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Author

Riku Nanano

Illustrator

cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Illusions of History



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CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Epilogue

Afterword

“Even without
Mr. Allen, we’ll
do what’s in
our power!”

White Saint

Stella

Tina's elder sister and the president
of the Royal Academy student council.
Under Allen's guidance, Stella regained
confidence in her own ability as
the future Duchess Howard.



Characters



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

ALLEN

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



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

CAREN

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



Thunder Fox

ATRA

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



Hero

ALICE ALVERN

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



Allen & Co. head clerk

FELICIA FOSSE

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



"The kingdom's most viciously
devious sorcerer"

THE PROFESSOR

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



Allen's star pupil

TETO TIJERINA

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



Twin Heavens

LINARIA ETHERHEART

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

Characters

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



Duke Howard
“God of war”

WALTER HOWARD

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



Duke Howard’s eldest daughter
Royal Academy student council president

STELLA HOWARD

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



Duke Howard’s second daughter
Little Lady of Ice

TINA HOWARD

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



Tina’s personal maid
Little Lady of Wind

ELLIE WALKER

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

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



Duchess Leinster
Bloodstained Lady

LISA LEINSTER

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



Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter
Lady of the Sword

LYDIA LEINSTER

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



Duke Leinster’s second daughter
Little Lady of Fire

LYNNE LEINSTER

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



The Leinster Maid Corps’s number three

LILY LEINSTER

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

Characters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prologue

“Excellent work, everyone. Please lend me a moment of your attention.”

At those words from me—Mina Walker, second-in-command of the maids in service to the northern Ducal House of Howard—a stir ran through the council hall of the Ducal House of Leinster’s mansion in the royal capital. Despite the early hour, many maids were already hard at work alongside handpicked officers from the Ducal House of Lebufera and other noble families. And all of them raised their heads to look at me.

Exhaustion lay heavily on most of their faces. Roland Walker, one of our own butlers who had petitioned the professor for a transfer from the northern capital, had dark circles under his eyes.

In the midst of them all, I stood up and struck a thick sheaf of bound papers with my right hand. A red stamp on its cover page read “top secret.”

“You have gathered evidence,” I said, “of the misdeeds of conservative nobles who did not take part in the Algren rebellion but nevertheless maneuvered for power during His Majesty’s absence from the capital. The final check of those documents is now complete. Today, Fireday, is the deadline that the professor set. So while it came down to the wire, you finished on time—and earned a passing grade from me.”

Everyone gasped...and then erupted in cheers.

“We did it!”

“Oh, I thought it would never end!”

“The amount of wealth they were illegally sitting on just got to be too much.”

“W-We pulled it off. Now I can be a proper maid like you, Susie!”

“H-Huh? Bea?!”

They might have gotten a bit carried away, but I would overlook a little excess on this occasion.

A gorgeous woman with a refined air—the Leinster Maid Corps’s number eight, Cordelia—calmly watched over the celebration. Then she caught my eye.

I clapped my hands and ordered, “Prepare for breakfast, then rest in shifts!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the Leinster and Howard maids chorused, then immediately and animatedly streamed out of the hall. Now that I thought about it, they had been buried in paperwork for more than ten days.

Cordelia set down a white porcelain cup decorated with little scarlet birds on a work desk. The black tea, which I’d heard came from the south of the League of Principalities, had a pleasant aroma.

“Congratulations, ma’am,” she said. Between her radiant blonde hair and lustrous gold and silver eyes, she was so beautiful that I forgot to feel jealous. Add to that the ample bosom beneath her maid uniform, and the unfairness of the gods truly—

No more of that.

“Thank you, Ms. Cordelia,” I replied. “And please, don’t call me ‘ma’am.’ If you had your due, *I* would owe *you* deference. Just ‘Mina’ will do.”

“Then please, call me simply ‘Cordelia.’ My birth family cast me out. Now I am number eight in the Leinster Maid Corps—no more and no less.”

“As you wish, Cordelia.”

“Thank you, Mina.”

Cordelia had made every possible effort as a leader of the joint investigation team. She was among the maids assigned to the Howards’ and Leinsters’ latest business venture—known to most as Allen & Co.—and I had heard that she was well-informed. Hopefully, I could use this opportunity to build a rapport with her, I thought as I surveyed the hall.

A young elven accounting officer lay sprawled across his desk, asleep. All of the couches along the walls were likewise occupied—one by Roland, who was sleeping like a log. On the couch next to his, a young blonde maid was speaking excitedly to a staid brunette colleague whose bangs hid her eyes.

Those girls put in a lot of work. I must praise them later. And...Roland earned

high marks as well, although I wish he would sleep in his own room.

“I witnessed Mr. Roland Walker’s exceptional skill with paperwork,” Cordelia remarked, noticing my gaze and smiling. “And Beatrice and Susie are charming.”

“All of our desk-work specialists stayed with our head maid in the northern capital,” I said. “I ended up asking a lot of those two, even though they only just achieved officer rank—a failure on my part as second-in-command. I must follow up. We’re lucky that Roland left the north to join us. But please, don’t tell him. He’ll give himself airs.”

“I don’t see the harm in a little frank praise...but all right.” Cordelia winked with her lovely silver eye.

Pretty as a picture. Full marks.

Someone draped a white cloth over the eyes of the soundly sleeping Roland. A Leinster maid with pale-aqua hair—Nico, their number seven—stood beside the butler, watching his stomach rise and fall with interest. I grinned wryly and lowered myself into a chair.

Cordelia was kind enough to pull up her own seat beside mine. “That reminds me, Mina,” she said. “How is the north?”

“In the capital, our head maid, Mrs. Shelley Walker, is arranging supplies for more than ten thousand soldiers,” I replied. “Our head butler, Mr. Graham Walker, has been granted full authority to act on behalf of Duke Walter Howard and gone to negotiate peace with the Yustinian Empire. I hear that the talks are in their final stages.”

“Both of their reputations precede them. The Mastermind is the kingdom’s finest logistician, and the Abyss is feared throughout the continent.”

A small plate came to rest on the desk in front of me, bearing cookies. I took it with a slight bow and said, “Those two are in a class of their own. Still, part of me wonders what Mr. Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, and Miss Felicia Fosse would have done had they been in command of this operation.”

“That list of names would have been twice as thick, I’m sure. Miss Fosse’s determination knows no bounds when she works with Mr. Allen, and rumor doesn’t do his talents justice.”

I recalled the feats that I'd seen Duke Howard's younger daughter, Lady Tina—or Her Highness, as she had a right to be styled—and Miss Ellie, the heir to the Walker name, perform at headquarters in the northern capital. And above all...

"Farther north, at Rostlay, Lady Stella showed herself so sublime and noble that she seemed positively saintly," I mused. "I feel nothing but gratitude to Mr. Allen for helping her to reach such heights. Love makes a girl strong!"

"Given my position, I feel duty bound to support Lady Lydia," Cordelia replied. "But Miss Fosse is just so lovable."

"It's a tricky question, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed."

We both giggled, and I had a feeling that we would be good friends.

"Has there been any news from the southern front?" I asked, nibbling on a cookie. "I've spent the past few days rushing here, there, and everywhere in the city, waiting on the professor and Lord Rodde, the Archmage."

Cordelia nodded slightly and shifted her chair so that it pressed right up against mine. At such close quarters, she looked like a princess.

"We haven't lost our advantage on the southern front," she said. "The capital of Atlas, however, may prove difficult to take by storm. The Fortress of Seven Towers guards the approach to it, and an able commander has entrenched himself there with a garrison of elite troops. But we have a more pressing concern."

"I assume you mean the state of affairs in our enemies' center of power—the League of Principalities' capital, the city of water," I ventured, recalling a report I'd heard in the northern capital concerning differences of opinion in the heart of the league.

"Lean closer," Cordelia murmured. I bent my ear toward her, and she continued in a whisper that was at once soft and clear. "No doubt you've already heard, but Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen are in that very city as we speak. They're to act as a point of contact in peace negotiations."

“So the professor told me,” I whispered back.

Despite the pair’s glorious achievements during the insurrection led by the eastern Ducal House of Algren, the old-guard aristocrats who rallied behind Crown Prince John had driven them from the kingdom. That said, everyone above a certain standing knew where they had gone.

“I have colleagues permanently stationed in the city of water,” Cordelia continued. “Since last night, however...we’ve been unable to contact them.”

I gave a start.

Cordelia quickly pressed a hand to my lips. “Mina.”

Calming myself, I gave her an apologetic look and returned my voice to a whisper. “I presume that maids stationed in the center of a potential enemy nation must be of officer rank?”

“Yes. Saki and Cindy are jointly number six in our corps, and they’ve been assigned to guard the pair.”

“That’s worrisome, then. What does the Ducal House of Leinster propose to do about it?”

A cheer rose in one corner of the hall. It seemed that the other maids had brought breakfast.

“I’m not certain,” Cordelia whispered. “When I made my report to our head maid, she said quite cheerfully, ‘No cause for alarm—with Mr. Allen at her side, Lady Lydia is unbeatable!’”

“I see. If Ms. Anna says so, then it must be true.” That name took me back and roused memories of my homeland.

I hesitated, then pulled away from Cordelia and said in my normal voice, “Lady Lydia Leinster’s fame as the Lady of the Sword reached us in the north. But where on earth did Mr. Allen spring from? Oh, please don’t misunderstand me.” I waved my hands, and my own flaxen hair flitted across my vision. “He—Mr. Allen—not only saved our Lady Tina’s heart but thawed Lady Stella’s obstinacy. He helped dear little Miss Walker as well. I would never doubt someone to whom we owe so much. I swear it by my name, Mina, which my

late mother gave me.”

Cordelia smoothed my hair with her hand. “I have the utmost respect for him as well. That said, some of the other girls and I once put the same question to our head maid.”

My eyes widened. “And what did Ms. Anna say?”

I had to know.

“The head maid replied that ‘Mr. Allen is soon to become a living legend. One day he is certain to influence the whole world for the better.’”

A good influence on the world, then?

Cordelia gave me a dazzling smile. “We only half believed her, but Saki and Cindy always said that to them, he was ‘a star to light the darkness.’”

“A star?” I repeated slowly.

Egged on by Susie and Nico, a blushing Beatrice placed a blanket over Roland. Her simple innocence deserved high marks.

My beautiful conversation partner lowered her gaze. “I can’t deny that discrimination against the beastfolk, immigrants from many nations, and all others without family names is a reality of life in our kingdom. Only later did I realize that to such people, Mr. Allen is hope itself. Though an orphan raised by the wolf clan, he graduated from the Royal Academy and university and now walks at Lady Lydia’s side. There’s more to our head maid’s answer.” An earnest sincerity entered Cordelia’s gold and silver eyes as she recited, “‘Lady Lydia spends every single moment at Mr. Allen’s side beaming with joy. To one such as myself, that fact carries more weight than anything else—anything at all. That alone is reason enough to trust and defend him.’”

I nodded repeatedly and emphatically, knowing just what she meant. Lady Tina had been derided as a “cursed child,” and the abuse had wounded her. Miss Walker had lost both of her parents and yet kept her darkness bottled up inside. Lady Stella had suffered under the crushing weight of the Howard dukedom she was to inherit. And one man had restored heartfelt smiles to the faces of my dear, dear young ladies. What more did I need to know?

“Yes, you’re exactly right, Cordelia,” I said, reaching out and seizing my new friend’s hand. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“Please think nothing of it, Mina.”

While we basked in a warm glow, a maid with short silver hair entered through the open doors and called, “Ma’am.”

“Hélène,” I said. “Is something the matter?”

The girl who served as our number eight looked tense as she gravely replied, “The professor and the Leinsters’ head maid wish to see you. It sounds urgent.”

No wonder she’s nervous.

“Cordelia,” I said.

“I’ll see to things here, Mina. We should visit a café in the city next time we have a free moment.”

Thank goodness she’s so quick on the uptake.

“Yes, it would be my pleasure,” I replied, nodding. “I hope you’ll give me a tour of the royal capital as well.”



“Hello, Mina. Good morning. I hate to be brusque, but have you completed the job I gave you?” a gentleman in sorcerer’s garb—the professor—asked without rising from his seat as I entered the parlor. A black box lay beside him, and a petite, chestnut-haired maid stood in attendance with a black cat on her shoulder.

“Here is the dossier on the old guard’s misdeeds,” I replied, placing the thick bundle of bound papers on the table. “Thank you for summoning Roland to the royal capital.”

“Oh, Roly volunteered,” the professor said dryly, raising his teacup. “And I could hardly send him to the *southern* capital.”

“Splendid work, miss! Allow me to pour you tea,” the chestnut-haired head maid chirped, darting behind me and drawing out a chair before I even realized she’d moved.

“Ms. Anna, would you *please* stop treating me like a lady?”

The head maid giggled. “Certainly not!”

“Give it up, Mina,” the professor advised. “You can’t deny that you are *now* a fine young lady of the Walker family.”

Reluctantly, I took the seat in front of me. The black-cat familiar, Anko, dropped onto another empty chair and curled up.

The gentleman clasped his hands on the table and said, “It seems that a disturbance shook the city of water last night. Combat may have broken out in places.”

“Cordelia just told me,” I responded. “But wasn’t the league leaning toward peace under the leadership of Doge Pisani, Deputy Nitti, and four southern marchesi?”

“The doge apparently offered to visit the southern capital in person. I presume the league’s hawks mobilized troops before he could follow through. Still, this is a bit too sudden.”

A porcelain teacup came to rest in front of me without a sound. The aroma of Lalannoyan tea leaves recalled old times.

“It’s true that we’ve lost contact,” the beaming head maid chimed in. “Please, have a sip.”

She must have brewed this for me.

Hesitantly, I replied, “Th-Thank you...Anna.”

“Oh, miss!” To my surprise, she hugged my head and began stroking my hair—just like she used to when I lived in the Yustinian imperial capital. “You used to be as little as a doll, and now you’ve grown into a fine young lady. Your poor Anna is overcome with emotion. If only Lady Mia were alive, how delighted she would be.”

“L-Let go of me!” I protested. “Demerit! Don’t think I won’t mark you down!”

“Not for the world.”

I groaned. Among the Yustinian Empire’s assassins, Anna had been known as

the Angel of Death. And since she'd had more than a passing acquaintance with my mother—

The professor brought his hands together. "Allen and Lydia are in the city of water, and not even a hero of old could best the two of them when they're united." He left a pause before adding, "Nevertheless, I find Liam's latest news from the southern capital rather unsettling."

"By your leave," I said, accepting the proffered letter and pushing Anna aside so that I could quickly scan it.

"Interference on a massive scale now blocks magical communications throughout the city of water and the surrounding area. I believe church sorcerers to be responsible."

They've isolated not only the city but the entire region? Who could maintain such a large spell?

When I looked up, the professor nodded and said, "It appears that the Church of the Holy Spirit has its hooks deeper in the city's leadership than we'd imagined. We must reestablish communications with Allen's party posthaste. I believe the Leinsters had their sights set on the capital of Bazel. However..."

"Bazel is situated south and east of the southern capital, nearer to the commonwealth," Anna explained. "That places it somewhat farther from the city of water than the capital of Atlas. I doubt that griffin riders could make round trips from there."

So if we want to reestablish communications with the city of water, our only choice is to take the capital of Atlas.

"Were you able to learn anything from the church's agents in the royal capital?" I asked quietly. The professor had "interviewed" all concerned with help from Anna and the Leinster maids' second-in-command, Romy.

"No, the old bishop knew nothing," the professor replied. "Still, I did stumble upon a few interesting tidbits."

"Lord Rodde the Archmage and our own Maya Mato interrogated the former Algren lordlings, and their stories all had one point in common." Anna darted her pen across a sheet of notepaper.

“The Saint.”

It was the title of an ancient legend supposed to have wielded the great spell Resurrection, with which she had even raised the dead. Could such a fairy tale really be pulling the strings? The girl apostle who had appeared at Rostlay *had* shouted her name, but I still found it difficult to believe.

The professor sighed. “This self-proclaimed saint also seems to have orchestrated the theft of relics and ancient texts from the royal and eastern capitals. It would help to know which volumes in Marquesses Crom and Gardner’s care were stolen, but they still refuse to disclose anything, so we’re getting nowhere. Be that as it may...the church tampered with something they shouldn’t have. I was right to go along with Lydia’s suggestion and send Allen to the city of water.”

“Something that they shouldn’t have touched?” I repeated. “Do you mean the thing that Lord Rodde rushed back from the eastern capital to investigate with you?”

“The last remains of the dhampir Zelbert Régnier, the kingdom’s savior and Allen’s best friend, who was laid to rest in the city’s catacombs. When Allen learns of this...” The usually flippant professor screwed up his face in a grave frown. “I can’t begin to imagine his sorrow. The church sacrificed their knights and followers to deploy spell-soldiers in the eastern capital, as well as in the north at Rostlay and in the south at Avasiek. Could they have taken Régnier’s body as a means to produce artificial vampires? Lord Rodde and I certainly fear so, as does the Flower Sage, Chise Glenbysidhe. Chise reports that such magic does exist among the lost inventions of her younger sister.”

I gaped.

Mr. Allen’s best friend was a dhampir?! Vampires can be created?! And why was he ever buried in the catacombs?! With a few exceptions, only royalty can even enter them!

“I’ll set to work ‘cleaning’ the royal capital as soon as I’ve discussed it with Gerhard Gardner one last time,” the professor continued dispassionately, touching his black box. “Mina, you will act as my aide in the city. All Leinster maids apart from Anna are to return to the southern capital on a staggered

schedule—I need them to deliver this package to Lynne, for one thing. Its contents ought to be sealed away, but Allen wrote to me before his departure, urging me to entrust it to her, and I can't refuse him. Lisa and Leticia will soon leave the east and make for the southern capital as well, and the armies of Dukes Howard and Lebufera should visit us here before much longer. I've written to Stella about Felicia's father. And when all else is said and done, the grueling task of pacifying Princess Cheryl and my students awaits. I would appreciate all the assistance you can offer."

"Certainly, sir," I replied, instantly dismissing my doubts and bowing respectfully in my capacity as second-in-command of the Howard maids. I had my purpose, and I would fulfill it to the best of my ability!

"Please sit back and enjoy your tea, miss. Your dear Anna will see to any roughhousing!" my diminutive former bodyguard exclaimed, squeezing me in another hug.

"A-Anna! Let go of my head! H-Honestly!" I shouted, but I couldn't shake her.

The professor let slip a smile even as he stated the stark reality of our situation:

"None of this changes the fact that our allies in the city of water are stranded in enemy territory with no hope of aid in the foreseeable future. Before the Algrens launched their rebellion, Lord Rodde and I were taken in by documents that the church had forged, and on this occasion, we misread the situation in the city of water. Ashamed as I am to admit it..." He pounded the map on the table—right on our southern capital. "Our only option is to turn to the children on the ground. Lady Tina Howard is the only person other than Lydia whom Allen has ever called a genius. Let us place our hopes in her and the other luminaries of her generation. Our kingdom's future rests with them."

Chapter 1

“Let me see. Considering the atmospheric conditions, terrain, and season... Felicia, we should focus on ships to keep the front supplied! We won't have any storms to worry about!”

“Understood, Tina. In that case, I'll pull the wagons that free up from the capital sieges and use them to support people asking for shelter. Ellie, check these papers!”

“Y-Yes'm! I'll give it my best!”

Fireday morning, the start of a new week, found the Ducal House of Leinster's great council hall in the southern capital resounding with the shouts of girls. Several days had passed since Tina Howard, Stella Howard, Ellie Walker, and I, Lynne Leinster, had come here from the east in pursuit of our tutor, Allen, and my elder sister, Lydia Leinster.

We believed that my dear brother was currently in the city of water, the core of the League of Principalities. But even on griffinback, it was impossible to travel there and back from the southern capital. So we had thrown our efforts into logistical support, hoping to speed the capture of the capital of Atlas, which lay to the southwest of our present location and nearer to the city of water. Since we had reached that decision, this hall had become our new battlefield, in a manner of speaking. However...

A sigh escaped me as I surveyed Tina, Ellie, and Felicia Fosse. My platinum-haired peer in a white military uniform was reading and dashing off papers at a superhuman rate. The blonde girl dressed as a maid and the buxom, bespectacled girl in military uniform were processing an endless stream of documents.

I couldn't help wondering if there was such a thing as going *too* far above and beyond. And I wasn't alone, if the murmurs of the logisticians were anything to go by.

“Is predicting the weather really as easy as she makes it look?”

“Miss Fosse looks so dashing. Be still, my heart.”

“How do we handle the reallocation of ships and wagons?”

“The paperwork is already making the rounds!”

“So *that’s* the young Miss Walker.”

“O G-Great Moon...”

One odd comment aside, the representatives of all the southern houses were clearly rattled. My personal maid in training, Sida Stinton, had even started to pray.

Felicia was physically frail at the best of times, but she was wielding her pen at breakneck speed, making steady inroads into the paperwork. My dear grandfather, Duke Emeritus Leen Leinster, had appointed her acting inspector general of logistics, which made her the highest-ranking person present.

Tina touched the clip in the front of her hair as she immersed herself in thought, then slid a paper to one side. “Ellie, tell me if there’s anything wrong with these calculations.”

“Y-Yes’m! Um...” Tina’s personal maid took the paper, ran her eyes over it, and nodded. “All correct!”

How could she possibly have checked them that quickly?

My best friends’ and former upperclassman’s performance was giving me a headache. “Never mind Felicia,” I muttered under my breath, fiddling with a lock of my red hair, “but I never dreamed Tina and Ellie could do all this.”

Tina was a duke’s daughter, just like I was, and I got better grades than Ellie at the Royal Academy. I couldn’t allow myself to become deadweight, especially not after the city of water had fallen silent the night before.

Suddenly, I felt a poke on my cheek, and a voice said, “That’s quite the fearsome face you’re making, Lynne. The two of them were like this in the northern capital too. As for the city of water, we ought to wait for a more detailed report.”

“Lady Stella,” I gasped, turning to the young woman in the seat beside me. Tina’s elder sister, Stella Howard, wore an azure ribbon that matched the faint blue tinge of her lovely platinum hair. I thought she looked even more stunning now, dressed in her military uniform, than she had before the Algren rebellion.

“Don’t overdo it,” Lady Stella added, pressing her index finger to my forehead. “If you don’t rest when you can, you won’t have any strength left when you really need it. So let’s take a break.”

“All right,” I mumbled, blushing because she had seen through to my desperation. The fact that her gesture reminded me just a little of my dear brother made it all the more embarrassing.

Ugh.

“You stop too, Tina, Felicia,” Lady Stella commanded with dignity. “Everyone, take a break.”

“Yes, Lady Stella!” came a chorus of replies, and a wave of relief spread through the hall. In the past few days, the future Duchess Howard had completely won over the maids and supply officers. It was plain to see that she had them well in hand.

So this is what the blood of the “god of war” can do!

Tina and Felicia were the only dissenting voices.

“Stella! I can still work!”

“Can’t it wait until I finish with these papers?”

“Ellie, make a note of those remarks,” Lady Stella said. “I’d like to report them to Mr. Allen.”

“Y-Yes’m!”

The offending pair flapped their lips wordlessly, then hung their heads. Lady Stella had thwarted them with ease.

My dear brother is sure to have something quite mean to say if he hears of this.

The audience of maids oohed, aahed, and applauded. The performance must

have struck close to home for them, since Felicia overworking herself had caused problems during the insurrection as well.

“That’s better,” Lady Stella said, with a nod. “I like my sister and my friends to do what they’re told.”

“Stella, you meanie,” Tina grumbled, pouting.

Felicia removed her spectacles and added, “Are you sure you’re not taking after Allen?”

Our student council president giggled. “Do you think so? Sally, Ellie, would you brew us tea?”

