hair. Repeated overexertion had left my body leaden. If only I could just go back to sleep—

I slowly opened my eyes and saw a young noblewoman in white, her sleeves torn and tear tracks on her cheeks. The emerald lights floating overhead revealed streaks of dirt in her long hair, but also calm on her face. Noticing me wake, she reached out a hand and touched my forehead.

“Good morning, Mr. Allen.”

“G-Good morning, Stella,” I replied, trying to marshal disordered memories while she ran her fingers through my hair.

Let me see. First, we descended into the Sealed Archive to find a cure for Stella. Then we fought a Stone Serpent with bladed ice wings, and—

I tried to bolt upright, but a hand on my chest held me back.

“Don’t you get up yet!” Stella scolded, pouting like a child. “You weren’t hurt, but you kept tossing and turning in your sleep. And you mumbled all the other girls’ names, but not mine. I demand an explanation.”

Oh, that’s right. I fell into a fissure with her. I managed to cast a levitation

spell before we hit the ground, but then I fainted from mana exhaustion.

“W-Well...” I floundered. “Perhaps I simply have no complaints about you?”

“Then find some,” Stella shot back. “Take me to task. Ask me why I can’t even link mana.”

Large teardrops fell on my forehead. Every time I wiped one away, a fresh droplet spilled from Stella’s eyes, rolled down her cheeks, and dampened my chest.

“It’s all my fault things ended up like this,” she sobbed. “If only I could link mana. If only I had a stronger heart... You and Ellie have every right to be angry with me.”

“What? I would never,” I replied, sitting up successfully this time. Stella’s staff rested nearby.

We found ourselves in a strange space crawling with the roots and branches of the Great Tree. Combined with the emerald lights, it made for a mystical scene. A short distance ahead, I saw what I took for a mausoleum with its roof blown off.

Did we end up underneath the palace?

“No one could have predicted we’d find traces of Duchess Rosa’s magic in a place like that,” I said, drying Stella’s eyes with a handkerchief. “You’re her daughter. It’s only natural it gave you a shock.”

“Thank you for saying so,” our resident saint murmured as her tears finally stopped.

Relieved, I turned my mind to our predicament. Crane my neck though I might, the platform we’d fallen from remained out of sight in the darkness above. Silver Bloom and my bracelet were running low on mana. And the communication orb? No luck there either. I couldn’t get through.

“Now, how do you suppose we’ll get out of this mess?” I mused. “Did you scout the area at all?”

“No,” the noblewoman admitted sheepishly, clenching her fists. Beads of light threatened to spill forth but collapsed before they took shape.

Her formulae are flawless. What's going on here?

"Before I knew it, my light magic didn't work either," she continued. "These mana lamps occurred naturally. But I can sense mana even more clearly than before."

"Maybe my attempt to link mana backfired, and— Stella, that hurts," I complained as she pinched my cheek, hair rising with the force of her mana. The emerald lights around us started turning black-and-white.

"It didn't. It couldn't have." After a few moments, she added, "If this cavern is like the ones above, there should be something in the center."

"Let's go see. Can you stand on your own?"

"I can't."

I gave Stella a rueful grin and helped her to her feet. Then, rod in hand, I cast Divine Lightning Detection. Electricity crackled but vanished before it left our immediate area—seemingly for the same reason that my levitation spell had failed while we fell.

That makes this a kind of sacred ground, like the level above! We've picked one hell of a place to stumble into. Getting in or out seems like a challenge.

"Stella," I called to the girl who'd only gotten worse, "I'll take the le—"

"No, Mr. Allen. *I'll protect you,*" she interrupted, taking a few steps forward and giving her staff a dance-like twirl. "I've trained as a daughter of the Ducal House of Howard. I won't let you down."

"Don't push yourself too—"

"I believe *I* should be telling *you* that."

Despite our dangerous predicament, I might never have seen her in such high spirits.

I wove a few spells as we walked together. Soon, we got a better look at the roofless remains of the mausoleum. White flowers blanketed all the ground around it, as did...

"Spears and an azure sword?" I murmured. More Stellar Spears than I could

count pincushioned every surface and pillar, while out of the central stone altar stuck a sword so beautiful it seemed almost divine. A delicate azure rose adorned its hilt.

I couldn't help recalling what Duchess Letty had said about her technique in the eastern capital: "With it, I struck down an eight-winged devil and sealed it beneath the royal capital a century ago."

It couldn't be. There's just no way. But the headmaster did mention an incident one hundred years ago, didn't he?