“Certainly, Lady Stella,” replied the Howard Maid Corps’s number four, Sally Walker. Ellie matched her with a “Y-Yes’m!” and the two of them began preparing to serve tea, moving with perfect, practiced efficiency.

“O Great Moon,” Sida murmured, clasping her hands in prayer, “will I ever be able to make tea for Lady Lynne like that?”

Felicia put her spectacles back on and looked around. “Wait,” she said. “Where’s Caren?”

Caren was a member of the wolf clan and my dear brother’s younger sister, although not by blood. She also served as the vice president of the Royal Academy’s student council, which made her Tina’s, Ellie’s, and my upperclassman. And now that Felicia mentioned it, I hadn’t seen her recently.

Tina moved to the chair next to mine and surveyed the hall. “Lily’s not here either,” she said. “Oh! D-Don’t tell me they ran off to the city of water without us!”

“How rude,” a calm voice responded from behind us. “Unlike you, Tina, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

We turned around, Tina fuming, “Just what do you mean by that, Ca— Huh?” My platinum-haired peer’s eyes widened, and I shared her surprise.

Lady Stella, Felicia, and Ellie seemed equally taken aback.

“Oh?”

“Caren, that outfit...”

“Oh, wow!”

Silver-gray hair. Fluffy beast ears and a tail that I secretly longed to touch someday. A floral military beret gifted by the chieftain of the demisprites on her head and a dagger at her hip. All of that was Caren as usual. Her clothing, however, was a striking departure. She wore a foreign jacket with interlocking patterns in shades of violet, a long skirt, and leather boots.

It suits her to a T!

Under our gazes, the vice president crossed her arms and turned her head. “I didn’t have a choice,” she mumbled. “My school uniform didn’t come back from the laundry in time. And then Lily...”

I caught the sound of someone running lightly through the hall. A long scarlet ponytail, tied with a black ribbon, fluttered as a beauty whose outfit matched Caren’s in all but color seized the vice president in a hug from behind.

Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, let out a lilting laugh as she nuzzled my upperclassman’s cheek. “Miss Caren, you’ve never looked better!”

“I... I’m... I’m only wearing this today,” Caren protested bashfully as she tried to shake free.

“Honestly, Lily—”

“Lady Lynne, I’ve had a revelation,” my cousin—who served as a maid even though she was the under-duke’s eldest daughter—interrupted before I could begin admonishing her. Stepping away from Caren, she pressed her right hand to her ample chest with an uncommonly serious expression.

Wh-What can be the matter?

“I am number three in the Leinster Maid Corps,” she continued, adding a mournful sigh. “And yet neither the head maid nor her second-in-command will agree to grant me a uniform.”

I raised a hand to my forehead and closed my eyes. What was *wrong* with my cousin?

Lily clenched her right fist. The hair clip near the front of her head swayed as

she declared, “But then, it hit me: ‘I can’t earn a maid uniform. Very well. In that case, I’ll just make *my* outfit the standard!’”



Nearly everyone nearby let out a resounding “Huh?”

While we reeled, Lily did a twirl in place and pointed to Caren, who was sitting on a couch and looking over Felicia’s papers. “A stroke of genius, if I do say so myself! Just look at Miss Caren! With her ears and tail, this look has a punch that can’t be beat! What maid could see it without wanting to try it on herself?! No maid, I say! None! Take, for example...”

Ellie was briskly making tea, and Sida was watching her work, but both girls suddenly let out a little shriek and shuddered.

“Miss Walker, Sida,” Lily continued, rubbing her hands together with a swindler’s grin, “doesn’t Miss Caren look lovely in this outfit? Be honest, now.”

The pair looked at each other and fell silent. Then they glanced at the vice president sipping her tea and gave their unvarnished impressions.

“She, um, chooks larming.”

“V-Very charming, I think.”

“Thank you very much!” Lily crowed. “Next—”

In a flash, Caren had her hands over the maid’s mouth. “Th-That’s enough!”

Tina whispered in my ear, “You don’t see Caren get that flustered often, do you?”

True enough.

Lady Stella and Felicia were also giving their classmate amused looks.

The scarlet-haired maid broke free and whined, “Oh, Miss Caren! You were just admiring yourself in the mirror and wondering aloud whether Allen would compliment you!”

“D-Don’t tell me you were spying on—” Caren stopped herself and cleared her throat. “Please keep your teasing under control. Remember, we have serious matters to discuss.”

“Oh, all right.” Lily relented with an air of satisfaction and approached Ellie to begin serving the freshly brewed tea. As befitted our maid corps’s number three, she never missed a beat.

“What serious matters do you mean, Caren?” Lady Stella asked, accepting a teacup.

The vice president straightened her beret and swept her gaze over us. I saw a steely determination in her eyes as she replied, “Lily and I are going to take a look at the capital of Atlas’s last line of defense—the Fortress of Seven Towers. We have Duke Leen’s permission.”

Tina and I gasped and looked at each other.

“Ms. Caren,” Ellie murmured, a hand to her mouth.

“You mean go to the front?” Felicia demanded, making the same shocked gesture.

Lady Stella was speechless.

The Fortress of Seven Towers was a massive bulwark north of Sets, Atlas’s capital city. Renovated from an ancient church during the age of strife, it was now garrisoned by a force under Robson Atlas, rumored to be the principalities’ best general. That was why our pleas had failed to convince my dear grandparents and the other war leaders to prioritize taking the city—until a few days ago, when their approach had shifted dramatically. The army was currently pivoting to storm the fortress, and no one would tell us why.

“These few days have made something clear to me,” Caren explained matter-of-factly. “All I can do at headquarters is get in the way of Tina and Felicia’s desk work. I’ll be more useful on the ground, gathering information to share with all of you.”

“I want to go too!” Tina volunteered, faster than the rest of us.

I felt a pang in my chest. Miss First Place was always walking ahead of me.

But our vice president shook her head. “Not you, Tina.”

“Wh-Why not?!” my Howard peer demanded, a lock of her hair snapping to attention.

Caren, in contrast, remained calm. “You need to forecast weather for the whole war zone—a job no one else can do.”

“B-But...”

Timidly, my blonde best friend raised her hand as well. “M-Ms. Caren, t-take me with you.”

“Ellie, you have an important role supporting Tina and Felicia,” Caren said. “I can see more clearly than ever why my brother is so full of praise for you.”

In the face of this direct compliment, Ellie lowered her gaze, blushed so furiously that even the nape of her neck was bright red, and murmured, “Th-Thank you very much.”

The pain in my chest was growing.

Lynne, what do you want to do?

I could sense Lily coming up behind my chair.

With a fearless grin, Caren continued, “I hope I don’t even need to mention Lady Stella Howard, whose health still suffers every time she casts a spell—even if the formula my brother left has helped.”

“Someone who can’t fight has no business on the front lines, and I need to rein in Tina and Felicia as well,” the girl whom even my house’s people were beginning to call a saint agreed cheerfully. “Caren, you sounded exactly like Mr. Allen just now.”

Seeing the strength of the bond between these two only exacerbated my anxiety.

“Naturally,” Caren replied. “I’m the only sister he’s got. Tina, Felicia, try not to bother Stella too much. Ellie, look after Stella.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tina grumbled.

“That wasn’t very nice, Caren,” Felicia pouted while Emma and the other maids ministered to her.

“Y-Yes’m!” Ellie responded with enthusiasm.

I needed to speak up soon—to say, “I’d like you to take me with you.” But before I could work up the courage, Caren turned to me.

“Lynne, would you come with me?” she asked.

For a moment, I was speechless. Then I could only manage a “What?”

Caren came closer to me and studied my face. “Right now, you look like you could use a breath of fresh air.”

I gave a start. “I...”

Tina and Ellie came up beside me, looking worried.

“Lynne?”

“Lady Lynne?”

They hadn’t done anything wrong. The weakness lay in my heart and the envy it harbored toward such kind friends.

Remember, Lynne. You’re a Leinster—the Lady of the Sword’s sister. And most importantly, you’ll never catch up to your dear brother if you stay the way you are.

I rose from my seat and declared, “I’ll go. Please... Please take me with you!”

“Very well,” Caren said, looking grown-up. “Lily.”

“You got it!” my cousin responded and, without warning, embraced me from behind.

“Lily? Wh-What is this about?” I asked as a terrible feeling of dread crept over me.

Lily let out a smug chuckle. “Lady Lynne, don’t you think a Leinster uniform would be aaawfully conspicuous?”

That was all my brain needed to divine the truth. Tina and Ellie must have puzzled it out at almost the same moment, because they suddenly wore the looks of coconspirators. Lady Stella, Felicia, and the maids were no better. Even Sida was ready to join the plot.

“I won’t wear it,” I told Lily, struggling to calm my rattled mind. “In any case, my dear grandmother is at the front, and she would never permit any such—”

“*Of course* I got the venerable mistress’s approval using magical communication,” Lily interrupted brightly.

“What?! N-No! I-It can’t be!”

My dear grandmother—Duchess Emerita Lindsey “Scarlet Heaven” Leinster—

was currently our supreme commander on the front lines. How could I have foreseen that Lily would already have cleared the outfits with *her*?!

“Lynne, give up,” counseled the wolf-clan girl.

“B-But... Lady Stella, Felicia...”

No longer able to even feign composure, I resorted to begging my upperclassmen. Yet both dismissed me out of hand, never so much as looking up from their tea and pastries.

“You’re sure to look charming.”

“I think it will suit you.”

I groaned, and the strength left my body. As Lily carried me away, Caren’s bold words rang in my ears.

“Well then, we’re off. Expect more news tonight, in our bedroom.”



Our griffins soared over the vast Avasiek Plain. The level expanse straddled the border between the Principalities of Atlas and Bazel and the Under-duchy of Leinster—formerly the Principalities of Etna and Zana. It had also been the first battlefield of this war. I could still see scattered traces of the taboo spell Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend, which my dear sister had unleashed at the close of the battle.

This second look really drives home just how devastatingly powerful her magic was.

“I can see it now! There’s general headquarters!” Lily shouted, looking over her shoulder and pointing forward as she steered our griffin. I was perfectly capable of riding one myself, but to my chagrin, no one at high command would grant me leave to do so.

Caren squinted as she flew beside us. The standards of many houses fluttered above a gently sloping hill, on which stood an encampment more like a castle than a fort. I waved my hand, and she nodded and began a gradual descent.

“Nice flying, Miss Caren!” Lily whistled. “She’s practically ready to join our aerial forces!”

“You’re talking about someone who rode a sea-green griffin all the way to the western capital alone,” I reminded her. “And I’m sure our griffins can tell.”

“Good point!” Even as she chatted, Lily skillfully maneuvered our mount lower as well. The under-ducal house she’d been born into commanded an order of griffin knights, so I supposed that she might have learned to ride from them.

While I speculated, the ground drew slowly closer. Several dozen of the under-duke’s knights looked up at us curiously, although a magical message had supposedly warned my dear grandmother to expect us.

I glanced at my clothes. The outfit was identical to Caren’s except for its color—all shades of red. No wonder the knights were wary.

“I am Lynne Leinster!” I shouted to them. “I commend you for your service! Is my dear grandmother available?”

“We beg your pardon!” replied the startled older knight at the head of the force. “Her Highness Scarlet Heaven is in the center of headquarters! Please proceed! There is a landing field within!”

“Thank you,” I said, a mere moment before our griffins took wing.

Judging by the standards I see, my dear father’s main force and Marquess Pozon’s troops are both absent.

A short while later, I caught sight of an open field, just as the knight had said.

“Down we go, Lady Lynne!” Lily announced.

I felt a jolt as the griffin touched down. Lily leapt off and spread her arms wide. I pulled a face as I dismounted, evading my cousin.

“Aaaw!” she whined. “That was your cue to jump into my arms!”

“Stop that,” I grumbled. “Everyone is watching. Jeez!”

In the meantime, the ranks of knights parted into perfectly ordered rows, and two women walked out from behind them. One was as slight as a child, with long scarlet hair and sorceress’s robes of the same hue. Her attendant was a tall beauty with a silver ornament in her longish pale-scarlet hair. Her ears were long, and her complexion was somewhat on the darker side. They were Duchess Emerita Lindsey “Scarlet Heaven” Leinster, acclaimed as one of the continent’s

mightiest sorceresses—who also happened to be my grandmother—and the former second-in-command of our house’s maid corps, Celebrim Ceynoth, “the Headhunter.”

“Goodness!” My dear grandmother pressed her hands together and beamed. “What adorable little guests we have.”

“Dear grandmother, forgive us for our abrupt—” My greeting ended in a squeal as she caught me in a gentle hug and touched my cheeks.

“It’s so good to see you, Lynne,” she said, laughing musically. “And what a charming outfit you’re wearing! Celebrim, would you be a dear and record it to a video orb?”

“Yes, venerable mistress. Lady Lily, might I trouble you and the other young lady to stand beside Lady Lynne?” the maid asked, gesturing to my companions.

Oh, right. I haven’t seen her in so long that I’d almost forgotten, but all the Ceynoths are the sort of people who would say, “We exist to serve the House of Leinster” with a straight face.

“D-Dear grandmother!” I protested as the great sorceress continued fondling my head. “P-Please unhand me! Jeez.”

“Goodness.”

Having escaped her embrace, I straightened my clothes, adjusted the hair clip that doubled as my communication orb, and cleared my throat. “Dear grandmother, we haven’t come to play. This is Caren, my upperclassman at the Royal Academy and the younger sister of my dear brother—Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.”

“Caren, daughter of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan, at your service,” Caren added, looking tense as she bent in a deep bow. “My brother has spoken of Your Highness on several occasions.”

A murmur rose from the nearby knights.

“Hey.”

“I know.”

“So that’s the savior’s sister.”

My dear grandmother gently took the wolf-clan girl by both hands, her face radiating affection. “It’s so nice to finally meet you,” she said. “I’m Lindsey Leinster. Call me Lindsey. Would you mind terribly if I called you Caren?”

“No, Duchess Lindsey.”

“Thank you, Caren, dear.” My dear grandmother giggled. Then she straightened, and the knights followed suit as the atmosphere turned tense. She stood before us as Scarlet Heaven, with none of her usual amiability.

“The Leinsters have burdened your brother with heavy responsibilities on more than one occasion. The black dragon, a devil, a vampire, an ancient monster... Though people call us one of the Four Great Ducal Houses and the ‘rulers of the south,’ we forced one boy to contend with all of them! But still, I want you to remember this.” My dear grandmother met Caren’s gaze. Her own eyes were damp with tears. “The Leinsters never forget a debt, not for anything, and certainly not when my darling, darling granddaughter is concerned. We *will* repay little Allen. And I hear that you’ve been a good friend to Lydia too. Thank you for that. My granddaughter is the kindest and most fragile person you’re likely to meet, and I’m truly grateful that you’ve been there for her. Lindsey Leinster will never, ever forget that.”

Caren lowered her gaze, completely bowled over. Her ears and tail were quivering.

I placed a hand over my heart.

Dear brother, I swear to repay you as well.

At last, Caren managed, “You really don’t need to. Lydia has been, um, v-very good to me, so—”

“Lady Lydia and Miss Caren are the best of friends,” my cousin chimed in, hugging the wolf-clan girl from behind as her cheerful tone sliced through the tense atmosphere. “They even go shopping together on their days off in the royal capital. Isn’t that right, Lady Lynne?”

The nerve of her! Still, this is a good opportunity.

“Yes, that’s true, Lily,” I replied, joining in the performance. “My dear sister shows Caren more affection than she does me, her own flesh and blood. I can’t

help but envy her.”

“Not you too, Lynne,” Caren whined piteously.

The mood in the field relaxed, and smiles spread over Celebrim’s and the knights’ faces. I was no match for Lily in matters like this.

“Friendship is such a lovely thing,” my dear grandmother said, pressing her hands together. “You and Allen must come over to play once all this fuss is behind us. Promise me, now.”

“I promise,” Caren answered reluctantly. “Thank you very much.”

My dear grandmother gave a tinkling laugh. “Now, join me in the pavilion. Celebrim has baked simply scrumptious treats to go with our tea.”

“I feel certain that they will meet with your approval,” the maid added. Her ominous nickname belied her passion for baking.

Caren shot me a look.

Yes, I know.

“Dear grandmother, before tea, let me explain our reason for—”

“Excuse me!” a man’s voice boomed from above, drowning out my words. **“I heard my daughter was— There you are, Lily!”**

Lily pulled an uncharacteristically sour face and grumbled, “What a nuisance” under her breath.

A military griffin alighted in the field, its body caparisoned with a sash—a sash signifying the house of Under-duke Leinster. A burly, red-haired, and red-bearded man in uniform dismounted.

“Mind your voice, dear Uncle Lucas,” I admonished him.

“Hm? Oh, sorry, Lynne. Griffin riders get in the habit of shouting, and not even communication orbs will change that,” my uncle—Under-duke Lucas Leinster—explained, scratching his head. “But why are you dressed like that?”

I ignored the question and proceeded with the introductions. “This is my dear Uncle Lucas. Dear Uncle Lucas, this is my dear brother Allen’s sister, Caren.”

“Oh! The girl who flew to the western capital alone! Fancy meeting you here.

Lucas Leinster, under-duke.”

“Caren of the wolf clan,” answered my student council vice president. Taken aback though she might be, she wouldn’t let that stop her.

“And what could Your Highness possibly want with a humble maid such as myself?” Lily asked, using me as a shield.

My dear uncle’s bushy eyebrows rose in surprise. “You’re *still* carrying on like that? No wonder I haven’t seen you at home. I won’t tell you to drop everything at once, this being wartime, but it’s high time you came home and thought about settling down with a nice—”

“I will not!”

And just like that, father and daughter started arguing. My dear grandmother and Celebrim turned to discussing tea leaves, while the knights wore looks that said, “Not *again*.”

I stood on tiptoe and whispered in the bewildered Caren’s ear, “Don’t worry. The whole family is used to my dear uncle and Lily’s spats.”

“I see,” Caren murmured slowly. “The Lebuferas were a little odd, but I guess all ducal houses—”

“D-Don’t lump me in with them!”

However eccentric anyone else might be, I was nothing of the kind. At least, I thought not.

“How many times must I tell you?!” Lily demanded, the bracelet on her left wrist flashing. “I’m a maid! And as for marriage, I already gave you my answer! I’ll consider anyone who can beat Allen!”

My dear uncle groaned. “Oh, very well. But don’t forget those words.”

What’s this? He’s relenting already? It normally takes much longer.

While I pondered, my dear grandmother said, “Has something happened, Lucas?”

“Ma’am.” My dear uncle drew a letter from inside his coat and proffered it to her. The wax seal made me wonder if it was a secret document. “From Sykes.

He's at work deciphering magical communications from the city of water."

"I see. Celebrim."

"At once, venerable mistress." The maid took and unsealed the message, then held it out for my dear grandmother.

My dear grandmother's normally cheerful face fell, and she gestured for us to join her. We all clustered to read the letter—and got a shock.

"The city of water fell silent before dawn last night due to the enemy jamming communications on a massive scale. Their spell formulae confirm that the Church of the Holy Spirit is involved and possibly in league with the pro-war faction. Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen appear to have become caught up in a major conflict within the city. Signs indicate that the church is planning something in the near future, but the specifics are unclear."

My dear brother and sister had fought a battle in the city of water?! Then...it all made sense. My dear grandfather and the other strategists had pivoted to storming the capital of Atlas because they couldn't afford to sit by while the church schemed.

The message bore the signatures of both Earl Simon Sykes and his daughter, Sasha. Below their names, however, a postscript read:

"We are devoting all of our resources to cracking magical communications, but due to a sharp increase in the strength of their encryption, it will be difficult to obtain additional information at present."

The Sykes had thrown up their hands? How much fighting strength had the church brought to the city of water?

Lily was calling a string of names under her breath. "Allen, Lydia, Atra, Saki, Cindy, everyone." Our house kept maids permanently stationed in the city, and I supposed they must be caught in the disturbance.

My dear grandmother turned her gaze to the south and murmured, "It seems Leen and the professor were right to worry. Caren, Lynne, you want to scout the fortress, don't you?"

Caren and I nodded and answered simultaneously.

“Yes.”

“We doubt that maps will give us a complete picture.”

The situation was more urgent than we’d feared. We needed to hurry!

“Mother, the girls alone won’t—”

“Mistress, please permit me to guard them,” Celebrim said, stepping forward before my dear uncle could voice his objection. Our maid corps’s former second-in-command was kind as well as strong.

“Would you?” responded my dear grandmother.

“You may depend upon it.” The tall maid performed a beautifully polished salute.

My dear grandmother nodded, then turned to us. “I’ll send Celebrim to keep you safe. Don’t do anything reckless, now. And that goes for you too, Lily.”



“Dear me.” A lively voice filled the pavilion serving as our frontline command. “Lady Lynne, welcome to this squalid place. Please forgive the mess—it isn’t easy to be tidy at the front. Your Highness’s charms are sure to inspire my troops.”

An aristocratic man in scarlet armor—Earl Tobias Evelyn—greeted us with a grandiose salute. A magical message had alerted him to our arrival. From the map and game pieces on his simple desk, I guessed that he had been pondering how to take the fortress. Despite his foppish appearance, Earl Evelyn was the bold leader of the Scarlet Order, the red-armored elite of the southern houses. Although he was only twenty-eight, my dear grandmother had appointed him to command the siege alongside Marquess Hugues.

I returned his salute and said, “I hate to be brusque, Tobias, but how do things stand?”

The commander glanced behind me at Caren, Lily, and Celebrim, then raised his hands and shook his head. “The troops are grumbling about days of boredom. The foe hasn’t budged from their fortress, but they’ll strike at our rear if we ignore them and try to charge the capital. Unlike his brother, the

marchese, Robson Atlas is a skilled and highly driven leader. Look here, my ladies.”

The young earl gestured toward the marker-strewn map, so we leaned over it. The details must have been the fruits of aerial reconnaissance. The shape of the fortress and the lay of the land around it were plain as day.

“It’s like a castle in the middle of a lake,” Caren murmured.

Just as I’d read, the Fortress of Seven Towers was a massive, heptagonal stronghold occupying a small island on the outskirts of Sets. In its center stood an ancient church, which now apparently served as the enemy headquarters. Three sets of walls stretched between the seven colossal spires that formed the points of the heptagon. Red lettering beside the towers read, “Strategic barrier generators.”

The fortress bordered the sea on its west side and natural rivers to its east and south. And on its north side, a vast seawater moat cut through what had presumably once been dry land. The only way in was the front gate, which lay across the moat from the Scarlet Order’s main camp.

No wonder they call it unassailable.

Tobias gave his ornate sheathed sword an ostentatious tap. “I concur,” he said. “Miss Caren, sister to the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.”

“Your lordship has heard of me?” the wolf-clan girl asked, disbelieving.

“Naturally.” The gallant commander made a courteous bow.

Lily, meanwhile, was hmm-ing to herself as she played with the positions of the pieces representing the besiegers. The handsome young earl paid her no mind.

“Every officer I met in the royal capital sang your praises,” he continued to Caren. “You’ve garnered a reputation as ‘the lovely wolf-clan girl who boldly fought the church in the eastern capital, volunteered to fly west alone to save her homeland, and succeeded with flying colors.’”

“I... I see.” Caren’s ears and tail stiffened. I was surprised to see her act so shy.

“Enough pleasantries, Tobias,” I said, arresting the earl with a left-handed

gesture. “How are the enemy defenses?”

“Yes, my lady!” The earl’s foppish air gave way to the look of a frontline commander as he took up a pointer and indicated the terrain around the city. “As you can see, the Fortress of Seven Towers stands on a river delta. The defenders have cleared the island of trees to eliminate blind spots, and they’ve also constructed slopes between the shore and the walls. The strategic barrier projected by the seven spires is powerful as well—we’ve used our griffins to launch several aerial assaults, but to no great effect.”