While I endeavored to dismiss that line of reasoning, the saint in white began a silent walk forward.

"Stella? Is something the matter?" I asked.

Black-and-white lights multiplied with each step she took. Even some of the white flowers covering the ground began taking on a black hue. A sudden thrill of unease shot through me. As she reached for the sword, I shouted at her back:

"Don't touch—"

The next moment, a shock wave hurled me a long way back. What little remained of the roof crumbled, and I could see clearly as black-and-white mana swallowed the girl whole.

Calling on wind and levitation in midair, I somehow managed to land on my feet. Bright white and inky black flowers were covering every speck of ground, filling the air with countless petals.

My heart hammered with strain and fear, and my cold sweat refused to stop. Raising Silver Bloom, I met the gaze of the being hovering above me—though her eyes were closed.

In her right hand, the azure-rose sword, stained a sinister jet black. In her left hand, a staff radiating black light, its orb frozen solid. Her lovely platinum hair had turned white and black too, splitting from a central part. It bobbed and swayed like it had a life of its own. I sensed mana of dragons, devils, vampires, the Hero, and the Dark Lord. And also...witches. Most striking of all, she had four wings, pure white and pitch black. Paired with her torn white garments,

they created the inescapable impression that she was not of this world. Her mana surpassed the monsters that Lydia and I had contended with.

I murmured the name of the entity that had usurped the body of Lady Stella Howard.

“The Black-and-White Angel.”

The angel slowly opened her gleaming eyes—one profound white, the other, deep black—and gave a smile so beautiful it took my breath away. Cold sweat rolled down my cheeks.

“Unless I miss my guess,” I ventured, “they call these ‘dire straits.’”

My strained aside vanished into the beginnings of an icy gale. A moment later, the angel launched herself at me without mercy.

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been another four months, and thanks to all of you, *Private Tutor* made it to volume thirteen. Volume one went on sale (in Japan) at the end of 2018, which makes thirteen volumes in about four years. Not a bad effort, if I do say so myself! Then again, I have a feeling I'm coming up on the limits of what a human can do. What do you think, dear readers?

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu. As I wrote in the last volume, "As long as I keep even a single letter, it counts as a revision." I stand by that!

Now, on to the story. For every volume of *Private Tutor*, at least fifty pages of manuscript end up on the cutting-room floor. Until now, Her Royal Highness has always fallen victim to that purge (meaning other characters swiped her time in the spotlight). But in volume thirteen, she won herself not only a spot on the cover but a color illustration as well. Is her total victory finally at hand?!

From the author's perspective, she can be every bit as volatile as the Lady of the Sword, Saint Wolf, and the fashion-forward maid, so I can't promise we won't see an embarrassing upset, but such is life. I'll forgive her, if only because Chiffon is such a noble creature. Still, I can't shake the feeling that she'll throw her weight around even more in the next volume.

Announcement time: *Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars* went on sale alongside this volume (in Japan). I tried my hand at Chinese-inspired military fantasy—not the most common genre these days. The illustrations, courtesy of cura, bring the leading lady to life with a dignity and charm that has to be seen to be believed. I hope you'll give it a look.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:


My editor. We made it through another volume together. I promise I'll work just as hard on the next one.

The illustrator, cura. I can't thank you enough for your work every volume,

and I look forward to embarking on a new series with you.

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—angels and dragons. Be afraid of the False Saint.

Riku Nanano



“Allen, sir..
would you
mind teaching
me to cook
too?”

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.

Private Tutor to the 13 Duke's Daughter



“Oh, just a little emergency.”

“So, Mr. Allen, I hoped to avail myself of your help. You don’t mind... do you?”

Fashion-forward maid
Lily
The Leinster Maid Corps’s number three is extremely quick-witted despite her usual carefree attitude. But why has she suddenly turned up in formal wear?!



“I could
say the same
to you!”

“Save the
fantasies
for your
dreams!”

First princess

Cheryl Wainwright

The “Lady of Light” attended the Royal Academy with Lydia and Allen.
A flawless princess, she equals Lydia in ability.
Following upheaval in the kingdom, she became first in line to the throne.

Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter

Lydia

The Lady of the Sword has been the albatross around Allen’s neck since they enrolled in the Royal Academy. As brilliant as she is beautiful, this young noblewoman’s sorcery and swordplay are second to none. Back in the royal capital, she resumes her duties as Princess Cheryl’s bodyguard.



“Allen the Shooting
Star of the wolf clan,
I, Cheryl Wainwright and
heir apparent to the crown,
hereby name you my
personal investigator.”



“ ”
...

Private tutor to the dukes' daughters

Allen

A young man who fails to appreciate his own
unrivaled control of magic.
At long last, he gains public standing.




13

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Great-Tree Warden's
Testament



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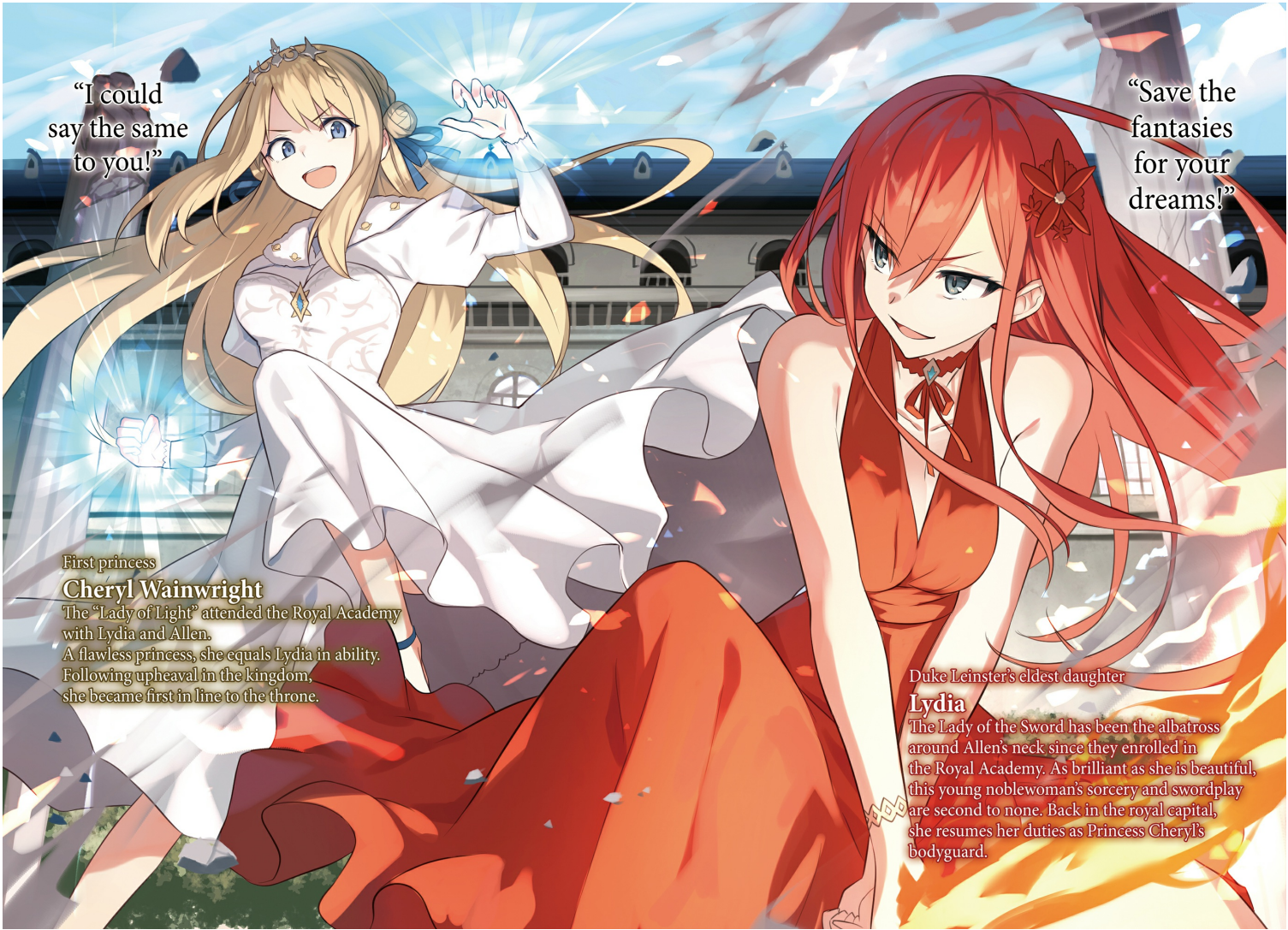
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Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Epilogue

Afterword

“I followed
your example and
started practicing
in the mornings,
so, u-um...”



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.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 13

by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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Illustrations by cura

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