“And the front gate is the only entrance?” I asked. “It looks awfully well fortified.”

“Yes. That’s another thorny problem.” Tobias frowned and tapped the gate with his pointer. “The thrashing we gave them in our three wars before this one must have left an impression, because they’ve taken thorough precautions against our fire magic. I doubt that any ordinary spell could breach their defenses.”

“I see,” I murmured.

“The venerable mistress *did* do a number on them!” Lily chimed in, catching a protesting Caren in a hug from behind. My cousin never changed her ways for anything—a fact for which I was sometimes grateful.

No “ordinary” spell will do the job? In that case...

“Tobias, may I try something?” I asked.

The fearless commander, whom they said had never shown cowardice in battle, gave me a puzzled look. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m a Leinster in my own right,” I said, thumping the scabbard of the sword I’d inherited from my dear sister. “I can cast the supreme spell Firebird, so I’ll probe the front gate’s defenses. Kindly lend me a military griffin.”

I finally prevailed upon Tobias, although he’d remained reluctant to the end. Even so, I found myself overawed by the view spread out below my griffin.

“Up close, it’s even bigger than I imagined,” I said.

The white walls and seven spires of the fortress towered over their surroundings. Within their fence, the dignified old church sparkled with stained glass. Soldiers pointed to us from the ramparts.

The northern moat might as well have been part of the sea. The front gate was firmly shut and gleamed darkly with steel, its sturdiness beyond doubt. To the south, I could dimly make out what must have been the capital of Atlas.

Behind us, on the opposite bank, Tobias and his Scarlet Order stood fully armed and ready in case the enemy sortied. Caren's and Celebrim's griffins were circling above the fortress. We had planned for them to provide a diversion before my attack.

Their reports came via the communication orb in my hair.

"Whenever you're ready, Lynne."

"Please do not overtax yourself, my lady."

"Understood, Caren," I replied. "Celebrim, I'm well aware. Don't worry—I have a dependable maid with me."

"That's right!" Lily chimed in from astride the griffin next to mine. "I'm the most dependable maid you could ask for!"

I heard a dry chuckle from my orb.

"We'll get started, then."

"Leave everything to your faithful Celebrim."

The communication cut off, and the two circling griffins ascended, then stopped. A moment later, a stir broke out in the allied ranks behind us as violet lightning and crimson mist blanketed the entire fortress. Then a bell rang out a shrill note, and brilliant lights shone from the towers. Seven radiant pillars formed an intricate barrier, dispelling both mist and lightning.

If not even their magic can last long, these defenses must be even more formidable than I'd imagined!

I stood up atop my griffin, relying on my clumsy wind magic, and drew my sword. "Lily!" I shouted. "Are you prepared?!"

“You bet!” My cousin brought her right arm around in a broad sweep, and whirling fire flowers filled the air around us.

I closed my eyes.

Dear brother, dear sister, lend me your strength.

I exhaled, then opened my eyes and raised my sword high. “Now!”

“You got it!” Lily answered.

I focused my mana on the tip of my blade, and the symbol of the Ducal House of Leinster—the supreme spell Firebird—took shape. Screaming my lungs out, I hurled the most potent bird of prey that I could muster into the front gate.

The seawater in the vast moat evaporated into white steam. On the walls, enemy soldiers hurriedly raised their weapons and fired a wild volley of spells—but my Firebird kept coming. As easy as it was to forget when my dear brother dismantled them with ease, supreme spells were widely considered unstoppable once cast.

My avian terror charged ahead, unfazed by the balls and spears of water that pelted it. It might not measure up to my dear grandmother’s, mother’s, or sister’s Firebirds, but I felt confident that it could make at least a small breach in the defenses. At last, it crossed the moat, slammed head-on into the front gate...and let out a mournful wail as it disintegrated.

Lily made a thoughtful noise. I couldn’t believe my eyes, but I still squinted at the gate. As Tobias had said, more than a hundred fire-resistant barriers shielded it. I had just learned firsthand that we weren’t fighting fools.

“I see them!” an enemy officer roared from the ramparts. “Right there! Fire!”

The enemy soldiers were carrying...spell-guns? The weapons flashed in rapid succession, directing at least a hundred Divine Water Shots my way.

What range!

“Oh no you don’t,” Lily cut in, skillfully guiding her griffin while she wiped out the barrage with the elementary spell Divine Fire Wave. The fire flowers flying around us also multiplied, taking up a defensive formation around me. Caren and Celebrim brought their griffins lower as well and flitted around the fortress

at high speed, confusing the defenders and diverting some of their fire.

My cousin turned to me as her flowers repelled another several hundred Divine Water Shots, and she wasn't wearing her maid face. "Lynne, fall back ahead of us," said Lady Lily Leinster, eldest daughter of the under-duke. "The enemy may get ideas after stopping a Firebird, so I'll give them a scare."

"Very well," I responded reluctantly. A tug of the reins sent my griffin into a retreat. I could hear the crack and roar of spells, but not a single one reached me.

Right now, I'm even weaker than Lily.

Frustration welled up inside me, but I had a duty to perform. Gritting my teeth, I said into my communication orb, "Caren, Celebrim, we're falling back. Tobias, please withdraw your force to the camp. No need to engage."

"Understood," came Caren's response.

"Please don't let it weigh on you, Lady Lynne," the maid added.

"Yes, my lady!" shouted the commander.

Once I was out of range of the enemy's spells, I brought my griffin lower. My companions had already withdrawn, and no more magic poured from the fortress.

"Long live Atlas! Long live the league!" our foes cheered, making a point to magically broadcast their triumph for all to hear.

I shook, racked with regret. Had I chosen poorly? What would my dear brother have done if—?

"Use your power when you protect yourselves, those you care about, and your beliefs."

That was what he had told us in the carriage on our way to the Royal Academy entrance ceremony. And... I touched my left cheek. I still hadn't managed to pay Tina back for that slap she'd given me in the royal capital.

This is no time for moping!

While I was busy reigniting my spirit, Lily's griffin caught up to mine. A chipper

“Lady Lynne!” from my orb told me that she was unhurt.

Thank goodness.

I waved to her as I looked down at the fortress and the seven shining pillars rising from it. “The impregnable Fortress of Seven Towers will be a tough nut to crack,” I muttered. “We need a plan.”

Tobias’s Scarlet Order was the best of the best. No doubt they could take the fortress by storm, but not without suffering terrible losses. It was a tricky problem, and the old me—the me who had only had her family to turn to—might have given it up as hopeless. Now, however, I had—

“Lynne, what next?” Caren asked via my orb. “Do we return to the southern capital?”

“No,” I answered, looking up at the sky. The sun was high, and our griffins were full of vigor. What more could I ask for?! “We still have time, so we’ll scout the vicinity of the fortress as well. Even if we don’t think of anything clever, Tina and the others very well may. Celebrim, will you accompany us?”

“Yes, my lady,” the maid responded. “Those were the venerable mistress’s orders.”

“My dear grandmother’s?” I asked, startled. I felt a warmth in my chest.

I’m not alone!

Lily signaled to me from her griffin, flying alongside mine. I nodded firmly and announced, “Onward, everyone! To do what’s in our power!”



“So you scouted the area around the fortress too?” Tina demanded from across the bed. “Even though the enemy might have sortied? While Ellie and I weren’t with you? And you borrowed a griffin to do it? Well now.”

“Oh, L-Lady Lynne, Ms. Caren, that was dangerous. T-Tsk-tsk!” Ellie joined in.

Night had fallen by the time we’d returned to the southern capital. We’d washed off the battlefield grime, changed into our nightgowns, and eaten dinner. But no sooner had Caren and I entered the bedroom than these two had accosted us—one wearing a pale-azure nightgown, and the other, pale

green.

“H-How else could we have confirmed their defenses?” I protested. “And we weren’t alone—we had Celebrim along to guard us.”

My friends looked nonplussed.

“Celebrim?”

“Who might she be?”

“Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster’s personal maid,” Felicia explained from the other bed, where she was brushing Caren’s hair. Lady Stella was sitting by the window with a sheaf of documents, but she looked up to listen. “I’ve seen her around high command a few times. Hold still, Caren! You had Lynne with you, and you still acted recklessly!”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be careful. But I got something to show for it.” Caren—whose nightgown was pale yellow—activated a video orb, projecting an image of the vast fortress with its towering spires onto the opposite wall. She squinted as she adjusted the orb and continued, “The Fortress of Seven Towers has no blind spots. Its west side is all ocean, the rivers to its east and south run too fast for easy fording, and the northern moat is awfully deep.”

“The fortress proper is also ringed by three high walls, and the majority of its garrison carry spell-guns. A powerful fire-resistant barrier covers the front gate.” Reluctantly, I added, “It even repelled my Firebird.”

The projection switched to video of my spell disintegrating. My best friends patted me on the head, murmuring my name. My temperature rose as I became keenly aware of our upperclassmen’s sympathetic gazes, so I cleared my throat and went on with my report.

“Considering the scale of the spell-gun barrage they fired at us, an aerial assault doesn’t seem feasible. They must have learned from the damage our griffins did at the start of the war.”

Miss First Place groaned, seemingly stumped.

“This won’t be easy,” her angelic maid murmured, looking equally glum.

“We truly appreciate all you’ve done, Lynne,” Lady Stella said, setting her

papers on a table. “Video conveys so much more than writing. We’ll all think this through together. But first, I think I’d better have a word with my vice president about failing to stop something as dangerous as reconnaissance in force.”

Caren shrank, her ears and tail drooping as she grumbled, “Don’t try to scare me, Stella.”

“I’m not alone—Felicia feels the same way. Isn’t that right, Miss Acting Inspector General of Logistics who tried to sneak some work in during lunch?”

“St-Stella?!” The buxom, bespectacled girl squealed and shivered in the face of this surprise attack. Then she scurried under the blankets and took shelter behind Caren. I found it hard to believe that anyone older than me could be so adorable.



Tina and Ellie cowered behind me as well, only poking their heads out to babble self-justifications.

“I... I barely did anything, Stella!”

“A-And I just got through a little paperwork.”

“Oh, honestly,” I groaned. My best friends apparently loved to work as much as Felicia did.

“Yes, I was watching.” Lady Stella held up her index finger. “But you’d better take a real break tomorrow.”

“W-We will,” the younger Lady Howard and her maid answered in unison. I could sense their long history together.

The future Duchess Howard turned to me next. “Lynne.”

“Y-Yes?!” I responded, sitting to attention.

“Reconnaissance missions are vital, but never forget how many people would grieve if you got hurt.” Lady Stella giggled. “Tina and Ellie were on tenterhooks all day.”

Tina and Ellie scrambled to their feet on the bed, blushing slightly and shouting.

“St-Stella!”

“B-Big Sis Stella, d-don’t *tell* her!”

What a fool I am. I never needed to worry.

Under Lady Stella’s affectionate gaze, I pressed my left hand to my heart and said, “Thank you. I’ll be most careful.”

“I’m only quoting Mr. Allen,” she replied. “Caren, we’ll have a nice, long chat later. I don’t think Felicia has finished saying her piece yet.”

“I can take it,” Caren said grimly. “Now let go of me already, Felicia.”

“No! We’re sleeping in the same bed!”

“Ugh.”

Tension left the room, and I found myself thinking, *If only my dear brother*

and sister were here.

Tina and Ellie were playing with my hair when there came a knock at the door. “Excuse us,” two voices said—one rather more soberly than the other.

“Emma? Lily? Is something the matter?” I asked as the brunette and scarlet-haired maids entered, pulling a cart loaded with old books. Lily might easily drop in on us at this hour, but Emma was a different story. And Sally wasn’t with them.

My cousin noticed my confusion and opened her fingers to display a key marked with a small bird. “We’ve got everything you asked for, Lady Tina, Miss Fosse!” she lilted, laughing proudly.

The pair in question went wide-eyed and let out a cheer. Then, not content with that, they sprang out of bed and clasped hands, calling each other’s names.

“Lily, isn’t that the key to the archive? And what are all these books?” I asked the maid, who looked most pleased with herself.

“Well, you see—”

“The young ladies wished to examine all available materials concerning the history and geography of Atlas, and the venerable master was more than happy to grant their request,” Emma cut in from near the door.

My grandfather had opened the Leinster archive—one of only four ducal archives in the kingdom—to members of other houses? Acts like this showed just how broad-minded he was. He had even extended the same permission to my dear brother when he’d first accompanied my dear sister to the southern capital—and my dear brother had then roused her ire by burying himself in the archive.

“All right!” Tina declared, a lock of her hair swaying from side to side. “Lynne, Ellie, let’s get to work!”

“What?”

“Y-Yes’m?”

It was the dead of night. Inky blackness lay over the world outside our

windows. And she wanted us to start on the books *now*?

“I’ve calculated the size of the fortress garrison,” Felicia said, adjusting her glasses and then clenching her fists. “Once I know the state of their food stores and where they get their water, I can work out the maximum number of days they can withstand the siege. What am I waiting for?!”

What is wrong with these two?

But before I could admonish them, Lily chimed in, for all the world as if she were making small talk. “You’re in high spirits! Oh, and speaking of spirits, I think I’ve heard rumors that one of the tomes in our archive calls up ghosts. They say it’s imbued with a *very* ancient summoning spell, if you can believe it. Don’t they, Emma?”

Ellie, Felicia, and I let out a dumbstruck “Huh?” in unison.

“Ghosts?” Tina repeated, looking nonplussed.

“Oh, yes. I *have* heard something of the kind,” replied our maid corps’s intellectual number four.

The bespectacled girl, who had been so enthusiastic mere moments before, collapsed into bed with a squeak.

Caren gave her a kindly look and a pat on the head. “I think you should wait till morning, Felicia.”

“I... I’m not afraid of ghosts! M-My legs just went numb, and— Jeez, Caren! St-Stop laughing!” Felicia sat up and started feebly pummeling Caren’s arm.

I watched the charming scene, indulging in a kind of escapism—until I felt a tug on my left sleeve and heard a desperate “Oh, L-Lady Lynne.”

“Don’t worry, Ellie,” I said. “It will be all right.”

I will protect this angel of a maid!

After taking a moment to calm myself, I turned to my peer, who was still eager to begin researching this instant. “Tina, reading can wait until—”

“You’re not *scared*, are you, Lynne?” Tina interrupted. It was the perfect parry, and the fact that she was pressing her hands together and beaming only

made it more infuriating.

How silly of me. I'm up against the head of our class at the Royal Academy. I mustn't underestimate her.

"Of course not," I answered rapidly, averting my gaze. "I'm Lynne Leinster! If any ghost tried to spook *me*, I'd simply incinerate it! But... But you see..."

"Oh, don't put yourself out on my account. I'll be happy to hold your hand if you're afraid."

"M-Miss First Place!" I lunged, but Tina nimbly sprang out of my reach and onto the bed.

"Eek! Miss Second Place and Scared of Ghosts is attacking me!" she crowed while I glared at her, quivering.

"All right, that's quite enough," Lady Stella cut in, rising to chide her overexuberant sister.

"Give it a rest, Tina. And you too, Felicia," added her vice president.

"Stella, Caren," Tina murmured.

"You can't read *all* of them," the platinum-haired duchess-to-be continued with a rueful grin. "You still have morning training tomorrow, remember? Caren and I will brew tea."

Tina let out another cheer, while a trembling Felicia whimpered her friends' names.

Wait. Lady Stella and Caren are going to brew tea while Lily and Emma are here?

"We're with you, Felicia!" Tina proclaimed from atop the bed, puffing out her nonexistent chest. "Now, let's get reading!"

"Why am I part of this?!" I demanded, while Ellie babbled incoherently.

"Tina," Felicia murmured, her eyes alight with purpose.

Lily chimed in with an aloof "How ambitious of you."

Emma had been standing by. Now she went down on one knee and seized my pale-faced and bespectacled senior by both hands. "Miss Fosse, please entrust

yourself to my care. Unworthy though I am, I will allow no scurrilous specter to lay so much as a finger on you! Lady Stella, Miss Caren, Sally is already preparing tea. Today's leaves hail from the *royal capital*, I believe."

The same royal capital that's in the midst of an upheaval?

While I pondered the question, Lily threw her arms around me.

"H-Hey!" I protested.

"Time to hit the books!" she crooned. "I sure hope a ghost turns up!"

"That would be so exciting!" Tina agreed.

"D-Don't get your hopes up!" I snapped, over a soft shriek from Ellie and a groan from Felicia. We each took up an old book.

Lady Stella and Caren left the room. Suddenly, they looked back, and I glimpsed grave expressions on their faces in the moment before the door slammed shut.



"What? Are you done already, Lynne, Tina?" Caren asked dryly, standing before us in her Royal Academy uniform. She was unarmed.

"H-How did you dodge *that many* fire and ice shots?!" I demanded, while Tina let out a frustrated groan. We were both shaken by this morning of impossible sights.

If not for the dark scorch marks and jagged ice shards that dotted our makeshift training ground in the inner courtyard, I would have assumed that I'd been dreaming. We had all been taking turns challenging Caren since our return to the southern capital, but none of us had managed a single victory yet.

Lady Stella, Felicia, and Ellie were watching from outside the training ground.

"D-Don't give in, my ladies!" the maid cheered, bold despite the terror she'd shown the previous night.

On the other hand, Miss First Place, who stood beside me with her rod and her white military uniform, had done her best to frighten us while she read. Lily had joined in, hugging Sida all the while.

“This time, I’ll take the offensive!” Caren announced as lightning crackled across the training ground. The wolf-clan girl wrapped herself in it as she burst into motion.

“Tina!” I shouted, sweeping my dear sister’s blade sideways.

“I know!” Tina grunted as we simultaneously cast the elementary spells Divine Fire Wave and Divine Ice Wave.

Caren was closing in fast, relying on her mastery of Lightning Apotheosis. We’d failed to pin her down with our spell barrage, but she wouldn’t dodge this so easily!

“Good strategic thinking,” Caren said, thrusting her lightning-clad left hand into our waves of fire and ice. Tina gasped and I groaned, raising our arms defensively as, with a blast, she tore straight through them.

“But I can push through a little fire and ice like this easily. Shall we call it a day?” she asked, ears and tail standing on end.

“We wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied, raising the sword that I still wasn’t used to wielding.

“We’re just getting started!” Tina shouted, tightening her grip on her rod. At times like this, her boundless enthusiasm was a blessing—not that I would ever tell her so.

“I like your pluck. That said...” I felt a light tap on my neck. From behind me, Caren said coldly, “Determination’s not enough to bring *me* down. Tina, Lynne, if this were a battlefield, you’d be dead.”

We spun around, biting our lips in frustration as we readied our weapons again.

Ellie and Sida watched us with concern, their hands clasped.

“Oh, Lady Tina, Lady Lynne.”

“O Great Moon, could Miss Caren be the Great Wolf clad in lightning that the scriptures speak of? She looks positively divine.”

What scriptures?

I wanted to question her, but this was hardly the time. The largest violet lightning bolts of the day were coursing through the courtyard. Two short spears of electricity materialized in Caren's hands—a new technique devised by my dear brother. The lightning-resistant barriers screeched, startling Felicia into a swoon. Emma and Sally called her name as they rushed to assist—something they were clearly old hands at by now.

"Tina, I have a suggestion," I said, focusing my attention on the formidable opponent before us.

"What a coincidence, Lynne," she replied. "So do I!"

A "Hm?" escaped Caren as we yelled, simultaneously activating the advanced spells we'd woven in secret: Scorching Sphere and Imperial Ice Blizzard! Gouts of flame and driving snow enveloped the vice president.

"We failed," I warned Tina, gripping my sword tighter. "It's not working."

"Caren's even stronger than she was during our duel in the royal capital," Tina said. "The rules Stella set—banning any spell beyond the advanced level—is working against us!"

I'd never imagined that simply depriving us of supreme magic would force us to struggle so. Lady Stella clearly had an accurate grasp of our capabilities.

"Yes, and we can't buy ourselves enough time to charge up intermediate and advanced spells to compensate. Against Caren, a single advanced spell at a time is the most we can manage," I agreed, mentally reviewing my dear brother's notes. "Tina."

"Take the vanguard, Lynne! I'll hang back and prepare spells!" Miss First Place shouted, raising her rod high. She must still have had a trick up her sleeve.

I raised my sword too—just as our two advanced spells burst and disintegrated.



“Are you done chatting?” Caren asked, twirling her twin spears. Her eyes had turned violet. “I’d like to try out a few moves of my own, so...” A metallic clang cut the morning air. To my dismay, I felt my feet sink into the ground as I just barely stopped Caren’s strike with my blade. “I’ll be rougher than usual.”

“Lynne!” Tina cried.

“Focus!” I snapped at her, activating a spell I’d been weaving. Fire engulfed my sword, and I pushed Caren back.

The wolf-clan girl narrowed her eyes. “Your form’s improved since yesterday.”

“Yes, it has! I’m finally adjusting to my dear sister’s sword. So let me apologize in advance: please forgive me if I beat you!”

Caren’s eyes widened as I magically enhanced my body to the utmost, knocking her away and forcing her to retreat. The vice president righted herself in midair and landed lightly.

“It looks like I underestimated you. In that case...” The wolf-clan girl’s short spears extended, and the force of her mana skyrocketed.

A startled cry burst from my lips.

A full lightning spear in each hand?!

“My brother is such a slave driver,” Caren said, as pleased as she was proud. “He wrote that I should ‘try training without my dagger,’ like nothing could be simpler. ‘Start with short spears, then work up to full spears. It will come in handy when your dagger gets its edge back. I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it in no time.’ Can you believe it?”

“Hear, hear! Allen works people to the bone!” Lily chimed in, raising her left hand. That bracelet of hers caught the sunlight, and all of us—except Felicia, who was still dazed—glared at it as we might a mortal foe. Matching accessories with my dear brother was an unpardonable offense.

Even Caren returned my nod. We would see justice done!

Sunlight streamed into the courtyard, finally peeking over the roof of the house. Taking that as a signal, Caren and I both broke into a sprint.

Sword and spear crashed together in the center of the training ground. I had already enhanced my body nearly to its limit. Now it was time to try the *other* assignment my dear brother had written for me!

I deftly parried a left-handed strike, then batted away Caren's other spear with my blade. Alarmed, she sprang backward, bending her knees as she landed.

"So, you've finally managed to sense mana?" she asked with undisguised admiration.

"I've never stopped training!" I replied, recalling my dear brother's words.

"Remember to practice every single day. That's the key to progress. Keep at it and you'll even catch up to Lydia eventually."

He had given me that same assurance every time I saw him, going all the way back to our first meeting. I knew that my talent paled in comparison to that of Lindsey Leinster, Scarlet Heaven; Lisa Leinster, the Bloodstained Lady; and Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword. But that could never be an excuse to stop trying. My dear brother was even less fortunate, born with less mana than the average person, but that hadn't stopped him from being the strongest there was. And I was his—Allen's—student. I couldn't let anyone cow me!

Caren dispelled her lightning spears and stood up. "I know that look," she said. "You really are her sister. I'm glad. And maybe alarmed. It's complicated. I don't want you to take after the Lady of the Sword, who must be enjoying having my brother all to herself in the city of water right now. On the other hand..."

I puffed out my chest—which I felt confident surpassed Miss First Place's—and said, "You needn't worry. I could never become like my dear sister, and I don't intend to try!"

Caren considered. "Not a bad answer."

Behind me, Tina's mana had stabilized. That meant she was ready.

"Lily, Emma, Sally, Ellie!" Caren shouted. "Make sure the barriers are on the sturdy side!"

The maids responded in chorus as the already formidable magical defenses grew even thicker.

“You got it!”

“Consider it done.”

“Certainly, miss.”

“Y-Yes’m!”

The wolf-clan girl flashed a fearless grin, then whipped her dagger free of its sheath and tossed it skyward. I wasn’t alone in my shock at what came next—everyone watching gasped as a massive lightning spear with a cross-shaped head took shape. Caren seized it in a two-handed grip and thrust it forward at eye level.

“You truly are my brother’s students,” she said while her armor of lightning took on the appearance of a colossal wolf. “But don’t forget: I’ve been learning his spells longer than anyone else. Defend yourself with everything you’ve got—this technique packs a wallop!”

“Tina!” I shouted.

“I’m ready when you are!” she immediately replied.

The next clash would be the last. I shifted to a two-handed grip on my sword and channeled all of my mana into it. My gaze met Caren’s—and we both charged!

My flaming sword and her massive lightning spear collided head-on.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” Caren demanded as I strained with exertion.

The ground cracked. Flames and lightning bolts shook the encircling barriers. But it wasn’t enough—she was going to overpower me!

“Lynne!” Tina cried. I could hear the concern in her voice.

You’re too kind for your own good.

I reshaped the flames around my blade into briars, tangling the lightning spear.

“That’s Allen’s trick!” Caren exclaimed.

“I... I’m growing too! I won’t stay a child forever!” I yelled. Then I let go of the hilt and leapt back. “Tina!”

“I’m ready!” Miss First Place responded, swinging down her rod. Four Imperial Ice Blizzards bore down on Caren at once!

“Tina, you overdid it. This is always the problem with you, Miss First Place.”

My grumbling carried across the snowy plain that half the courtyard had become in the wake of the blizzards. Thankfully, the barriers had held, even if the pond had frozen solid.

Under my breath, I added, “Although I’m impressed you learned to control *four* advanced spells on your own.”

“I... I did my best to control it,” my peer said, descending the icy mound that she’d ended up on top of. “Still, it looks like our tutor was right—persistence really *is* the key to strength.”

“Remind me, who was it who kept whining, ‘He’s playing favorites with you and Ellie; all I ever get assigned is basic spell control’?”

“Not me!”

“Why, you brazen— No, wait.”

Before we could fall into our usual routine, we turned our attention to the massive block of ice before us. A moment later, it was sliced to bits. My platinum-haired peer looked on admiringly as Caren emerged unscathed.

“Not bad, Tina, Lynne,” she said, sheathing her black dagger and clapping her hands. “Let’s call it there this morning.”

“Yes, ma’am!” we chorused in response.

No sooner had I sheathed my sword than fire flowers filled the air, melting the remaining chunks of ice. This was Lily’s magic. She was certainly capable, if nothing else.

“Lady Tina, Lady Lynne!” Ellie cried, rushing toward us. Her hug knocked the breath out of Tina and drew a squeal from me, and her eyes shone with admiration. “You were both *amazing*! I realized I’ll have to work so much

harder! Tomorrow, I'll be right there with you! Oh..."

We couldn't help laughing while a flustered Ellie begged us to stop.

I suppose a morning like this can be nice, once in a while.

Lady Stella and Lily walked up a little later. Felicia...was still in her swoon. Would she recover in time for breakfast?

"Freezing via large-scale ice magic," the future Duchess Howard mused gravely. "Our forces froze a path for their advance when we faced the empire. And lightning has the greatest penetrating power of any element. You could call that big spear Caren's sledgehammer. With all this..."

"Lady Stella?" I asked hesitantly. "Is something the matter?"

She snapped out of her daze, looking bashful. "I was only thinking," she replied. "Tina, Lynne, you've both been working very hard. I'd better keep up. Oh?"

"Hello there. I see you went at it hammer and tongs again this morning." My dear grandfather—duke emeritus and current head of our high command, Leen Leinster—entered the training ground. Unusually, he had a maid with him.

"Good morning, dear grandfather," I said. "And...Celebrim?"

The gorgeous maid gave me a gentle smile and a silent bob of her head. She had been our bodyguard the day before, but what was she doing in the southern capital?

"Good morning, girls," my dear grandfather said, producing a letter from his coat pocket and unfolding it. "I hate to be abrupt, but Lindsey and her frontline commanders have sent me a proposal. I'd like you to look it over."

We exchanged startled glances, perused the letter, and then stared at each other again. We didn't like where this was going.

"Duke Leen, is this set in stone?" Lady Stella asked slowly. "It says that they're considering a full-scale assault on the Atlasian capital."

"No, but I can't deny that the hard-liners are gaining traction."

"I'm against it. Capturing the capital and establishing communications to the

city of water are urgent objectives, but we can't storm that fortress without heavy losses," Lady Stella stated, dignified and unabashed. Tina's and Ellie's cheeks flushed, and Caren looked glad.

"I agree. But the league is in the grip of upheaval, and I suspect we're short on time. Therefore..."

Then, a realization hit me. The city of water was too distant for any griffin to make a round trip there. So anyone we sent would need to be capable of handling themselves in any situation.

The lovely maid spread her skirt in an elegant curtsy.

"I will dispatch Celebrim Ceynoth to the city of water," my dear grandfather concluded. "She will rendezvous with Allen and Lydia and return with information. That should help us to make better decisions."

Chapter 2

“Look, Cindy! We’ve got new books!”

“And new beds! They’re so soft and fluffy!”

“And look at these clothes.”

“They bought us notebooks and pens too. I’ll study my brains out. Someday, I want to be a Leinster maid like you and Saki.”

Happy children’s voices filled the yard of an orphanage on the outskirts of the southern capital. Just seeing their ear-to-ear grins raised my spirits. I, Cindy, was the Leinster Maid Corps’s *newly minted* number six.

“Really? You got new books?” I asked, crouching down amid the gentle shower of sunshine. “That’s amazing! And the beds and clothes too. Study hard, and I’m sure you’ll make it! Oh, your teacher is calling you.”

“Oh, we gotta go!”

“See you later, Cindy!”

“There’s so much I want to ask you about.”

“Teach us magic too.”

With a little reluctance, they ran off toward the young cat-clan woman who had just emerged from the building. She hadn’t been here when Saki—my fellow number six—and I had lived in this orphanage ourselves.

Warmed by the children’s enthusiasm and the late-spring sun, I sank onto a nearby wooden bench. I pushed up the brim of my straw hat, fussed with my milky hair and white dress, and let out a sigh. The sky was high and blue, heralding summer.

Idly, I gazed at the orphanage where I’d spent about a decade of my life. The brick building was a repurposed church. Ivy crept up its walls, and even the window glass showed its age. Yet it was suffused with a living warmth that the old me had never known. And so I found myself vividly recalling the day that I’d

been brought here: the lowering clouds, the cold rain...and the stench of the blood still clinging to my hands. If I'd met the current "Cindy" back then, I would never have believed she was me. At age seven, I had been the commonwealth's darkest—

"Cindy."

My mind snapped back to the orphanage's yard.

"Oh, Saki! Welcome back! How was the director?" I greeted my bird-clan colleague, who was fresh back from an interview. The gray plumage mingled with her black hair was as pretty as ever, and she looked charming in a hat and white dress that matched mine.

"Very well," my best friend replied, sitting beside me on the bench. "You should have come with me."

"I wasn't a good girl like you were," I said, keeping the twinge of guilt I felt out of my voice. "I wouldn't want to make things awkward."

"You do have a point there."

"What? That was your cue to stick up for me!"

We'd spent at least ten years together, but our banter hadn't changed since the day we'd met.

My best friend held a hand over her lovely hair as a late-spring gust ruffled it. Her gaze held nothing but tenderness as she watched the children at play.

"They all seem so happy."

"They told me they got all the books and notepaper they were lacking," I said. "And new beds too! One girl even said she wants to be a Leinster maid like us."

"That will be something to look forward to."

"It sure will."

Our conversation trailed off, but not in a bad way. As fellow orphans, we were practically family—although there was plenty of room to debate which of us was the "big sister"!



As we went on watching the children, the young bird-clan woman said, “Cindy.”

“Hm?”

“Doesn’t it seem strange to you?” Saki studied my face. It looked like she shared my doubts. “I know that the southern houses have been giving generously to orphanages, following the Leinsters’ example. But their donations still only cover so much.”

“We never went hungry when we were here, but we could almost never afford anything new, could we?” I agreed. “Maybe some real moneybags decided to chip in.”

“That *is* possible,” my friend admitted, but she didn’t sound convinced. If wealthy donors were as common as all that, we wouldn’t have spent our nights on hard, old beds, and we would have had plenty of pens and paper too. Our own donations since becoming maids wouldn’t even cover everyday meals. So where *had* these funds come from?

“Are you curious, Saki? Cindy?” asked a cheery voice.

We instinctively stood to attention and saluted.

“I-It’s good to see you, ma’am.”

“S-Simply lovely.”

There stood a petite woman with chestnut-brown hair—the Leinsters’ head maid, Anna, wearing the uniform of her office.

“It’s good to see you too. Fancy us running into each other on your day off,” she replied, all smiles as usual. Old memories sent a chill down my spine.

“But weren’t you in the royal capital, ma’am?” Saki asked before I got the chance.

Thank goodness for that. I always tensed up in front of Ms. Anna. She was the one who had brought me to the orphanage, for one thing.

“Lady Lydia brought Mr. Allen to summer in the southern capital again this year, so I came ahead to get things ready for them!” Ms. Anna replied jubilantly,

pressing her hands together and tittering.

Lady Lydia, the duke's eldest daughter, was one of the brightest hopes for the kingdom's future. At just *fifteen*, she had already earned the title "Lady of the Sword." Mr. Allen was a boy she'd met at the Royal Academy, and they'd been inseparable ever since, even spending the summer and winter vacations together. The other maids gossiped that he was an adopted member of the wolf clan from the eastern capital—as houseless as we were. Consensus in the corps was that Lady Lydia had feelings for him, but I'd never met him myself.

"Would you, um, mind telling us why things have improved so much at the orphanage?" I asked now that Saki had broken the ice.

A soft breeze blew as the head maid took a few steps forward, her gaze on the children listening to their teacher. "The facilities have improved and the children are better supplied thanks to a gift from a certain personage," she said. "Not only here, but in cities all throughout the south."

The young bird-clan woman and I looked at each other in silence. Could such a fairy-tale story be true?

"May we ask the donor's name?" Saki ventured.

"The name on the documents is 'Lady Lydia Leinster.'"

We gave a start.

A personal gift from Her Highness, not the Ducal House of Leinster?!

"Since enrolling in the Royal Academy, Lady Lydia has performed many feats of arms and received vast sums from the state coffers in compensation," Ms. Anna continued proudly. "Those became her capital, and she wishes the surpluses its management generates to support orphanages and children who wish to learn in both the southern and eastern capitals."

"But..."

"O-On *this* scale?"

When we'd first become maids, Lady Lydia had seemed to take no interest in outsiders. I'd been shocked when she'd set her sights on the Royal Academy. But going to the royal capital had changed her. I hardly recognized the vivacious

beauty who spoke to us far more often than ever before.

Anna shook her head. “Naturally, Her Highness’s rewards alone cannot cover the costs. That is merely what the documents say.”

“Then...”

“Who?”

The head maid drew herself up straighter before us. “Both the gifts to orphanages and the name under which they are made were Mr. Allen’s idea. He received rewards as well but donated the whole sum apart from a payment to his parents and the cost of his younger sister’s tuition and other necessary expenses. In his own words, he only needs ‘enough money to treat Lydia to the occasional tea and cake.’”

We shook, bowled over. A fifteen-year-old boy had given all this? And a houseless one, at that?

“Difficult though you doubtless find that to believe, it’s entirely true,” Ms. Anna said wryly, seeing us frozen in shock. “The mistress and master protested that they couldn’t allow him to go so far at first, but Mr. Allen insisted.”

“Ma’am,” Saki said slowly, just as the wind picked up, “what sort of gentleman is Mr. Allen?”

While we hurriedly clutched our hats and skirts, a fond look spread over the head maid’s face.

“A good one,” she answered. “A very good one. He’s kind, gentle, never stops improving himself, reaches out to help the weak, and never abandons them. Yet he judges himself as harshly as can be. Someday, I’m certain, his legend will be told throughout the continent. And above all...” She closed her eyes and put a hand on her heart. The look on her face left no doubt that she genuinely believed what she said. “Lady Lydia always, *always* looks so joyful when she’s by Mr. Allen’s side. The same Lady Lydia who suffered so much scorn as a ‘cursed child’ that she’d forgotten how to smile.”

We were speechless. The head maid had been watching over Lady Lydia since she was a baby. Every Leinster maid knew the strength of her feelings.

“In Lady Lydia’s infancy,” Ms. Anna continued, looking up at the blue sky, “while the mistress held her, she took my hand—a hand stained with death and blood and dishonor. I could never forget the shiver that ran through me then or her angelic smile. Mr. Allen is the person who restored that smile. And to me, without homeland or kin...”

Children’s shouts filled the orphanage’s yard. They were holding new books and toys. We couldn’t help grinning, and Ms. Anna smiled as well.

“That was the most valuable thing in the world,” she concluded. “Just as those children’s smiles are to you, Saki, Cindy. You needn’t overthink things—this is just that simple.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Saki said clearly beside me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I echoed hesitantly, feeling as if a weight had fallen on my chest. Unlike my best friend, I had blood on my hands. Raised as a lab rat in the commonwealth, I hadn’t even had a name until I’d come to the southern capital, where I’d become “Cindy”...and meeting Saki had saved my heart. So if...if we ever did meet Mr. Allen, and if we found ourselves in danger, it would be my duty to...



“Cindy. Wake up, Cindy.”

Someone shook me. I slowly opened my eyes and saw a maid with gray feathers in her beautiful black hair.

“Saki?” I called sleepily.

“Good morning,” my best friend said, folding her arms in annoyance. “It took you long enough to wake up.”

I sat up on the sturdy sofa where I’d been sleeping and looked around the room. Antique bookshelves and mana lamps lined all four walls, and any tables and chairs had been cleared away to make room for beds and couches. Late-summer sun streamed in from the inner courtyard beyond the large windows.

“Wait,” I mumbled. “This is, um...”

At last, my memory woke up. Of course. We were in the ruins on the city of

water's north side—a labyrinthine district in the process of being consumed by vegetation. Although the area had been abandoned centuries ago, the House of Nitti, as one of the first families in the League of Principalities, secretly continued to use this old, heptagonal mansion as an archive.

Two days ago, on Darknessday evening, we had been staying at the luxurious Water Dragon Inn. Then Marchese Carlyle Carnien and a church sorceress who called herself an “apostle” had attacked the hotel, their sights set on Deputy Nitti's second son, Niccolò. Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen had fought back, as had we. But after repelling the invaders, the two of them had faced a vampire claiming to be the legendary Crescent Moon in Seven Dragons Plaza. Lady Lydia had pushed her mana beyond its limits, leaving her exhausted. So, at the suggestion of the elder Nitti brother, Niche, and with Mr. Allen's approval, we had relocated the previous night. Help from the city's otter-clan population had facilitated the move.

This archive's location was known only to the Nittis and Toni Solevino—the proprietor of the Water Dragon Inn, who kept us supplied with food—and to a handful of beastfolk ferrymen. We would be safe from attack here for the time being. Even so, Saki and I would sleep in shifts until the mansion's security was on a firmer footing. Except that I'd apparently nodded off.

My bird-clan friend leaned in and pressed her forehead against mine.

“Saki?” I asked.

After a moment, she said, “Good. I don't feel a fever.”

I felt my chest tighten, and, partly inspired by my dream, I threw my arms around her. I just *loved* my little sister.

“No fever here!” I reassured her. “Sorry about that! Oh, do you want to take your turn to sleep now? You can use my lap as a pillow.”

“No, thank you.” Saki paused. “You really are all right, aren't you? You're not just putting a brave face on it?”

“I'm fine! Never been better!”

Saki was extremely sensitive to other people's feelings, and I didn't want to worry her.

“I finished positioning birds and setting detection spells,” my little sister reported, now looking every bit the Leinster Maid Corps’s number six. “But someone is jamming magical communication over this whole area, and I can’t contact the southern capital. Cindy, I assume you know our duty.”

“Yup.” I nodded emphatically. We’d sworn on that summer day. “We’ll keep Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, and little Atra safe, come hell or high water.”

“I’m certain we have what it takes. And if worse comes to worst...” Saki faltered, then shook her head. “No, forget I said anything.”

I pretended to, but I knew what she meant.

“Now, let’s get going,” she continued. “We need to check whether the you-know-what works.”

“You bet we do!” I responded cheerily, standing up and buckling on a pair of inelegant daggers from an end table. As my best friend and little sister made for the door, I whispered at her back, “Don’t worry. I promise I’ll protect Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, Atra, you, and all the other maids—even if it kills me.”

“Cindy? Did you say something?” she asked, turning back. She was still the same kind girl whom I’d met all those years ago.

“Nope! Not a thing!” I answered, pressing my hands together. “Come on! What are we waiting for? We’re maids, so it’s time we acted like it!”



“I searched the archive for leads, but I couldn’t find a mention of a ‘Cornerstone’ in any book more recent than the War of the Dark Lord. I dimly recall my grandfather telling me that it ‘lies beneath the Old Temple,’ but that’s all. I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to help, Allen.”

The girlishly slender, pale-blue-haired boy—Niccolò Nitti—hung his head and slumped in his chair. Tuna seemed equally distressed in her aqua maid uniform.

I stroked the fox cub sleeping soundly in a box on the sturdy office desk—Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals—as I replied, “Not at all, Niccolò. I’m most grateful. I hate to ask, but would you mind keeping up the search? Please look for anything about vampires or dragons as well.”

“O-Of course! I’ll research anything you like. No one’s ever turned to me for help like this before, so I couldn’t be happier!” Niccolò said, cheeks flushing with enthusiasm. He was a good kid.

I pondered, surveying the room. Apart from the desk and bookshelves, it held a sofa, a bed, an end table, and several chairs.

“You know,” I said at last, “I might be able to help you search the archive for —”

An ostentatious clearing of the throat cut my suggestion short. A lovely, scarlet-haired young woman had just moved onto the sofa so that I couldn’t miss seeing her, and her glare meant, “No. Never. Absolutely not!”

Yes, Your Highness.

“Well then, Niccolò, I’ll see you again at dinnertime,” I said. “Tuna, if he tries to overwork himself, put him to bed by any means necessary.”

“Yes, sir. You may depend upon it!” the plucky part-elven girl responded vigorously.

“A-Allen?! Not you too, Tuna,” the boy grumbled. Nevertheless, he bowed to me on his way out of the room.

Once the heavy door swung shut, I picked up an old tome from the desk. *Dragons, Devils, and Vampires*. The city’s Grand Library also had a copy.

“Now,” I murmured, “on to the next—”

“You need a break too!” the young woman snapped, jabbing her finger at me. She had sidled up to me as soon as Niccolò and Tuna had left the room.

Lydia Leinster, the albatross around my neck, was dressed for swordplay, and her short scarlet hair was as gorgeous as the rest of her. As the eldest daughter of Duke Leinster, holder of one of the kingdom’s Four Great Dukedoms and ruler of the south, she was a genuine lady, entitled to the style “Highness.” So where were her manners? Not a question I would ever ask out loud, of course.

“But you see, Lydia—”

“I won’t tolerate back talk,” she interrupted again. “You’ve had your nose buried in books all day. What’s your name while you’re in the city of water? You

wrote it in the hotel registry, remember?”

“Allen Alvern,” I admitted.

“And what’s mine?” Lydia smirked as she took a seat on the desk. She enjoyed watching me squirm.

“All right. I’ll take a break,” I conceded, raising my hands in surrender.

“You should have said that in the first place. Now, what’s my name?”

“Lady Lydia Leinster, may I suggest that assuming the Hero’s surname would be blasphemous?”

“You wrote it first!” She flared up, then grumbled, “What was wrong with ‘Leinster’? Oaf. Meanie. Bully.”

“We *are* technically in enemy territory. You need to take it easy and recover your strength after that battle.”

“You’re as worn-out as I am!”

Our verbal sparring continued as we moved to the room’s kitchenette. I set a metal kettle of water on a fire spellstone.

“Mm.” Lydia passed me a glass jar of tea leaves.

“Thank you,” I replied. Niche had given us permission—via an intermediary—to use anything in the house as we pleased. I was more than happy to take advantage of his generosity.

While we waited for the water to boil, I took another look around the room. “What a library...” I murmured, unable to suppress my admiration.

The Nittis’ secret archive truly was magnificent. Although this building in the heart of the old city seemed to have begun as a heptagon, repeated renovations had tacked plazas and other buildings onto its sides. The original shape might now survive only in the gorgeous inner courtyard. Bookshelves occupied half or more of every room, including the walls of this one. The garden’s layout reminded me of the Howards’ greenhouse in the northern capital and the place where Linaria had lived with Atra. Could there be a connection?

Lydia folded her arms, looking resentful. “What was Niche Nitti thinking, offering this place to a bookworm like you?” she demanded. “I’d say I have every right to slice him up, incinerate him, and then slice some more.”

“Well, I wouldn’t,” I said. “We ought to thank him for providing such a well-concealed hideaway. With magical communications jammed throughout the city, we’re cut off behind enemy lines. I doubt a single sorcerer is responsible, but even a group would need to be quite skilled to keep this up. So our best option is to lie low until we recover.”

“I know all that!” Her Highness fumed, pouting as she passed me the teapot. She seemed put out that I’d spent my day on books and not on her. It couldn’t help that Atra had spent the whole time asleep in her fox form.

I stopped the spellstone, poured the boiled water into the pot, and then carried it out into the courtyard, where I deposited it on a nearby circular table. Gardeners had been at work here, keeping the plants from running wild, and a burbling brook soothed my mind. According to Paolo Solevino—who had once been the Nittis’ finest spy, for all that he now ran a hotel—the courtyard may have once boasted a glass roof. Fascinating, if true—it put me even more in mind of other gardens.

“Don’t go off without me,” Lydia grouched as she strode up and set two cups on the table. I poured hot water into both to warm them, then sank onto a couch.

“Come on, Lydia,” I said, patting the seat next to me.

Her scarlet hair rose slightly on a surge of mana, and a blush tinged her cheeks. Nevertheless, she folded her arms and refused to look at me. “Humph! I-If you think you can earn my forgiveness that easily, y-you’ve got another think coming!”

“Really? Well, I won’t force you to join me.”

With a spell, I levitated the sleeping Atra’s basket out of the room. Our battle with the dread vampiress must have unnerved her, because she’d taken to waking up whenever we weren’t with her. I lowered the basket onto the end of the couch, and the curled-up fox cub wagged her tail drowsily.

“Honestly. That was your cue to make concessions.” Miffed as Lydia sounded, she still sat down beside me and leaned her shoulder against mine. Then came a stream of rapid-fire invective. “Coward. You’ll get yourself stabbed in a dark alley one of these days.”



“Not that I’ve done anything to deserve it,” I said, emptying the cups and starting to pour richly fragrant black tea for two.

“Yes, you have. You spoil Tiny! And don’t forget that ring! Or that bracelet!”

“I can’t argue about the ring and bracelet, but I wouldn’t say I give Tina special treatment. Although between Frigid Crane and Duchess Rosa’s case, I do devote time to her.”

“Most people would call that playing favorites!”

I handed Lydia her teacup, then filled mine. The bracelet that Lily had fastened on my right wrist in the eastern capital caught the light, as did the ring that a witch had put on the third finger of the same hand.

“Tiny” seemed to be Lydia’s nickname for Lady Tina Howard, one of the girls I was tutoring. The great elemental Frigid Crane resided within her, and before meeting me, she’d been known as her family’s “cursed child” due to her complete inability to use magic. She was also the second daughter of Duke Howard, holder of one of the Four Great Dukedoms and guardian of the north. At the moment, she ought to have been in the eastern capital with my other students: her elder sister, Stella; the heir to the renowned Walker line, Ellie; and Lydia’s younger sister, Lynne.

I took a sip of my tea, then attempted to reason with the scarlet-haired beauty. “Tina is the reason I became a private tutor in the first place, remember? And I *must* find a way to free Frigid Crane. That concerns your Blazing Qilin too.”

Lydia looked away. “I should never have left you alone in the royal capital after your court sorcerer exam,” she spat, still unconvinced. “Look what happened the minute I took my eyes off you. I might make a *very* generous exception for Lynne and Caren, but Tiny, Ellie, Stella, and Felicia? And now Lily on top of that?! Perhaps this calls for some discipline.”

“Lydia.” I wrapped my hands around the shoulders of the noblewoman—whose birthday was next Fireday—and pulled her close, bringing our faces together. Her temperature was rising fast. “Tina is just like you and me, in a way. I may not know the pain that being branded ‘cursed children’ put you

through, but I appreciate how deeply being scorned and ostracized can wound a heart. What do you think would have become of her if I hadn't failed my court sorcerer exam?"

Lydia didn't answer. We'd learned about cursed children from Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, who had served as the legendary Allen the Shooting Star's lieutenant two hundred years ago in the War of the Dark Lord. According to her, they either died by age twenty or became devils and turned against mankind. And the ducal houses were the kingdom's swords and shields. The choice facing them must have seemed impossible.

I opened my eyes and wiped the tears from Lydia's. "I know how much you like Tina. I wouldn't say this otherwise."

"You're right," she said slowly. "I'm sorry, Allen. Thank you for setting me straight."

A frank apology. My lady was wise as well as kind.

We stayed huddled like that for a while longer, sipping our tea. The wind rustled the branches, and seabirds were flying north.

"Lydia," I said casually, "would you humor me while I get my thoughts in order?"

The young woman who had finished her tea and moved on to fiddling with my bracelet answered only "Mm."

"First, the kingdom. The Leinsters, in particular," I began, drawing a labeled map in midair—partly for magic practice. "The League of Principalities took advantage of the Algren rebellion to invade, plotting to recapture the former principalities of Etna and Zana. But they were halted on the Avasiek Plain—thanks in part to a certain duke's daughter. No more taboo spells, by the way."

"It was your fault. I swear I won't let you off the hook next time," Lydia grumbled. She sounded like she meant it, but I also caught a note of fear in her voice.

"Yes, you're right. Sorry," I said, touching her scarlet hair.

Lydia shifted, burying her face in my chest. "Unbelievable." She then looked

up with eyes that said, “Stroke me.” Her nerves had been a bit shaky since the rebellion, and they apparently needed soothing.

“After the Battle of Avasiek, the armies of Atlas and Bazel retreated to their capitals,” I continued, slowly stroking her hair. “And going by what Niche said, both marchesi abandoned their people and fled to the city of water. I suppose they wanted to be here when the Committee of Thirteen met.”

“Felicia’s schemes fractured their alliance. We’ll be able to conquer both eventually,” Lydia interjected coldly.

She’s right: we can beat them. The problem is time.

“Bazel lacks defensible strongholds, but the Atlasian capital has the Fortress of Seven Towers to guard it. Capturing that will take time, although how much depends on who the marchese left in command,” I said. “Next, there’s us. I got a summons from the royal capital, and the next thing I knew, a bunch of old-guard nobles had rallied behind Crown Prince John to make demands I could never accept. One thing led to another, and we fled to the city of water, where —”

“You became our diplomatic point of contact,” Lydia interrupted. “It will be all over the official documents once the dust settles.” She laughed, running her fingers down the back of my neck. For a moment, I imagined how a helpless mouse must feel when in a predator’s sights.

In the basket, Atra’s ears twitched.

“Where Doge Pirro Pisani approached us while we were out sightseeing,” I pressed on. “He was sounding out peace with the Leinsters, and I drew up my idea of what the terms might be for him. Specifically—”

“The league will cede the unpopulated Avasiek Plain and open a sea route to the city of water, in the name of ‘enlivening trade between our nations.’ I’m sure my grandfather and Felicia had something harsher in mind, but they’ll keep the territorial claims to a minimum if you say so. The league will find that easy to swallow, since they were worried about losing all of both principalities in a worst-case scenario. A pragmatic proposal if I’ve ever heard one. Well? Am I right?”

“I’m no match for you.”

Seizing Avasiek would drive a wedge between Atlas and Bazel. And since Bazel was closer to the southern capital than to the city of water, it would eventually fall into our laps like a ripened grape. Not that I expected the reality to play out quite so smoothly.

Lydia’s lovely face pressed close to mine. She put a finger to my lips and said, with a bewitching smile, “But it all fell apart.”

She was right. As things stood, peace between the League of Principalities and the Duchy of Leinster wouldn’t come anytime soon. It had hinged on Doge Pisani visiting the southern capital himself.

“One spark is all it will take to ignite conflict between the league’s hawks and doves now,” I mused, changing the colors of my map. “Scuffles are already breaking out all over the city. The pro-war faction has brought in troops by the hundreds, while Rondoiro and the other southern marchesi who favor peace are mustering armies in their own domains. According to Niche, the loss of magical communications forced the doge to abruptly cancel his trip to the southern capital. The Committee of Thirteen convenes tomorrow, and the outcome might split the city in two.”

“Doge Pisani, Deputy Nitti, and four southern marchesi are doves. All five northern marchesi are hawks, and so are Carnien and Folonto from the south. In terms of numbers, we’re at a disadvantage. But they aren’t the problem.” Lydia reached out and touched my cheek, the light of battle in her eyes. “That church apostle is. And Crescent Moon—Alicia Coalfield.”

Even Lydia and I together had been no match for that fearsome vampiress. As a lieutenant to Allen the Shooting Star, Crescent Moon was legendary for her magical swordplay, but she had barely even bothered to draw her blade. I shuddered, recalling the overwhelming force Alicia had brought to bear under the crimson moon. Her sinister black sword had demolished the indestructible Seven Dragons Plaza. And although she’d left for the south, I had no doubt we would cross paths again soon.

And she wasn’t alone. An apostle was in the city with a band of church inquisitors, all ready to lay down their lives without hesitation for their

enigmatic leader, the self-proclaimed Saint. Did we stand any chance of winning?

Feeling nervous, I hugged the scarlet-haired noblewoman's left shoulder. Lydia gave a start but said nothing.

"I read an old edition of *The Peerage* from the archive. One of those almanacs that lists noble houses and sketches their histories. I couldn't find records of them in the eastern, royal, or southern capitals, but the Coalfields are an extinct line from the west of the kingdom—a cadet branch of the Earls of Coalheart, apparently," I said, thin lines beginning to connect dots of seemingly unrelated fact. "And the Coalhearts were supposedly the birth family of Tina and Stella's late mother, Duchess Rosa. But Anna reported signs of a royal cover-up, and Gerard called Tina 'the Etherheart girl.'"

"So Crescent Moon might be linked to Tiny's mom. And to the awful witch who put that ring on your finger." Lydia shifted her full weight onto my lap and leaned against me. With an impish look, she said, "So, what now?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you shouldn't answer a question with a question." She giggled, running her fingers through my hair.

I let her have her way with me as I replied, "Well, Tina and Stella are my dear students, and Duke Walter asked me to investigate Duchess Rosa's death as well. Most importantly, I can't leave Alicia to her own devices."

"Humph. You sure have a soft spot for Tiny and Stella. Are you *that* attached to your reputation for 'having a natural way with young ladies'?"

"Y-You have me all wrong!" I protested, unable to bear the slander.

"No, it's the simple truth!" Lydia countered swiftly.

I groaned, and she gloated. This noblewoman always got the better of me in the end.

I dispelled my map, helped Lydia to her feet, and stood myself before stating my conclusion. "To begin with, I'd like to get in touch with the southern capital."

“Good idea. My grandmother will storm the capital of Atlas when she hears this place is in chaos.”

“Storm that impregnable fortress? As the author of a peace plan, I’d like to avoid that,” I said slowly, recalling a drawing of the Fortress of Seven Towers I’d seen at the university. The Leinsters could doubtless take it—but at a terrible cost. I needed to do something about that, somehow. But what *could* I do in this—

My conversation partner gently wrapped her arms around me.

“Lydia?”

“It’ll be all right.”

No matter how often I saw her, I never got over her beauty.

“I’m at your side, and you’re at mine,” she murmured, touching her forehead to mine. “So nothing in the world can stop us. Am I wrong?”

“Your Highness speaks truly,” I admitted.

“No titles!”

We both burst out laughing at this well-worn banter.

Right. With her, I feel like I can do anything.

The sleeping fox cub turned over in her basket.

“I’d like to avoid running into Alicia right now,” I said. “Your mana is still recovering, for one thing. Unless we find a solution in the meantime, we don’t have a prayer.”

“That’s not— Well, you have a point,” Lydia conceded. We’d given everything we had that night and still fallen short. If we weren’t at our best, another loss was guaranteed.

“So”—I winked—“I’d like to hit the books a little more in search of a clue.”

“Your idea of ‘a little’ is anything but!” Lydia pouted and fished her watch out of her pocket. I suddenly realized that the sun was setting. “Oh, would you look at the time. I’ll change clothes, then start making dinner. And I assume you’ll join me.”



“M-Mr. Allen.”

“Um...”

“We’re quite capable of cooking.”

I glanced across the kitchen at the trio of baffled maids and said, “Would you please fetch me that cut of fish? And may I trouble you to prepare plates and bread as well?”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Each maid scrambled to her station.

I plopped butter into two frying pans, then laid the fish in one and an accompaniment of vegetables in the other. The aroma whetted my appetite and made Atra twitch her nose in her basket. One of our local acquaintances, Suzu of the otter clan, had brought us the fresh ingredients. She was doubtless acting on Paolo’s instructions, but the sign of goodwill still gladdened my heart.

“L-Lady Lydia, please,” a simple-looking maid begged on behalf of her colleagues. “At least let us make the soup.”

The lady in question stood beside me in pale-scarlet casual wear and an apron with a design of two little birds on it. “I needed a change of pace,” she said kindly, stirring her soup. “Would you see to the salad?”

“Y-Yes, my lady! Consider it done!” the maids chorused, their eyes lighting up as they saluted and then set about chopping vegetables.

I served slices of grilled fish onto plates the maids had set out for me and drizzled them with sauce. Then I broke off a piece with a fork and called, “Lydia” before popping the morsel into the young woman’s mouth.

“Mmm.”

The maids froze, but the soon-to-be birthday girl took no notice. She cocked her head and declared, “It needs another dash of white wine.”

“Coming right up.” I splashed white wine into the frying pan, fine-tuning the flavor.

While the maids buzzed, Lydia held out a spoon and said, “Try the soup.” Her

neck flushed slightly, and her necklace chain glinted.

I gulped it down obediently—she would sulk otherwise. “Maybe a pinch of salt?”

“Yes, I thought so too,” she answered and added the seasoning.

Wait. Did she already taste it herself?

The noblewoman chuckled and broke into song as commotion spread among the maids.

“What?” I finally demanded.

The scarlet-haired beauty put a finger to her lips and revealed the secret. “I got your mother to teach me how you like your food while we were out east. I’ve upped my game since our time in the royal capital!”

“Mom,” I sighed, raising a hand to my forehead. Knowing her, she might be teaching Ellie, Lily, and Stella too. Caren would have some choice words if she found out.

Our audience of maids murmured as if in prayer.

“I... I can’t go on.”

“Don’t give in! Endure!”

“Th-The girls in the royal and southern capitals told me about this.”

“It’s cleansing my heart.”

“That fish and that soup both look scrumptious.”

Leinster maids were always true to form.

I plated the fully cooked fish and vegetables just as two new maids entered, one bird-clan and one human. The corps’s number sixes, Saki and Cindy, surveyed their subordinates and issued orders.

“Serve those dishes before this wonderful cooking gets cold.”

“Don’t interrupt their sugary-sweet alone time! She watches best who watches from afar! Isn’t that right, girls?”

“Certainly!” the lesser maids chorused, nodding in agreement with their lively

ringleader.

Lydia glared. “Cindy? And the rest of you?”

“This food won’t serve itself!” the milky-haired maid cried and began apportioning soup.

The others set to work with a hasty “B-Begging your pardon!”

I suppressed a chuckle and turned to the bird-clan maid. “I hate to bother you, Saki, but would you carry Atra’s basket for me?”

“C-Certainly, sir!” Saki responded, nervously grasping the basket and lifting it slowly so as not to wake its occupant. But the slumbering fox cub opened her eyes and wagged her tail for joy as she put her paws on her basket’s rim.

“Th-That’s dangerous,” Saki chided Atra, although she couldn’t suppress a smile as they left the kitchen. “S-Settle down, now. Please?”

Lydia tugged on my left sleeve. “What are we waiting for?”

“Nothing I know of,” I replied.

In our room, we found a large table arrayed with food and a waiting line of maids. Niccolò and Tuna seemed at a loss for something to do. Even Cindy was there—presumably by magic, since I’d just seen her dishing up soup.

Saki was the odd woman out, still grappling with the drowsy fox cub. “M-Miss Atra?” I heard her say. “What? A hug? B-But that wouldn’t be...”

“Lydia,” I said.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman, who had put away her apron, raised her left hand. All eyes turned to her. She cut a dignified figure—the perfect model of a duke’s daughter—as she said, “Thank you all. We don’t know what the future holds, but we won’t have the strength to face it if we don’t eat. So let’s do just that. Go on. Take your seats.”

“Yes, Lady Lydia!” The maids sat down, pressed their hands together, and tucked in. Noise filled the room.

Niccolò gave me a hesitant look, so I returned an encouraging one. I wanted

him to eat while the food was hot.

Once Lydia and I took our own seats, side by side, I could hear the other diners exclaiming.

“This fish is to die for!”

“And the soup is first-rate.”

“To think that Lady Lydia...”

“Don’t cry. You’ll set me off too.”

“Ah... My fatigue’s just melting away.”

“What fascinating seasoning, Tuna! Do you think this is a taste of the kingdom?”

“Don Niccolò, you got some on your mouth. Still, it’s certainly delicious.”

The generally positive reception lifted my spirits. Even natives of the city of water seemed to find something to like in the kingdom’s cuisine. I would have to speak with Felicia about exporting ingredients and eventually—

I felt Lydia’s gaze on me.

“You were getting weird ideas again, weren’t you?” she demanded.

“No,” I answered stiffly, “nothing of the sort.”

“Oh, really? Well, not that it matters.”

I watched her as we ate, puzzled that she’d given in so easily. Then two maids joined us.

“Lady Lydia, we have a report,” Saki said, cradling Atra in her arms.

“Everything’s ready!” Cindy chimed in.

What’s “everything”? Ready for what?

Her Highness wiped her mouth on a handkerchief. “I see,” she murmured. “Thank you.”

“All in a maid’s work.”

“Whatever you need, just say the word!”

Atra looked at me and gave a wheedling yip. I reached out to take her from Saki, and she soon curled up on my lap. The watching maids beamed.

Once I'd finished dinner, I addressed the prim-faced noblewoman sipping tea beside me. "Lydia, I'm going to sneak in a little more research before—"

"Please wait, Mr. Allen," Saki interjected.

Cindy added a bright "You're not going anywhere!"

I petted Atra to escape the bad feeling creeping over me.

"As Don Niche Nitti informed us through his messenger," the lovely bird-clan maid continued, "this building sits on a hot spring."

"Pardon? A hot spring?" I looked to Niccolò.

"Th-That's right," he said, nodding. "O-One of my ancestors was reportedly quite fond of baths and had this house built over a natural spring."

"Last night, we were still inspecting the premises, but I see no objection to availing ourselves tonight," Saki added without batting an eye. Cindy looked delighted.

Lydia set her cup on the table. "A soak will do wonders for our fatigue," she said. "Men and women separately, of course. Isn't that a letdown?"

I groaned. I had entertained the thought for a moment, and she'd seen through me.

She's been withholding information for this! And Niche, don't think I'll forget this, because I won't.

I exhaled, then turned to the blue-haired boy and said, "Would you care to join me, Niccolò? Seeing as we're the only men here."



"Ooh!" I exclaimed. "Now this is something!"

The semicircular bathing room surpassed my wildest expectations, with a semi-open design that let the moon and stars shine through where a roof had once been. I even spied a long-tailed comet. The builders seemed to have repurposed a ruin as they'd found it, lending the space a distinctive air.

As I descended the stairs into pale steam, I saw that the spring flowed into the tubs through a stone spout in the likeness of a dragon's mouth. A marble wall divided the men's and women's baths, although it seemed to be open at the top. Beyond a crumbled wall lay the inky darkness of the Grand Canal. The view must have been spectacular in the old city's heyday.

"This is, er, supposed to be the most expensive room in the whole building," Niccolò offered, bashfully following behind me.

"I think your ancestors and I would get along," I said, reflecting that the Howards had also put considerable effort into their baths in the northern capital. Both numbered among the continent's most prominent families, so tracing their lineages might reveal a connection.

I was washing myself with the free-flowing water when Lydia called from the other side of the wall, "Hey! Lend me your soap!"

"Didn't you bring your own?" I asked.

"I forgot!" she shot back immediately. "Now, hurry up!"

"Your Highness makes a lot of demands." Still, I'd expected something like this, so I approached the wall and tossed an unused bar to the other side.

"A-Atra!" Tuna cried. "You mustn't chase the soap!"

"And shampoo too!" Lydia added.

"Yes, yes." I ensorcelled a glass bottle and levitated it over the wall.

"You could at least *act* flustered about that one!" she whined, throwing in a sharp click of her tongue.

"I figured you'd ask! Wash Atra for me, would you?"

"I know." She paused. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

I sensed Lydia moving away from the wall.

"Niccolò?" I asked. "Is something the matter?" The blue-haired boy was staring at me in silence.

Clouds of concealing vapor rose where the hot spring met the seawater

added to adjust the bath's temperature.

"Well," Niccolò replied, "I was just thinking that you and Lydia really are quite, er, friendly."

"We're stuck with each other," I said. "So, do you have questions for me?"

"Oh, er, well..." The boy lowered his gaze, and his words trailed off.

I'd finished washing my hair and body, so I left him with a "Whenever you're ready" and moved to the tub. I must have built up more fatigue than I'd realized, because I couldn't suppress a sigh as I slowly sank into the hot bathwater.

Niccolò soon joined me, and after a short wait, he worked up the courage to say, "I know this is hardly a polite thing to ask, but Lydia is a lady of the Ducal House of Leinster, isn't she? The Wainwright Kingdom's dukes enjoy a status that other nations reserve for royalty. So I...find it hard to believe that you're able to act alongside one of their daughters."

"Ah." I saw how our arrangement might look strange. Many in the kingdom thought so too, even if they no longer said it to my face. "It's a long story, and too many things are tangled up in it for a simple explanation."

A burst of laughter told me that the women had hit it off as well.

"But we've been forging ahead together for a while now," I continued. "Lydia's a genuine prodigy, so I've had my work cut out for me keeping up with her, but I think I've grown as a result."

"You're strong," Niccolò said slowly. Then he balled up his little fists and fumed, "I was born a Nitti, but I can't work up the courage to move forward. I have mana, but I'm no good at spellcasting, and my swordplay never improves because my fear takes over."

I listened quietly. Few people could lay claim to pedigree, talent, and the temperament to make the most of them.

"So my father has no hopes for me, and neither does my brother. I want to go to the Royal Academy, but I can't even bring myself to ask. Please, tell me," he begged, desperate even as he put himself down. "How... How can I become

strong like you?”

“That’s a tricky question.”

Every so often, little lights flitted through the darkened old city.

Elementals? No, they couldn’t be.

“First,” I said, “I’m not strong. My mana is below average. I can’t cast advanced spells, and I’m no match for Lydia with a sword either.”

“But... But...” Niccolò’s voice shook.

The Nittis numbered among the city of water’s most illustrious houses. According to *The Peerage*, they were even related to the principes who had once ruled the whole league. No wonder this boy had worried in secret.

“If I have anything to be proud of,” I confessed, gazing up at the stars, “it’s that I never stopped walking.”

“‘Never stopped walking’?” Niccolò echoed.

“Yes. Let me show you an example.” I clenched my hand, and a bit of bathwater floated into the air, where it transformed into delicate flowers of fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, light, and darkness. “I’ve been practicing this exercise for magical control since I was little. Needless to say, I couldn’t even shape one flower to begin with.”

Niccolò was stunned. Then, after a moment, he haltingly said, “What grimoire did you find it in?” I got that question a lot.

“I take what I find in basic magic textbooks and break it down in my own way.” I waved my hand, and all eight flowers vanished into thin air. Then I faced the boy, raised both hands, and said, “You just saw the fruits of ten-odd years of practice.”

Niccolò wilted silently. But even as he sank, I heard Atra yipping happily. She, at least, seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Each step a genius takes clears far more ground than one of mine,” I added, conjuring a little cat from the bath and making it walk across the water’s surface. “That’s no excuse for me to stop trying, though. I think it comes down to ‘do or don’t’ in the end. But you look unconvinced.”

The boy looked up gravely, his pale-blue hair wet, and answered, “No. Between the control you just demonstrated and the way you fought the other day, even a novice like me can see how masterful your technique is. You say that I can do it, but I find that hard to believe.”

“Then I’ll give you another example. Let me tell you about one of my university underclassmen,” I proposed with an exaggerated shrug, thinking ruefully that I might be about to incur some ire. Teto Tijerina liked to wear witch hats and call herself “normal”—a descriptor that none of the professor’s students but me had a right to. “When she joined the department, she said the same thing you just did. So I made her practice that exercise every day for a year.”

Niccolò went wide-eyed.

“As a result, she learned my spell-control tricks, such as they are—although she loses her temper every time I tell this story. ‘Stop hiding behind me, Allen! And watch whose control you call mine equal to!’”

The boy lowered his eyes, looking torn.

Lydia and Tuna laughed again. I felt glad that they seemed to be making friends.

“Try taking one step to start with,” I told Niccolò as I rose from the tub. “You and Tuna together. I think your world will suddenly seem a whole lot bigger once you do.”

“Yes. Yes, you’re right. Thank you.” Niccolò Nitti nodded vigorously, determination in his eyes.

Niccolò and I discussed all sorts of things while we waited for the ladies to finish their bath. Linguistics seemed to be his specialty, and he could even more or less decipher Old Imperial—notorious for its impenetrability. I suspected he also had a scholarly bent if he’d made it through the first volume of *The Secret History of the War of the Dark Lord*. He and Teto were birds of a feather.

Tuna was the first to emerge, wearing a cape over her nightgown and stammering, “H-How could I have kept you waiting?”

“Tuna!” Niccolò cried, racing over to her like an enthusiastic dog. “I... I’m going to try my best!”

The part-elven beauty gave her young master a quizzical look, then broke into a smile. “Of course, Don Niccolò. And I’ll be right beside you.”

“What did you say *this* time?” Lydia demanded, emerging dressed in her nightgown. She carried Atra snug in her basket, which I took from her.

“We spoke man-to-man,” I replied, petting the fox cub’s delightfully fluffy head. “My lips are sealed.”

“Oh, really?” Lydia pressed closer, her gaze locked on my hand.

“What did *you* talk about?” I asked, slightly flustered to smell my same soap and shampoo on her.

“We spoke woman-to-woman. My lips are sealed.”

I see. So that’s how she wants to play it.

I looked down the hall after the retreating pair. “Tuna has nothing to worry about. Niccolò is Niche’s brother. He wouldn’t make her unhappy.”

Lydia gave me a half-lidded glare and wordlessly started nipping at my left arm.

“Ow!” I yelled. “No biting!”

“Then stop being too perceptive for your own good!” she snapped.

“What’s wrong with that?!”

I took a break from fooling around to wave at Saki and Cindy, who had been standing guard in the corridor. “Please make sure everyone gets a turn,” I said. “The baths are lovely.”



I returned with Lydia to our room and transferred Atra from her basket to the bed. The fox cub burrowed under the covers and twitched her ears with pleasure. While I set my pocket watch on the bedside table, I heard the patter of running feet, followed by an “Mm!” from behind me.

“Yes, yes,” I said.

“Only one ‘yes,’” Lydia whined from her seat on the couch. Tiredness must have been making her needy.

I circled around behind her and started brushing her short scarlet hair. A peaceful silence followed.

“Lydia,” I said at last, “as I mentioned earlier, I’d like to sneak in a bit more reading before bed.”

“No.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No!” the noblewoman repeated, turning to look at me like a sulking child. “You say ‘a bit,’ but you’ll go on reading into the dead of night. You ought to listen to me once in a while.”

“I think I do,” I demurred, scratching my cheek. I indulged her whims as much as Caren’s, didn’t I?

The young woman flopped over on the couch, hugging a pillow, and commenced flailing. “You don’t! And you haven’t baked me any treats yet!”

I sighed, stowed the brush in a cloth bag, and moved to the kitchenette. This called for herbal tea.

Lydia scrambled to her feet and hurried after me. “Allen?” she asked weakly, pinching the hem of my shirt. “Are you mad?”

I looked over my shoulder and found Lydia looking worriedly up at me, clutching the necklace I’d given her in her right hand. “Of course not,” I said, shaking my head with a forced smile. “Not at all.”

“But you left!” she whined, hugging my waist.

I hesitated. “I’d rather not spell it out.”

“Do it anyway, or I won’t understand!”

I added the herbs to the teapot with deliberate slowness. Lydia refused to take her eyes off me.

At last, I muttered, “Your birthday.”

“My birthday?” Her Highness echoed like a child.

Oh, for the love of...!

“I want to clear up all this trouble before next Fireday!” I blurted out, breaking eye contact. “We can’t just waltz into the Old Temple while there’s a war on!”

I wasn’t going to tell her.

My whole body burned under an onslaught of embarrassment.

After a few moments, Lydia released my waist and murmured, “Well now.” When I moved the kettle onto a fire spellstone and turned around, she wore a demure smile. “So you want to bring peace to the city of water, foil the Church of the Holy Spirit, and even take down Crescent Moon *for me*? Did I get that right?”

I couldn’t talk my way out of this one, so I answered honestly, “Yes. Is that a problem?”

Lydia reeled and blushed red as an apple. Then she mumbled, “N-Not really” and flung herself into bed. After burrowing under the covers, she set about flailing her legs and letting out a series of embarrassed moans.

“You’ll wake Atra,” I said.

The scarlet-haired young woman poked her head out, the fox cub sound asleep in her arms.

I picked up *Dragons, Devils, and Vampires* and removed Saki’s handmade bookmark to continue reading. It was apparently a product of the orphanage where she’d grown up. Lydia giggled as she watched me, lying face down on the bed and stroking Atra.

“What is it now?” I asked as I perused the antique prose. Nothing I read struck me as a new discovery.

“The vampire’s most fearsome attribute is the physical prowess born of its overwhelming mana.”

“The vampire’s sorcerous capacity for self-enhancement far outstrips that of any mortal. It also possesses lightning reflexes and powers of regeneration, and its mana swells on moonlit nights. Weaknesses, it has none. The Hero and the

Dark Lord alone may be considered its natural enemies.”

“Although the progenitor of the breed is said to have sucked blood, a reputation that persists, the modern vampire feeds on mana.”

Was this all?

“Hm? Not a thing,” Lydia answered in a singsong.

“Oh.” The kettle had boiled, so I turned off the spellstone and added hot water to the teapot.

Just then, a piece of notepaper fell from the book’s pages—too new to belong in such an ancient tome. I picked it up and saw at a glance that it was written in Old Imperial. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, it used a script exclusive to the upper nobility. I could only decipher bits of it. Still, something about the handwriting seemed familiar, while the clumsy penmanship suggested a relatively young writer. The phrases I could just barely be sure of read...

“‘Silver-snow,’ ‘the White Saint,’ and ‘the Black Saint’?”

Linaria had mentioned the former—a compound of water, wind, light, and darkness. I’d theorized that this was the true element of ice and used up all the power in my enchanted rod Silver Bloom to produce a sample for Tina in the eastern capital. As for the latter... Who had ever heard of saints coming in multiple colors? The mysteries simply kept piling up. Illusions of history, I supposed.

I’d better go over this somewhere I can check a dictionary, then give it to Niccolò in the morning. But for now...

“Lydia, you’re making it hard to read,” I informed the young woman who had slipped out of bed and spent all this time spying on me from behind a desk.

“Don’t let it bother you,” she said.

“I can’t help it.”

“Then you need to work on your concentration. What a sorry excuse for a scholar.”

“Honestly?”

Seeing that she'd gone on the offensive, I gave up on reasoning with her. With teapot and cup in hand, I returned to my seat, pulled out a dictionary, and started looking up words.

Lydia ducked her head out of sight, murmuring something inaudible. I wondered what had come over her as I poured my herbal tea.

("The way he looks in profile when he gets like this just isn't fair, and it never has been. I should have borrowed a video orb from Saki or Cindy. I'd better not forget again tomorrow.")

One sip of the refreshingly aromatic brew cleared my head. I still hoped to catch a few winks before dawn.

Lydia sat on the desk and started fiddling with the ring on my right hand. "I'll be understanding about the bracelet," she grouched, "but hurry up and get rid of this thing!"

"Y-You want me to surpass *the* Twin Heavens?" I asked. "That's hardly—"

"Yup. Leave her in your dust."

Oh dear. She looks like she means it.

I gazed down at the ring and tried mentally begging it to come off. The red stone merely blinked.

Lydia let out a massive yawn.

"If you're sleepy," I suggested, "take off that shirt of mine and go to bed."

"I want you to carry me," she said.

"My lady asks much of me."

"Yup. I'm willful as can be. Do you mind?"

An honest Lydia trumped all. I resigned myself, stood as the noblewoman removed her borrowed shirt, and scooped her up. She giggled in my arms, sounding as though she couldn't be happier, and buried her face in my chest. I lowered her into bed, and no sooner had I tucked her in than a drowsy Atra snuggled up beside her. Lydia reached out to me, so I took her hand.

"You're warm," she murmured sweetly. "I feel so calm when—"

A knock shattered the mood.

Lydia sat up and seized the enchanted sword Cresset Fox from her bedside. We looked at each other and nodded.

“Come in,” I said.

“I beg your pardon,” a voice replied. The heavy door swung open to admit a tall, long-eared maid with skin on the dark side and a silver clip in the front of her shoulder-length palered hair. Saki entered the room behind her.

I’d met the newcomer a few times in the southern capital. Celebrim Ceynoth was Duchess Emerita “Scarlet Heaven” Lindsey Leinster’s right-hand woman. She’d made her reputation fighting in the first three Southern Wars. Celerian Ceynoth of the royal guard was her younger sister.

“Celebrim?” Lydia asked, climbing out of bed to stand at my left. “How did you get into the city?”

“I have my ways,” the maid replied, “and a few contacts in the southern isles. Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, I’m delighted to find you safe and—”

To our further surprise, Celebrim stopped midsentence. Following her gaze, we saw Atra stretching on the bed. The fox cub hopped down, padded over to me, and pawed at me with her front feet.

“I’m sorry. Did we wake you?” I asked, picking up Atra. She answered with a happy yip, ears and tail swaying.

“M-Mr. Allen,” Celebrim said, “who is that delightful little creature?”

“Atra the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals.”

“S-So she’s called Miss Atra.” The maid radiated an unspoken—but unmistakable—plea to hold the fox herself. Had she always been like this?

“Explanations come first, Celebrim,” Lydia cut in, hands on her hips.

“I beg your pardon.” The maid bobbed an elegant curtsy and cut to the chase. “I am here on behalf of Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster, Scarlet Heaven. She wishes to hear Mr. Allen’s report of the current situation before deciding how to conclude the siege of Atlas’s capital. This city seems even more disordered than I’d heard in the southern capital.”

“Yes, it is. Allow me to explain,” I said. Research, it seemed, would need to wait until morning. My lady was already putting a shirt back on. “Lydia, feel free to sleep if you’re tired.”

“Silly. I’ll never leave your side. That’s just common sense,” she replied, as if nothing could be more natural. Then, with dignity befitting the Lady of the Sword, she added, “Saki, would you brew us black tea? Strong enough to wake us up.”



“Damn Carlyle! What is he thinking?! We can’t afford a split in the heart of the league right now!” I, Niche Nitti, wailed in my study on the city’s central island.

The situation was worsening by the moment. Even Doge Pisani’s visit to the southern capital had needed to be postponed, owing to unrest in the city and the loss of magical communications—the latter likely the church’s doing. Faced with uncertainty, great houses had turned their backs on tradition and brought troops into the city. Carlyle Carnien, in particular, reportedly had several hundred regulars at his disposal. Frequent skirmishing resulted. Meanwhile, the pro-peace southern marchesi had taken their cues from Rondoiro “the Impaler,” leaving proxies in the city while they returned to their lands to prepare for war with the hawks. The League of Principalities now stood on the brink of civil war.

“Don Niche, any more work tonight will impede your performance at the committee meeting tomorrow.”

“I know. Thank you, Toni,” I said.

My father, the city’s deputy, reposed absolute confidence in Toni Solevino, and so did I. The old steward had lost his right hand—to the Leinsters’ “Headhunter,” I’d heard—and wavering moonbeams reflected off the black prosthesis he wore in its place.

“By the way,” I added, “has Paolo’s messenger arrived?”

“Yes, sir. He indicated that he will employ the otter clan of Cat Alley for future food and water deliveries,” Toni replied. Paolo was his younger brother and the

proprietor of the luxurious Water Dragon Inn. The pro-war Carlyle and his church associates had attacked the hotel and partially destroyed it, but Paolo still served as our link to the Lady of the Sword and her “Brain.”

Carlyle and the Church of the Holy Spirit had gone after Niccolò. He would be safest with the Leinster contingent, especially now that they’d availed themselves of the safe house.

I had also forwarded Allen’s warning to Marchesa Rondoiro, dispatching a precious war-wyvern south with the news that an enigmatic vampire calling herself “Crescent Moon” had gone the same direction. I only hoped that his concern proved groundless.

“Sir,” Toni said quietly, “where have those people taken Don Niccolò?”

Apart from my father, my brother, and I, only a handful of people knew the safe house’s precise location. Paolo had played in the archive with my father when they were children, and a few beastfolk from Cat Alley had long served to keep it supplied. The value of the books it held supposedly justified this secrecy, but even within the family, only my father knew exactly what made them so precious. Still, I thought I ought to tell Toni.

“The archive in the old city,” I said. “No one will find them there.”

The steward considered. “True. An excellent choice, if I may say so, sir.”

“Spare me your flattery.”

I had maneuvered to avoid civil war and to drive a wedge between the five warlike northern marchesi. If I got my way with the Committee of Thirteen, then even Carlyle would have his hands tied. He and his church allies wanted my brother, but “sacrifice family for peace” was not a Nitti motto!

“How shall we explain matters to the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, sir?” Toni asked.

“That’s a good question.”

That infuriating and formidable sorcerer had the gall to call himself “normal.” Still, his presence in the city might have been a stroke of luck. Either way, I needed to keep him informed. Niche Nitti had promised Allen of the wolf clan

as much.

“I’ll write him a letter tonight,” I said. “I hate to trouble you, but would you deliver it to Paolo for me?”

“Certainly, sir,” the old steward replied with a respectful bow.

I gazed out the window. A comet dragged its tail across the night sky it shared with an eerily incomplete moon.

“In any case,” I said, “success at tomorrow’s meeting will mean peace with the Leinsters, and I’ve taken steps to ensure the committee decides in our favor. Once that’s settled, we can deal with the church’s meddling.”

Chapter 3

“So, Marchesi Atlas and Bazel still see merit in war with the Leinsters?” a bespectacled elder—Doge Pirro Pisani—asked quietly. His voice carried through the Round Table Chamber hidden deep within the city of water’s assembly hall.

The league’s supreme executive body, the Committee of Thirteen, was in session. Favoring peace with the Leinsters were the doge; his deputy, Nieto Nitti; and the representatives of four southern marchesi, including myself, Roa Rondoiro. All five northern marchesi advocated continued hostilities, as did the two youngest southern marchesi, Carlyle Carnien and Fossi Folonto. Each of these thirteen participants had brought only a single bodyguard, making this gathering small indeed.

I recalled what my grandmother, Marchesa Regina Rondoiro, had told me before leaving me here and returning to our principality to muster troops for a worst-case scenario—civil war with the hawks: “Are you listening, Roa? Pirro loves his country. You can trust his judgment.”

The gold chain around Marchese Atlas’s neck jingled as his fist struck the table. “Naturally!” he shouted, glaring at the man beside him. “Although I can’t speak for Marchese Bazel.”

“We’ll fight to the bitter end,” Bazel replied. “Although I’ve heard *you* desire otherwise.”

“N-Nonsense!”

“You accused me first!”

Marchese Atlas reeled. He might really be on the verge of joining the pro-peace faction. But he and Marchese Bazel had still abandoned the people they were sworn to protect when they’d fled to the city of water. I scowled at their shameful display.

“Silence,” said Deputy Nitti, raising his left hand. The sharp-witted Niche Nitti stood in attendance behind him. “If we err in our decision, we may very well

doom our nation.”

Backs straightened, and Marchesi Atlas and Bazel shamefacedly resumed their seats.

Doge Pisani could not conceal his exhaustion as he turned to the two young marchesi who supported the war despite hailing from the pacifist south. “Marchese Carnien, Marchese Folonto, what say you? I am informed that you, Marchese Carnien, have mobilized troops within the city limits on your own authority and that skirmishes are breaking out in some districts. Kindly also explain your involvement in the citywide obstruction of magical communications.”

“The jamming baffles me as much as anyone,” Carlyle replied without turning a hair. “As for mobilizing troops last Darknessday, I admit it.”

“What?!” I cried in spite of myself, bolting to my feet and glaring at the unmoved man. Questions raced through my mind, multiplying so rapidly that I couldn’t think straight.

Have you really joined forces with the Church of the Holy Spirit? And if that much is true, what about the rumors of the supposedly long-dead Crescent Moon? Don’t tell me you jammed communications just to keep the doge away from the southern capital!

“Donna Roa, be seated,” said Deputy Nitti.

I sank back into my chair with a mumbled “Forgive me.”

Why, Carlyle?

“Yet I acted only for the league’s future,” Carlyle continued dispassionately. “To make peace would be folly.”

“You might say that the crushing defeat at Avasiek exposed fatal flaws in our nation,” Doge Pisani pressed, rapping his fingers on the round table.

Marchesi Atlas and Bazel, for whom the battle was personal, raised their voices in protest.

“What crushing defeat?!”

“We merely suffered a minor setback!”

Marchese Folonto, who sat on Carlyle's right, fixed them with a withering glare. "Even foreign powers know that the battle ended in a devastating loss for the principalities."

The stunned marchesi opened and closed their mouths a few times, then hung their heads.

"You must know as well as I do that our league is currently no match for the Leinsters," Carlyle said, his face like a mask. "Although I make no claims to strategic brilliance, I see little hope of victory in open warfare."

"Yet you and your fellows ask us to continue fighting. And is it true that you had a hand in damaging both the Water Dragon Inn and Seven Dragons Plaza?" Deputy Nitti demanded in a voice devoid of emotion.

Carlyle bowed deeply. "My own folly caused the former. But my convictions remain unshaken. If we seal a humiliating peace with the Leinsters now, future history books will condemn us as traitors. The Wainwright Kingdom has its hands full with the aftermath of the Algren rebellion. If we persevere and fight on—"

"They'll eventually give up?" the deputy finished for him. "I suppose the capital of Atlas does have the impregnable Fortress of Seven Towers to guard it."

Niche's gaze never left Carlyle. The marchese must have noticed, but he showed no emotion as he nodded and replied, "Leinster supplies seemed inexhaustible, but we've calculated that they can't support a larger front than they already are. We may temporarily lose the vulnerable capital of Bazel, but I am confident we could reclaim it."

A loud stir filled the room. The enemy was also nearing their limit—a tantalizing thought, almost irresistible. And while Carlyle hadn't produced a single shred of evidence, no one wanted to go down in history as a traitor. The committee had been leaning toward peace, but the tide was turning.

Niche Nitti's hand shot into the air. "Doge Pisani, may I request permission to speak?"

Speaking privileges at committee meetings were limited to the eleven

marchesi, the doge, and his deputy. Nevertheless, others could participate with the proper permissions.

The doge nodded his grizzled head and replied, "Permission granted."

"Thank you," Niche said. "Let me be brief: I was in the Water Dragon Inn when Marchese Carnien stormed it last Darknessday."

Another commotion broke out.

He's an eyewitness?!

"The marchese invited a group of church inquisitors onto the premises, and the outrage ensued."

The doge and deputy responded simultaneously.

"Marchese Carnien?"

"Explain yourself."

Both men had fought in the Second and Third Southern Wars and survived battlefield encounters with the Bloodred Witch, Lindsey Leinster. They made themselves as intimidating as that record would suggest, but Carlyle answered simply, "Also true."

Shock ran through the chamber. Even the pro-war northern marchesi wavered. Apart from Carlyle, only Marchese Folonto maintained his composure. Had he already known the truth?

"But are you not equally guilty?" Carlyle asked. "Our opponents were the Leinsters' Lady of the Sword and a young man in her service. The supporters of peace spoke of preserving the nation in public, but all the while they were colluding with the enemy. Can you imagine a clearer betrayal of the league?"

The hawks pounded the table, and the doves grimaced.

"And while all of *us* are here in person, every pro-peace marchese sent a proxy. I must question their commitment to the Committee of Thirteen," added Marchese Folonto, striking another sore spot.

The other substitutes seemed out of their depth, so I countered, "We may be proxies, but we are empowered to vote for our principalities."

“Everyone knows that Marchesa Rondoiro and her southern allies are mustering for war, while *we* kept our troops in the city to the bare minimum. Which of us is truly a threat to law and order in the league?!”

“Th-That’s not...” I faltered. My grandmother didn’t *want* to reduce the city of water to a sea of flames, but she wouldn’t hesitate if it became necessary.

“Then do you expect us to believe that we can trust the church apostles you’ve allied with?” Niche asked quietly. “They tried to massacre every person in the Water Dragon Inn. And you haven’t cleared yourself on other counts either. Are you certain that you don’t know the sorcerer jamming our communications?”

“Both our sides were confused that night,” Carlyle replied. “And what do you mean by ‘apostles’? As for the jamming, Don Niche, you accuse an innocent man. I assumed it was one of *your* schemes.”

“You can’t worm your way out of this with—”

“Niche, restrain yourself,” the taciturn deputy interrupted before his eldest son lost control.

“Yes, sir. Forgive me.” Niche hung his head and said no more.

The deputy continued, “Pirro, I believe that we have no choice but to postpone today’s vote.”

“Father!” Niche burst out again. “If we delay, negotiations with the Leinsters will—”

“Please don’t mistake me,” Carlyle cut in. “I don’t advocate fighting until all our lands burn to ash. But wouldn’t you agree that we need a little more time?”

No one present knew how to take this sudden concession. What was he up to?

“I propose that we postpone this vote until next Darknessday,” Marchese Carlyle Carnien—my former schoolmate—continued shamelessly. “The Leinsters must have noticed the city of water fall silent, and they will surely agree to delay negotiations by a few days. What say you?”

“Carlyle!” I shouted at Marchese Carnien’s back as he walked ahead of me down the secret passage, chatting with Marchese Folonto. The committee had adopted his motion and dispersed.

Carlyle looked back with exasperation. “Forgive me, Fossi,” he said. “Go on without me. All proceeds as planned.”

“Very well.”

Having sent the other marchese on ahead, Carlyle stopped and greeted me with a buffoonish bow. “Donna Rondoiro! To what do I owe this pleasure? I hate to disappoint you, but I doubt I can make time for tea.”

“Be serious!” I snapped, shoving Carlyle against a white stone wall.

“My, how passionate. Unfortunately, I have a lovely wife already and so must decline.”

“Enough! Church inquisitors?! And fighting in the city of water? Are you mad?”

“I’m perfectly sane. Now, would you please unhand me?”

I slowly released Carlyle. In our student days, he had been hailed as a genius. Everyone had expected great things from him. The previous Marchese Carnien would never have invited him to marry into the family otherwise. Someone with his brains *had* to know how dangerous an alliance with the church’s uncanny inquisitors and apostles could be!

Carlyle straightened his collar under my reproachful glare. “It comes down to choosing the lesser evil,” he said. “If we side with the Leinsters, they’ll eventually take all five northern principalities. The Church of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, has no interest in territory. Their interests lie in an entirely different direction.”

“That’s no excuse!” I shouted.

Carlyle’s expression changed. He looked like the old Carlyle—the one I’d loved. “A word of advice for old times’ sake,” he whispered in my ear. “Have nothing more to do with me or the church. And leave the city as soon as you can—by next Lightday at the latest. But don’t dream of going home to

Rondoiro. If you do..."

"You'll die. No one can vanquish that monster—not even the Lady of the Sword and her Brain."

Carlyle turned on his heel and left before I could question him. He never looked back again.

"What?" I managed at last, standing dazed while a storm raged within me.

Carlyle, what do you want?

"Donna Rondoiro," a new voice said.

I turned to find a blue-haired young man adjusting his spectacles and looking terribly disgruntled.

"May I have a word with you?" he asked. "About Carlyle."

"Yes," I answered slowly. "I was just thinking that I'd like to speak with you too, Don Niche Nitti."



My right arm felt warm. Groggily, I wondered if Atra had moved during the night. Then I groaned as my mind cleared. I'd stayed up late listening to Celebrim's news from the southern capital, and then...

Did I oversleep?

I slowly opened my eyes and found myself face-to-face with a beauty. She was lying stomach down on the bed, propping herself up on her elbows and grinning contently. Our two pocket watches on the nightstand and her scarlet hair sparkled in the sunlight filtering through the curtains.

She said, "Good morning, Allen."



“G-Good morning, Lydia,” I responded and looked to my right. A beast-eared girl with long white hair was clinging to my arm, fast asleep. When had Atra returned to beastfolk form?

Lydia prodded my cheek, giggling. “You almost never sleep in. But it’s your own fault for staying up too late with Celebrim last night. I hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

I groaned again. Atra twitched her ears and giggled. Perhaps she was dreaming.

I sat up, extricating my right arm slowly so as not to wake her, and said, “How are you feeling, Lydia?”

“Sixty or seventy percent of the way to full strength,” she replied. Had her recovery freed up more mana for Atra?

While I racked my uncooperative brain, Lydia got out of bed and opened the curtains to admit warm sunshine. A refreshing breeze carried birdsong.

“What are you waiting for?” she demanded. “Wash your face and brush your teeth; then I’ll personally tidy up that bedhead of yours. So get going, and make it snappy.”

“D-Don’t push,” I protested, drawing a laugh from her.

While we played at shoving each other, Atra drowsily got up, gave her ears and tail a shake, and blinked her jewel-bright eyes. “Allen, Lydia,” she called in her musical voice.

“Good morning, Atra,” I said. “Come on! We’ll wash up and brush our teeth together. Then I’ll do your hair ribbon.”

“Together!” the child cheered, her pale locks still tangled from sleep.

I scooped her up. But just as I was about to make for the washstand, I felt a tug on my shirt and heard a sullen “Mm.”

“Lydia?” I asked.

“I’ll wash my face too,” she said. “Since I’ve been watching a certain self-proclaimed tutor sleep.”

“What? But—”

“No buts!” Lydia snapped, although her expression said, “Dote on me too!” She certainly had her childish side.

“My lady’s wish is my command,” I replied, sweeping a reverent bow without letting go of Atra.

“As it should be.” A moment passed; then Lydia broke out giggling.

I sat Atra in a chair and was just tying her violet hair ribbon when there came a knock at the door. I looked to Lydia, who wore a cape over her nightgown.

“We’re awake,” she called.

“Pardon the intrusion,” the knocker replied. “Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, allow me to bid you good mo—”

“Saki!” Atra cried, her lovely white hair fluttering behind her as she bolted out of her seat and embraced the maid’s legs.

“M-Miss Atra?! When on earth did you—? I beg your pardon.” Saki crouched to the child’s eye level and gave her a gentle smile. “Good morning.”

Atra cooed.

“Oh, lucky you, Saki!” Cindy exclaimed, joining her fellow maid. “And good morning! We still can’t raise the southern capital, but other than that, all’s well! The Nittis’ steward arrived with more food and other supplies early this morning. Tuna’s seeing to the delivery.”

The Nittis’ steward? That would be Toni Slevino, if I recalled Niche’s note correctly. He was Paolo’s brother and had adopted Tuna. I’d been given to understand that he didn’t know where to find this place, but perhaps Niche had told him.

“Well done, Saki, Cindy,” Lydia said. “We’ll take breakfast in our ro—”

“Thank you for waiting,” a stunning, dark-skinned maid interrupted, pushing a clattering trolley into the room. Its wooden trays held appetizing bread and soup, along with omelets clearly fresh from the pan, thick rashers of bacon, and salad. Spreading her skirt in an elegant curtsy, she continued, “Good morning,

Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen. I have taken the liberty of bringing your breakfast.”

“You never miss a beat, Celebrim,” Lydia said—and meant it. The maid had evidently anticipated our request.

“As it has long been my honor to serve as a Leinster maid...” Celebrim’s dignified response trailed off. She stared, wide-eyed and visibly shaken, at the pale-haired child in Saki’s arms.

“What’s wrong?” Lydia asked, perplexed.

“Oh, n-nothing at all,” the veteran maid replied. “O-Only, who might this most charming young lady be?”

“Atra!” the child happily piped up.

Celebrim gasped and fell to her knees, hands over her heart. “No, I can’t bear it,” she mumbled deliriously, gazing at the patterns in the carpet. “What an absolute darling. She rivals little Ladies Lisa, Lily, Lydia, and Lynne when they were children. Oh, but...but I’ve already given my heart to the venerable mistress! And yet... And yet...!”

“We shall set the table,” Saki said.

“Leave everything to us!” added Cindy, and the pair set about arranging plates without regard for the senior maid.

I felt lost and looked to Lydia for help.

“Celebrim used to be our maid corps’s second-in-command, remember?” she explained. “She also trained her successor, Romy. And Romy trained Saki and Cindy.”

“Ah.”

So she was a member of Anna’s clandestine “Society for Watching over Lady Lydia and Lady Lynne in Public and Private” and also a believer in protecting adorable little girls at any cost. So much for the impression of competent maturity I’d gotten from our conversation the night before.

“Scary that that’s all the explanation I need. I wonder how long I’ve been this far gone,” I said, with a shrug and a rueful grin for Lydia, who was smoothing out my hair by hand.

“Oh?” she replied. “Aren’t you glad to learn new things about my family?”

All three maids gave a start. Celebrim and Saki teared up, and the latter murmured, “L-Lady Lydia.” Cindy, meanwhile, stared at the floor and whispered, “F-Family? E-Even me?”

“Hurry up,” a blushing Lydia barked. “I’m famished.”

“Y-Yes... Yes, my lady!” The trio resumed laying the table for breakfast. Atra watched them work with fascination.

Lydia rested her head on my left shoulder.

“Family,” huh? She can finally bring herself to come out and say it.

“What’s that look for?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” I replied. “Come on. Let’s sit.”



“You’re certain the girls are at high command in the southern capital, then? And they’re set on joining the operation to take the capital of Atlas so that they can secure communications with the city of water?” I asked Celebrim, who was pouring a little cup of tea for Atra after our sumptuous breakfast. I wanted to make sure I’d understood her correctly the previous night, and Saki and Cindy were waiting off to one side this time. I assumed they’d received the same report, but it never hurt to reiterate this sort of information.

Celebrim nodded, gazing lovingly at Atra, who was staring curiously at her own reflection in the tea. “Lady Tina Howard and Miss Ellie Walker’s impressive performance under Lady Stella Howard’s direction has caught everyone’s attention,” she confirmed. “Marriage offers have been flooding in.”

Conflicting emotions roiled within me. I wanted to commend my students for taking the initiative to journey to the southern capital and make the most of their talents. At the same time, when I considered the glimpses I’d caught of the economic warfare that Felicia had apparently spearheaded, I couldn’t help feeling that adding Tina to the mix was a bad idea. That girl was both the straightest of arrows and undeniably brilliant.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask yesterday,” Lydia said, putting down her cup.

“What are Lynne and Caren up to?”

“Lady Lynne and Miss Caren are most wise,” the maid replied. “They conducted reconnaissance in force in order to bring back fresh intelligence on the Fortress of Seven Towers. Lady Lily and I accompanied them as guards.”

I rested my hand on the head of the child beside me to cushion the mental blow. I’d never dreamed they’d go anywhere near the front. But my scarlet-haired lady didn’t seem to share my lament.

“Not too shabby,” she said, with a satisfied chuckle. Atra added a happy yip in imitation. Lydia would never admit it, but she loved those two and thought the world of them.

I lifted Atra onto my lap and asked Celebrim, “Will Duchess Lindsey storm the fortress?”

“Without hesitation, if events here render it necessary,” the maid replied.

The mysterious jamming covering the city of water was magnifying the problem. Saki’s reconnaissance using magical creatures and Niche’s investigation had confirmed that Crescent Moon was nowhere in the city. She must have temporarily moved south, meaning we could reasonably blame the remaining church agents for blocking communications. But could even a group of them maintain a spell on such a scale? I couldn’t understand why we hadn’t found them either. Something was bothering me, but I couldn’t put my finger on what.

“Don’t worry,” Lydia said, with a wave of her left hand. “We’ll stay here as go-betweens for negotiations, but all we really need is a way to minimize losses. And the city seems to be leaning toward a speedy peace, anyway. Now, give us your plan.”

“Be reasonable. And peace *was* my plan,” I grumbled. A wave of *my* left hand conjured a three-dimensional map of the Fortress of Seven Towers, including its latest reported defenses.

Celebrim fluttered her long eyelashes. Behind her, Saki and Cindy gasped.

“I’ll tell you what I have in mind,” I continued, “but please don’t hesitate to discard it if anyone—say, Stella—comes up with a better idea. And if the league

wants peace, negotiations should take priority.”

One brief explanation later, I dispelled my midair diagram.

Oh, Atra is nodding off.

I scratched my cheek, feeling a bit awkward as I bowed to the maids and said, “That’s all. May I ask your opinions?”

No response.

U-Um...?

I was beginning to worry when Lydia spoke up.

“Not bad. The question is, do you think they can pull it off?”

“The girls? Absolutely,” I replied. “Loath as I am to send my students to war.” Their odds would be even better once the professor made the delivery I’d asked him to.

“Hmm.” My scarlet-haired companion seemed a touch put out by my answer, but she said, “Well, all right. What about the spell formulae?”

“I left notes in the eastern capital, but I might as well send them improved versions.” I deployed the formula for a lightning spell in midair.

Lydia’s dainty fingers swiftly traced it, then stopped. “This bit can go.”

“You think so? That *would* increase the penetration, but it would also make the spell more volatile.”

“Why are you so overprotective?! Have some faith in my sister-in-law!”

I wish she’d tell Caren that, I thought as I moved on to an ice formula and said, “What about this, then?”

Lydia considered. “Add more safety valves. Right now.”

Oh dear. Her eyes aren’t smiling.

Hesitantly, I ventured, “Don’t you think you’re being too harsh on Tina?”

“Excuse me?! Why are *you* so soft on Tiny?! You wouldn’t let *me* let my full mana loose for *ages* after I started casting spells!”

“Well, I want to see her improve. And with Ellie and Lily to help her—”

“Don’t even mention Lily!”

Lydia started throwing a tantrum, and the formula faded away. What did she have against her cousin? She was being a bad influence on Atra.

Celebrim bowed deeply and broke her silence. “I see now why the venerable mistress holds you in such high esteem. Kindly allow me to bear your report and proposal back to the southern capital posthaste.”

“It’s in your hands,” Lydia said, nodding.

“Please do,” I added, likewise returning the maid’s bow. “Your boat leaves this evening, doesn’t it? I’d also like to write a letter to—”

A sudden rap on the door stopped me short. It sounded urgent.

Lydia and I exchanged glances before answering.

“Come in.”

“It’s not locked.”

A tense boy and maid entered. Something must have upset them.

“Good morning, Niccolò,” I said. “What seems to be the matter?”

“Good morning, Allen,” the boy answered sadly. “Something’s been bothering me. Tuna.”

The bloodless girl took a nervous step forward. “I wish to speak with you at once,” she said. “About my father, Toni Solevino.”



“Hm... What to do?” I mused in the inner courtyard. I’d changed into my day clothes and come out here after breakfast to continue working on spells for the girls.

A wicker basket rested on a table I’d brought from the room. Inside it, Atra slept soundly. I basked in her soothing presence while I fiddled with the formulae in the air before me, but I couldn’t make up my mind; Tuna’s troubling report and the mysterious note I’d found in that old book distracted me. I hoped that Niccolò would help with the latter, since he’d claimed to recognize

some of the vocabulary. But as for these formulae...

I turned my head and called, “Lydia, I’d like your opinion on— Hey.”

“Yes?” the scarlet-haired noblewoman responded with an air of perfect innocence. She was dressed for swordplay with her enchanted blade at her hip. Her left hand held a white parasol, and her right, a video orb. She must have been recording me this entire time.

“Tell me, just for the record,” I said wearily, “where did you get that video orb?”

““I thought my lady might have need of this,”” Lydia quoted. ““A Leinster maid always comes prepared!””

“Celebrim, then. Would you consider *asking* before taking video?”

“You got it! And what? No way!” Lydia did a twirl. Her skirt flared, and her necklace caught the light.

The maid corps’s former second-in-command was a good person and an impressive one, but she could also be a menace.

Lydia pocketed the orb, bounded over to me, and held out her parasol. Once I took it, she glided her fingers through the air and said, “These are Twin Heavens’ formulae. Now that I get a good look at them, they have so many screws loose that you’d have to be crazy to cast one.”

“Mind your manners, but I can’t argue. Their inventor reminded me of you.” I recalled the formidable witch I’d met and fought in the depths of a small island in the Four Heroes Sea—the continent’s largest saltwater lake, located in the northeast of the kingdom. No one short of the Hero could have gone toe-to-toe with her.

“How rude,” Lydia snapped, circling around in front of me and planting her hands on her hips. “What kind of man talks about his own wife like that? Perhaps some education is in order.”

“Your Highness jests, Lady Lydia Leinster.”

“I’m Lydia *Alvern* now. And I still think you ought to simplify the formula for Tiny. Think about what would happen if it misfires. *She* agrees with me.” Lydia

held up the back of her right hand, where the mark of a great elemental flashed through her white glove.

Well now.

“I suppose I’d better listen to Blazing Qilin,” I admitted.

“You could at least *try* to be sweet!” Lydia beat her fists on my chest, and the sleeping Atra swished her tail in time to the blows. Then the noblewoman turned around, sank back against my chest, and purred, “Where’s mine?”

She didn’t think for a moment that I’d leave her out. Was it me, or had she reverted to the way she’d acted during our first year at university since coming to this city? But despite my misgivings, I clenched my left fist and conjured a new spell formula: an improved Firebird, revised using my simplifications of Linaria’s spells. It would be far more challenging to control but promised improved firepower.

Needless to say, this was one of my countermeasures against Crescent Moon. What I knew of past vampire hunts had taught me that we’d need a weapon to breach her absolute magical defenses.

Lydia speedily glanced over it. “Well, it will do,” she said, pressing her hands against me in delight. “I’m tired of standing. Go to the sofa!”

“Yes, yes.”

I went inside and sat as she asked, only to be told, “Put your legs up too!” Once I was stretched out on the sofa, Lydia rested Cresset Fox on a chair and then...

“Hey!”

“Don’t even think about escaping!”

She leaned back, using me as a cushion. Her soft body and the faint aroma of my soap and shampoo made my heart skip a beat.

Lydia giggled, and a lock of her hair swayed as she conjured up the formula I’d just shown her. “You made this spell just for me. I can’t wait to fire it,” she murmured. Despite her languid tone, I knew she’d master it in no time. Lady Lydia Leinster was a genius.

I levitated two old books from the table to my hands. “I checked a history of the city as well as *The Peerage*,” I said, sharing my thoughts as I leafed through them. “A prince who commanded the great spell Watery Grave once ruled the League of Principalities. The lineage is all but extinct now, except for the Pisanis and the Nittis. In the same way, the Etherheart line of witches vanished, leaving the cadet branches of Coalheart and Lockheart.”

I turned to the relevant page for Lydia. It read, “Bulwarks of the Grand Ducal House of Etherheart. Particulars unknown.” Like the Coalhearts, the entry for Lockheart included a brief note referring back to a main branch—in this case, the House of Lockfield. Supposedly, one of its members had married into the Glenbysidhe demisprite chieftains, and a dragonfolk chieftain had witnessed the match. The current Earl Lockheart’s daughter, Patricia, was one of the girls’ classmates. I would need to ask her about this when I got back to the royal capital.

“That must be why they want Niccolò,” mused the scarlet-haired young woman. “To give themselves an air of legitimacy, perhaps?”

“If that were it, they’d have other options,” I said. “They want Niccolò Nitti—and the ‘Cornerstone.’”

I sensed the door to our room open. Lydia must have noticed too, but she said icily, “Not for anything good, I’ll bet.”

“I’m with you there.”

Between inquisitors, a girl apostle, sorcerers disrupting communications, the living Crescent Moon, and the self-proclaimed “Saint,” we always found ourselves on the back foot. This couldn’t go on.

I ran my fingers through Lydia’s short scarlet hair, and she squirmed ticklishly.

“One more thing,” I said. “About the Old Temple—”

The tramp of feet startled little birds into flight and set Atra’s tail twitching. A bespectacled young man dressed in blue formal wear a shade darker than his hair glared at me.

“Lounging about with your doting bride?” said Niche Nitti. “If only we were all so fortunate.”

Lydia quite literally leapt off me and landed in front of the sofa, chortling. “Hear that?” she asked, turning to me with eyes alight. “We look like a couple!”

“Niche isn’t well schooled in affairs of the heart,” I countered. “Niccolò told me so.”

Lydia blew a raspberry.

“Y-You little...” The blue nobleman’s mana surged, filling the air with balls of water. We had evidently taken our teasing too far.

“Only a bit of fun,” I said, dispelling his magic with a wave of my left hand.

“I wish you’d learn to take a joke,” Lydia chimed in.

Niche clutched his head and breathed deeply. When he was done seething, he reported, “The Committee of Thirteen postponed the vote on peace at Carlyle Carnien’s suggestion. It will reconvene on Darknessday. The full details of your proposal never even came up for discussion.”

“Postponed?” I repeated.

“My grandmother’s army won’t wait,” Lydia warned. “She won’t sit back and let the church have its way.”

“I realize that,” Niche said heavily. “The Fortress of Seven Towers will most likely become a battlefield. For all intents and purposes, peace has fallen through.”

“Did you mention the church apostle and Crescent Moon?” I asked. I’d told Niche about our battle with the girl and the vampire myself.

The nobleman hung his head and groaned, “My father opposed ‘pushing the hawks too far.’ I couldn’t give them the whole picture.” Niche must have gone into the committee meeting determined to save the city—his home—from the ravages of war.

“Well,” I said, “at least your news clarifies things.”

“Such as what? That Carnien gave me a thrashing?”

“Such as their objectives. Marchese Carnien is trying to buy time for a reason.

Even if things had come to a vote, I suspect he would have requested a few days to prepare.”

Niche gave a start and clenched his fists, quivering with rage.

Next Darknessday, is it?

“Niche, let me ask you again,” I said. “Can you remember anything about the Old Temple? Or does the word ‘Cornerstone’ ring any bells?”

“You mentioned that the church is seeking it when we spoke in Seven Dragons Plaza. Why are you so fixated on it?” The nobleman looked up with a suspicious expression that said, “I know you’re still hiding something.”

“In a tiny island ruin on the Four Heroes Sea, I met an ancient legend. The tales of her exploits claim that she once sealed a dead water dragon’s corpse beneath this city’s assembly hall and placed a seal upon it.”

A gust blew between us, and the ring on my right hand glowed red.

“She lived five hundred years ago, during the age of strife,” I continued, “but the current assembly hall is newer than that. Did the Old Temple once serve the same function?”

No record mentioned the old hall’s location—as though someone had suppressed it deliberately.

Niche crossed his arms and considered. “You aren’t wrong. But no one knows the history apart from my father and a handful of elders.”

“Not even Doge Pisani?” I asked.

“The House of Nitti is the city’s oldest, and the only one descended from the principe. The Pisani line was interrupted and its traditions, lost. I hear that there was originally a third house as well, but that’s all I know.”

Three houses descended from the principe. Then one of the church’s targets was the ancient rulers’ blood. Did they need it as a magical catalyst?

“We’re done here,” Niche added, still glaring at me as he turned to go. “I dispatched messengers south to the pro-peace marchesi, advising caution as you suggested. I used my best wyverns, but I can’t tell you if they made it.”

“And is the church definitely behind the jamming?” I asked.

“I’ve drawn a blank. Nevertheless...” The vehement nobleman stood up straighter but kept his back to me as he declared, “My name is Niche Nitti, and I have sworn to defend the League of Principalities, the city of water, and all who live here. Though my talent may be lacking, I refuse to break my word!”

What an awkward fellow.

I recalled his words at my graduation from the Royal Academy: “Allen of the wolf clan! Come with me to the city of water! Use the might of the Nittis as you please and teach the continent what you’re capable of! Unlike me, you have the talent for it.”

No, I haven’t forgotten what I owe you. None of my classmates but Lydia, Cheryl, and Zel would give me the time of day, but you acknowledged me to my face. That’s a debt I swear to repay.

“We’ll look after Niccolò,” I said to the young man’s back. “Your little brother will surprise you.”

“Do as you please,” Niche replied. “Donna Roa Rondoiro claims that Carlyle himself warned her to leave the city by Lightday. They must plan to make some sort of move after that.”

Lydia and I exchanged looks. It sounded as though events would play out before next Fireday without any help from us.

Niche was waiting for a response, so I said, “In that case, let me tell you what we’ve learned about your steward and about visitors to this archive.”

When our short conversation ended, Niche hurried out of the room, shaking his head and muttering, “I must consult Paolo. You’ll have what you need. And no one has visited the archive that I know of, although I can’t speak for my grandfather’s time.”

The things taking place in the city of water now beggared belief.

No sooner had Niche left than maids filed in and formed ranks.

“Saki, Cindy, prepare to relocate,” Lydia commanded, wearing her enchanted

sword. “We’re expecting ‘guests’ as soon as tonight. Remember to notify the beastfolk of Cat Alley.”

“Yes, my lady!” the pair responded, Saki serious and Cindy cheerful.

“Celebrim,” I added, “Niche Nitti promised to secure transport for you. Please depart for the southern capital as soon as it arrives. The latest news from this city will decide the course of the war.”

“Certainly, sir. And Don Niccolò wishes you to see these,” the maid replied, handing me a sheet of notepaper with a few words on it.

“Master Floral Heaven”

“Senior Apprentice Black Blossom”

“The work of dragons”

A scribbled note explained, “I’m still deciphering the rest, but from the style, I think the writer was a little girl.”

For an instant, I could practically see a girl like a younger version of Tina and Stella.

Of course. I’ve seen that writing before—many times, in the loving notes that Duchess Rosa Howard wrote for her daughters at their home in the northern capital. She came to this archive as a child, along with her teacher and a more advanced student.

I’d found another reason to restore peace to this city in a hurry.

Her Highness surveyed the gathering and said, “You all have work to do.”

The maids straightened, then sank in deep curtsies. “Lady Lydia, we hear and obey!”



The intruder alarm sounded after the sun set and inky blackness engulfed the ruins of the old city.

“Mr. Allen, they’ve arrived,” Saki said calmly without rising from her chair or opening her eyes. She had been monitoring the mansion’s perimeter through her magical black birds. “Attackers are approaching slowly from the front and

rear, disabling our net of detection spells as they go. I count a dozen or so in each group. I can't recognize faces through their hooded cloaks, but an elderly man leads their way. The girl who calls herself an apostle isn't with them."

Lydia was lounging against the wall, dressed for a sword fight. I met her gaze, and we exchanged nods. The cloaked figures were church inquisitors, and the old man was a traitor who knew where to find us.

Niccolò and Tuna huddled in a corner of the room, downcast and shivering.

I grabbed Silver Bloom from where I'd left it leaning against a chair and turned to the maids. "Please do as we planned. The rendezvous point is the secret underground waterway."

"Yes, sir!" Cindy chirped, wearing a crude knife on each hip. "Squad Two, if you please!"

"Yes, ma'am!" several maids chorused and followed her out of the room. They would intercept the attack from our rear.

For just a moment, my gaze met that of the milky-haired maid. I could see resolve in her eyes—the same firmness of purpose that my friend Zelbert Régnier had shown before settling things with a vampiress.

Will she be all right?

"Miss Atra, please enter your basket," Celebrim said, making a point to scoop the violet-hooded fox cub up in her arms before depositing her in a wicker basket lined with white cloth. In contrast to my misgivings, she behaved exactly as usual.

The bird-clan maid opened her eyes and commanded, "Prepare to withdraw."

"Yes, ma'am!" the remaining maids responded, and the room erupted in a flurry of activity.

I'd love to take the more precious books with us, but that's hardly realistic.

Lydia interrupted my lament with a soft "Listen, I want to fight too."

"No," I said immediately. My partner's mana hadn't fully recovered yet—proof of the enormous strain that pouring her all into a Scarlet Sword while we were so deeply linked had put on her. I looked the unhappy noblewoman in the

eye and put a hand on her left shoulder. “You know who you need to fight, and it isn’t the group on its way here. Save it for Crescent Moon.”

“Doesn’t the same go for you?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t overdo it.”

“You’d better not be long. And... Mm.” Reluctantly, the scarlet-haired young woman withdrew and reached out toward me. “I need to test my Firebird on *something*, don’t I?”

She sounded casual, but her gaze was resolute.

“Very well.” I relented and took her outstretched hand, establishing the shallowest of mana links. Since our reunion, Lydia refused to part from me lightly.

Feeling the maids’ eyes on me, I turned to the anxious boy and girl and said, “Now, Niccolò, Tuna, shall we go take a look at our assailants?”

With the pair in tow, I made for the enemies at our front. Saki’s black birds delivered timely updates on their position, so we didn’t need to fear being caught unawares as we proceeded along dim, mana-lamplit corridors and into the main hall. The front door had been blown off its hinges, and an old man was issuing commands to several gray-robed church inquisitors.

“I can’t approve of vandalizing historic buildings,” I said as the butt of my rod struck a pleasant note from the marble floor.

The men gaped at me. They must have been confident that they had the element of surprise.

Niccolò and Tuna gasped.

“No.”

“It can’t be.”

Their grief rang in my ears as I nodded to the old man. “I presume I have the honor of addressing Toni Solevino, steward to the House of Nitti. May I take it that Niccolò is the object of this assault?”

A painful silence reigned in the hall.

The grizzled old man discarded his cloak to reveal light armor, then magically fortified his limbs as he drew his antique sword. A church insignia gleamed golden on his chest. A black prosthesis stood in for his right hand—seemingly of the same make that the Black Knight, William Marshal, had worn.

“I have no words for you,” he said, eyes flashing icy hate. “Where is the Headhunter?”

Recalling what Celebrim had told me of the Southern Wars over tea, I saw why he had betrayed the Nittis. “So, this is revenge against the Headhunter, Celebrim Ceynoth.”

Niccolò and Tuna gave a start as Toni stamped. His foot split the floor, and windowpanes came crashing down. As Niche had told it earlier that day, Toni had been a battle-hardened knight before losing an arm forced him to retire into service. And sure enough, he fought in a classic vanguard style, enhancing his own body to the utmost!

“I’ll never forget the wicked gleam of her scythe or her mocking laughter on the battlefield that day!” the old man shouted, laying his old grudge bare. “She’ll pay for my right arm and for leaving me to wallow in shame if it’s the last thing I do!”

Niccolò could bear this no longer. “Stop, Toni!” he pleaded, stepping forward. “Please.”

“Don Niccolò, a clever lad like you or Don Niche could never understand how it feels to be a vanquished knight—to live by the sword yet fail to die by it. I was forced to live on after losing as thoroughly as any man can. No amount of wisdom or book learning will teach you what that’s like.”

“B-But please, I...I...” Niccolò wilted.

“Father, this outrage is beyond the pale!” Tuna cried, throwing her arms around the dejected boy. “Please! I beg of you!”

“I ordered you to flee this morning,” Toni spat, his face contorted with grief. “I suppose I could never be your *real* father. I feel for my old comrade in arms, but needs must.”

“Father!”

Not even the words of his beloved daughter could reach him now. I recalled something Zel had once said: “Motives for revenge are usually nonsense, but sometimes, people still go mad for them.”

The old man thrust his sword forward. “Niccolò Nitti, I insist that you accompany me. You have a role that no one else can fill. You and you alone carry the blood of the Sinful Principe in your veins.” Then he addressed the inquisitors: “You men may kill the others.”

“Yes, sir!” they chorused, surging forward with their single-edged daggers drawn.

Tuna drew her own dagger and stood to defend Niccolò.

An instant later, a massive inky bird—one of Saki’s magical creatures—dove through the skylight and scattered the fanatics. They conjured chains and clung to safety on the walls and ceiling.

“Only the Nittis, your brother Paolo, and a handful of beastfolk should know the precise location of this archive. Who told you where to find it?” I asked Toni.

The old man hesitated. “As to that—”

Before he could say more, an impact shook the entire mansion. Mana pulsed on a new order of magnitude even as the sensation of something blocking my ability to sense it assailed me.

With a gasp of surprise, I looked skyward—and beheld a flickering magic circle in the shape of a colossal black flower. At the same time, I detected multiple new mana sources in the mansion.

I recognize this—

“Allen!” Niccolò shouted just as Toni kicked off the marble floor and swept his blade down at me.

I conjured a blade of lightning on my rod to block. After a few clashes, we broke apart and squared off.

“Your interference is already accounted for,” the old man sneered. “Didn’t

you wonder why Crescent Moon felt free to leave the city? Teleportation is a marvel, even limited to only so many uses per day!”

The apostle Edith and the inquisitors’ leader, Lagat, had been formidable. And the might of the vampire Alicia Coalfield—the fallen Crescent Moon—went without saying. But yet another powerful sorcerer apparently lurked in the city of water. Teleporting multiple other people with a single spell required nearly superhuman skill. I didn’t know of anyone who could manage it, apart from the Flower Sage, chieftain of the demisprites, and Lord Rodde, the Archmage.

“Mr. Allen, multiple spell-soldiers have infiltrated from outside our detection net,” Saki’s urgent voice burst from my communication orb. “Our main force is withdrawing, but Squad Two is in combat. Your retreat will be cut off unless we act now. Please hurry!”

I said only “Understood” and gave my rod a twirl, covering a wide area in the elementary spells Divine Ice Vines and Divine Earth Mire.

“Time to go!” I shouted to Niccolò and Tuna, conjuring fire flowers from my bracelet to further obstruct Toni and the inquisitors’ pursuit.

“CComing!”

“B-But, sir—”

Tuna shrieked as the black bird snatched the pair in its talons and took deeper into the mansion.

Looking up, I could see the black flower disintegrating. So, this caster’s precision didn’t quite equal the Flower Sage’s Phantasmal Falling Star-Blossom.

“Running won’t save you!” the revenge-drunk Toni screamed at my back as I raced down a corridor. “I’ll slay you along with the Headhunter soon enough! In Her Holiness’s name!”



Grunts and cries like “C-Curse them” and “H-How are they so fast?!” filled a hall near the rear entrance to the Nitti archive. We were making fools of the trespassing church inquisitors as we trounced them, my fellow maids exchanging shouts as they plied their weapons, fists, and brooms.

“Splendid work, ma’am!”

“I’d better try harder!”

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“Five more to go!”

We’d started with ten enemies but had already downed half of them. We could make this work.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson at the Water Dragon Inn? It will take a lot more of you to get past us!” I taunted the intruders, whose gray robes were now decidedly worse for wear. My crude black knives were ready to add to the damage.

“T-To hell with them! Fire!” screamed the enemy commander—the man called Lagat. He raised his own single-edged dagger, preparing a spell.

I crouched and sprinted so low to the ground that I practically grazed it. Two inquisitors launched magical chains at me, so they got a taste of my twin blades first.

“Y-You’ll rue those—”

“Her Holiness chose us to—”

“D-Damn youuu!” Lagat screeched and swung his dagger down. I knocked it aside as I blocked it, then leapt. One kick off the wooden frame of a skylight put me back among my comrades.

“Cindy, ma’am, that was amazing!”

“Chitchat can wait.”

“Open fire.”

“And don’t hold back!”

The maids of Squad Two cast a merciless barrage of their best offensive magic. Rapid bursts of advanced fire, lightning, earth, and wind spells hit Lagat and his goons dead-on, not even leaving room to dodge. A crash and a shock wave followed. Then assorted debris filled the air, blocking our view. I watched the billowing dust cloud through narrowed eyes.

We'd better take this chance to contact the main force and—

Dozens of chains tore through the dust toward us. My knives cut down every last one. I wouldn't let a single spell reach the others.

Lagat emerged from the cloud, his gray robe stained with blood. It looked like we'd managed to take out the others. But although the leader had lost a lot of blood, a flicker of unsettling leaden light was closing his wounds.

"H-How dare you!" he shrieked, thrusting his broken dagger at me with undisguised rage. "Worthless infidels!"

"Do be quiet," I said. "Nobody likes a loud— Hm?!"

My fellow maids shared my alarm.

"New mana sources, ma'am."

"Above us!"

"What on earth?"

"Th-They're falling toward us."

Through a skylight, I glimpsed an enormous magic circle in the shape of a black flower flashing as it disintegrated. Then knights in heavy plate and helmets burst through the stained glass. The floor shook as they landed in front of us one after another, grasping longswords, pikes, and battle-axes in their right hands and massive shields in their left.

Four of the spell-soldiers Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen mentioned?! But the two of them defeated so many on the Isle of the Brave. How did the church replace them so quickly? And how did they get past Saki's surveillance?

Despite my confusion, my body instinctively kicked off the floor. These were enemy reinforcements, so I'd reduce their numbers before they got their bearings. As number six, I had a duty to perform!

I swung my knives up at the closest spell-soldier, severing its axe-wielding right arm, armor and all. The thing was less sturdy than I'd heard, but it didn't bleed—it dripped a disgusting charcoal fluid.

"H-How could any knife hack up a spell-soldier, even a mass-produced one?!"

the shocked Lagat wailed from the back of the group. “K-Kill her! Kill her now!”

The remaining three spell-soldiers responded swiftly, ignoring their comrade clutching the stump of its arm. I would have liked to disable one more, but they were shockingly fast for their size and equipment. I dodged two ferocious pike thrusts and retreated.

“Ma’am! Urgent orders to withdraw. ‘Fall back at once,’” called the maid managing our communications. We’d grown up in the same orphanage.

We were up against three undamaged spell-soldiers and one church inquisitor. Meanwhile, our whole squad was in good shape, myself included. We could easily withdraw. And yet...

I touched the hair clip that doubled as my communication orb and said, “Saki, tell me what’s going on!”

“Cindy?” my friend responded. Everyone talking at once would only cause confusion in a combat situation, so the Leinster Maid Corps assigned one dedicated communications officer to each unit. A direct call like this was highly irregular.

“Never mind protocol!” I pressed. “Just hurry up!”

“Enemy reinforcements have arrived. According to Mr. Allen, a sorcerer of considerable skill teleported them here, and given the spell’s quality, they may even cast it again. The main force and Mr. Allen’s group are both falling back too, so don’t waste any time!” In a whisper, Saki added, “I’ll come get you if you get in over your head.”

I chuckled. My best friend and adorable little sister was as nice as she was devoted to our family.

“I don’t know,” I mused. “My bad feelings have a habit of being right. And—”

“Fresh mana sources!” another maid shouted, startling our other three squadmates.

The black flower reappeared overhead. And as Mr. Allen had predicted, this circle crumbled faster than the first. Even so, more enemy reinforcements landed in the hall, smashing the few remaining skylights on their way down.

“Could this day get any worse?” I grumbled as the floor shook under the second wave of spell-soldiers—two armed with longswords and two with hammers. Even the axe-wielder I’d disabled had regrown its right arm and returned to battle.

Suddenly, the rest of Squad Two darted in front of me.

“Please fall back, ma’am!”

“We’ll act as rear guard.”

“Please keep Lady Lydia, Miss Atra, and Mr. Allen safe!”

“And make sure the children at the orphanage are looked after.”

No maid stationed in the city of water belonged to a house, meaning that we all faced discrimination in the kingdom. Some were immigrants, orphans, or beastfolk. One was a...*thing*, not a person. So the Leinsters and their head maid had sent us here, to a country less steeped in prejudice, where we had truly become a family.

A laugh slipped out of me. It was clear what I ought to do. I closed my eyes and chanted softly.

““I am no hero. I am no legend. I am no champion.””

I could sense half the spell-soldiers charge with tremendous force. The maids held their ground.

I opened my eyes and shouted, ““Yet falter do I never! And even in death, I fall not!””

Lagat’s eyes widened. The maids’ did too as, shrouded in jet-black mana, I launched myself at the spell soldiers...and instantly sliced them in half.

“M-Ma’am?”

“Black hair?”

“And that mana...”

“B-Big sis?”

I felt their confusion as I checked my reflection in a shard of glass. I saw waist-length black hair, and a crimson sword and spear on the backs of my hands.

“Fall back immediately,” I ordered dispassionately, lowering my knives while jet-black mana covered and transformed them. “The highest-ranking officer has the privilege of guarding a retreat.”

“N-No!”

“We refuse.”

“We’ll stay with you!”

“Big Sis Cindy!”

They all clung to my back, not even flinching at my changed appearance. My heart swelled, and tears blurred my vision. I was a lucky girl.

Without turning to look, I held the *black spear* in my right hand straight out to one side. “Thank you,” I said. “I really mean it. Thank you so much for crying for a *thing* like me. For making me...part of your family. And sorry. Would you apologize to Saki for me? Now, get going!”

I heard jaws clench; then the warmth on my back vanished as they all started running.

I leveled a knife at Lagat, who had been eyeing me warily despite the encircling spell-soldiers, and said, “I am Cindy, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number six. And formerly...”

Multiple new mana sources popped up behind me—probably enemies who had come through the front.

“The commonwealth army classified me as Dark Soldier 1,013.”

Inquisitors were famously fearless, but this one retreated a step. “You survived the commonwealth’s darkest secret?!” he demanded. “*Their experiments to recreate the Dark Lord?!?*”

Two of the bisected spell-soldiers had escaped instant death and now pulsed with dark-gray light, consuming the corpses to restore themselves. Was it me, or was there something vampiric about this power?

“B-But you still can’t defeat six spell-soldiers!” Lagat shouted. “Give up!”

“‘Give up’?” I repeated slowly. “Not a chance!” Gripping a black sword in one

hand and a black spear in the other, I fully unleashed my mana. My body groaned and screamed under the strain, but I paid it no mind.

“I got the name Cindy, a heart, a smile, and a place to belong,” I told the grimacing Lagat. “All gifts from the Ducal House of Leinster, the head maid, her second-in-command, the rest of the corps, and my one and only little sister.”

I bet Saki will be furious. Still, if I could do this over again, I think I'd always make the same choice. After all...

“The world is black as night for houseless people like us, but Mr. Allen is the new Shooting Star, and one day, I know he'll give us light. So for his sake, I'll make sure this is as far as you go!”



Having sent Niccolò and Tuna on ahead, I dashed along a corridor bordering the inner courtyard, setting magical traps as I went. Based on the snippets of communications that I could overhear, our main force had already taken the secret stairway in the room Lydia and I had used down to the underground waterway where beastfolk gondolas were now collecting them. If Cindy's group, who were still fighting, and I managed to retreat safely too, then—

“Mr. Allen,” a lovely maid called, leaping through a window with her great scythe in hand.

“Celebrim?” I asked, stopping short. One look at her face told me that something was seriously amiss.

“Cindy is guarding the retreat alone,” she reported. “I believe she is currently fighting in the central hall.”

No wonder no one's chasing me! If she'd only said something...

“Everyone, escape at once,” I called into my communication orb. “Celebrim and I will fetch Cindy.”

“No, Mr. Allen!” came an answering cry. “You mustn't—”

“I'll be fine, Saki. A trusty maid has offered me her help.”

“You may depend upon it,” Celebrim said. “A proper maid never abandons her dear little juniors.”

“Relax, Saki. Cindy’s in good hands,” Lydia cut in. Her Highness’s mana conveyed a sullen wish to accompany us, but she didn’t voice it.

“Allen strong!” Atra added by way of encouragement.

After a brief silence, Saki’s quavering voice sounded in my ear again. “Mr. Allen, I know that no proper maid would ever ask this of you. But please, *please* save my little sister. She’s the only one I have.”

Other maids added their own pleas.

“Consider it done,” I responded, tightening my grip on my rod. “I promise we’ll rejoin you all later!”

Celebrim and I raced through the corridors. Soon, a hall near the room I’d shared with Lydia came into view. Inquisitors and spell-soldiers littered the shattered marble floor, the former’s gray robes dyed in fresh blood. Fire leapt from broken walls and windows. Broken pikes, axes, and swords studded the room.

Only four enemies stood amid the flames—a pallid Lagat, two uninjured spell-soldiers, and Toni Solevino. A dark-haired maid faced the old man, breathing heavily.

Cindy? But what happened to her hair?

Conjuring a little bird to scout ahead, I managed to overhear Toni saying, “Your lone heroics deserve praise. I never expected to lose so many mass-produced spell-soldiers. The Dark Lord’s power is a force to be reckoned with. But you’ve reached your limit.” The treacherous steward raised his bloody sword and commanded the two spell-soldiers, “Kill her.”

Cindy tried to swing her knives despite the wounds that covered her. But although she blocked the first battle-axe swing, the force of it flung her into a pile of rubble. The other spell-soldier advanced to deliver the coup de grâce.

Then Celebrim and I burst into the burning hall, and her scythe traced an arc of death.

“Dear me. What strange curiosities you’ve brought,” she said as her fearsome blow cleaved the soldier’s head in two and a quick follow-up reduced it to a

quartered lump of flesh. Charcoal light flickered in an attempt at revival, but the thing ultimately crumbled into dust.

These spell-soldiers contain vestiges of Resurrection but not Radiant Shield. Mass-produced models, I presume.

In the split second I spent thinking that, I hit the remaining soldier with Divine Ice Vines. Freezing its axe left me an opening to skewer its joints with the lightning blade on my rod. I immediately followed up with a point-blank cast of the intermediate spell Divine Fire Spear, and the soldier went still.

Another certain death by scythe, and the spell-soldier collapsed amid a metallic clangor and a loathsome stench. Its helmet came loose, revealing a hairless head. One of its eyes was clouded. Long fangs protruded from its mouth—plainly inhuman.

What had Toni said? “The Dark Lord’s power”? And Cindy had held her own against these spell-soldiers unaided. Had the Church of the Holy Spirit switched from human subjects to man-made vampires?!

My conclusion troubled me, but I forced myself to focus on my companions. “Splendid work, Celebrim,” I said.

“Child’s play, sir,” the maid demurred, chuckling.

I multi-cast the intermediate spell Divine Light Recovery on the stunned black-haired maid.

“Mr. Allen?” the bloodstained Cindy stammered, sounding utterly mystified.

“Thank goodness we made it in time,” I said.

Lagat was reeling, unable to process the loss of all his spell-soldiers. Yet Toni still had eyes only for Celebrim.

“Wh-Why...Why did you come?!” Cindy reproached me. “My life is worth nothing compared to yours. I wouldn’t have blamed you for forsaking me.”

“Saki and the other maids were crying, and Lydia asked me to.”

A moment of stunned silence followed. Then, “What?”

I crouched down and looked the maid square in the eye as her hair reverted

to milky white. “Cindy, I’m in no position to lecture you. I made my parents, my sister, and a lot of other people cry in the eastern capital. Lydia, my sister, and my students will never let me hear the end of it.”

Cindy was a lot like me. She put others first because she didn’t see much value in herself.

“But because of that, I say one thing for certain,” I continued. “I refuse to let you die here while you have people to shed tears for you. Besides, I promised your older sister.”

“Mr. Allen.” Cindy hung her head and shook with sobs. When she stood, wiping her eyes on her tattered maid uniform, she was the usual Leinster Maid Corps number six. “Thank you! But *I’m* the big sister! Would you back me up on that?”

“I’ll exercise my right to remain silent. Now then.”

“Right!”

We turned to face the battle-crazed old steward.

“There you are, Headhunter! Tonight, at long last, I’ll repay you for my right hand and the humiliation I suffered!” Toni yelled, his eyes alight with the joy of revenge. I couldn’t let Niccolò and Tuna see him like this. Or Niche, for that matter.

The dark-skinned maid, however, rested her scythe on her shoulder with a bemused expression. “I beg your pardon. Who might you be?”

“What?! I... I don’t believe it. You must remember me! Toni Solevino!”

My heart ached as I thought back to Zel’s days at the Royal Academy. My best friend had been forgotten by his erstwhile love, a person he’d spent his life trying to save.

“Solevino,” Celebrim mused as her scythe gouged a furrow in the floor. “Ah, yes! You must be that gentleman I crossed blades with in the capital of Etna. What a long time it’s been. You must excuse me—I’ve met so many gentlemen on so many battlefields.”

The old steward flushed crimson. “Well, no matter. Besting you will spell an

end to my long nightmare.” To Lagat, he added, “Retreat, or you won’t escape when I unleash my gauntlet. Niccolò Nitti must be gone by now. Edith is busy releasing the two dragons’ seal. She and the one who sent us these spell-soldiers must learn what has happened here.”

The inquisitor considered. “Very well. I entrust the rest to you. Leave no survivors.”

“I did not intend to.”

A seal placed by two dragons? Since when has the city of water had one of those?

Lagat launched his chains skyward and made his exit. Once he was gone, Toni sheathed his sword and thrust out his right arm.

“An archpriest of the Holy Spirit bestowed this false arm upon me,” he said. “It contains the power of *three great spells*. However mighty you may be...” His mana grew explosively, and its dark-gray radiance started writhing like a living thing. “At the cost of my life, my fangs can reach you. Prepare yourself, Headhunter!”

Toni raised his arm, now swollen to giant size, and swung it down at Celebrim. We leapt away in three directions, but a swarm of reeking snakes materialized to attack us.

The milky-haired maid laid into them with her flashing knives, then gave a start. “Th-These snakes are liquid! They reform as soon as I cut them!”

“Traces of Stone Serpent and Resurrection,” I said, multi-casting the elementary spell Divine Earth Wall. “The third great spell must be Watery Grave, supposedly passed down in the prince’s house. I’d like to know who they got it from.”

“How shall we proceed, Mr. Allen?” Celebrim asked, landing lightly atop one of my earthen barriers.

“That’s an excellent question.”

“D-Don’t you think you’re both taking this a little *too* well?” Cindy demanded.

The snakes burst through the walls after us, so I gave my rod another swing.

My countermeasures against Resurrection and the elementary spell Divine Ice Mirror bought me time to activate another bit of magic. I dodged any snakes that broke through while pelting Toni with Divine Light Shots.

The old steward's right arm swelled, and his lips curled in ecstasy as he blocked the spells that were among the fastest in existence. Slaty liquid had already engulfed half of his body.

Freezing the swarm with another elementary spell, Divine Ice Wave, I made a snap decision. "We'd better cut them off at the source: that false arm."

"Most insightful, sir," Celebrim replied. "Well then, Cindy—shall we?"

"Huh?!" Cindy squawked. "M-Me too? C-Can't you see I'm a wreck?"

"A maid has her duty—harsher than the darkest demands of the commonwealth. I should hope you're learning firsthand."

Cindy looked around for a way out, then clutched her head and wailed, "Oh, when did my mind just agree with you?!" For all her theatrics, she seemed delighted.

"Allow me to provide support," I told the maids, donning a smile of my own. "Please charge straight ahead."

"Yes, sir!" they responded in unison.

"I'm ready for you, Headhunter!" Toni roared, elated despite the vestiges of three great spells consuming him. His mana ballooned still further.

The snakes converged into one colossal, three-headed water serpent. With agility belying its size, the creature bore down on the maids...and fell as the floor I'd rigged with Divine Earth Mire earlier gave way. A cry of surprise escaped Toni as I immediately hurled an improved Firebird into the pit, cleansing its contents. At the same time, I activated a botanical spell, extending myriad branches for the maids to stand on.

"Mr. Allen!" Cindy exclaimed. "Is there anything you *can't* do?!"

"I see you're working harder than ever, sir," Celebrim said, happily sprinting over the boughs. "The venerable mistress will be delighted."

"You've not beaten meee!" screamed the swollen old steward, raising his

gigantic right arm aloft and swinging it down with all his might.

“None of that.” Saki’s resolute voice sounded from the orb in Celebrim’s hair.

A great black bird dove straight through the burning ceiling! It cannoned into Toni’s right arm, knocking him off-balance. Unable to withstand the unexpected blow, he toppled over and fell in an undignified heap. Then Celebrim raised her scythe high and delivered a merciless two-handed strike.

“N-No! I will not fail!” the steward roared through his pain. His whole arm transformed into a massive serpent, rearing up to devour the lovely maid.

Yet another lethal slash cleaved the snake’s head—along with the columns, wall, and even flames behind it. The severed serpent made a pitiful attempt to regenerate, but it was already turning to ash as Celebrim landed.

“My scythe is specially made,” she said, bringing the blade back around. “It disrupts the magic of whomever it cuts. Cindy?”

“I’ve got you nooow!” the other maid yelled. Her milk-white tresses fluttered behind her as she drove the knife in her right hand into what remained of Toni’s arm with all the strength she could muster.



A harsh metallic clang split the air.

“It will take more than that, girl!” Toni shouted. He had drawn his old sword and perfectly blocked the strike.

If he’d fought us honestly, this would have been a struggle.

With a heavy heart, I struck the butt of my rod on the floor and cast a new spell. “Cindy, don’t let up!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Wh-What is—? M-My power!” Toni cried. Icy fog ringed him in. The snake crumbled away from his right arm, and his exposed gauntlet was beginning to freeze.

I’d drawn on silver-snow to improve the bi-elemental purification spell Immaculate Snow-Gleam.

Cindy didn’t waste the opening I’d given her. She channeled mana into her left knife, extending the blade and instantly enhancing its sharpness. Then, with a piercing shout, she struck.

Following a dull thud, the knife cut the black gauntlet, and the scythe snapped the sword. I hit the gauntlet with a Firebird—contained in a barrier, of course—as it rolled on the ground, trying to repair itself. It writhed like a snake amid the hellish inferno and then was no more.

“W-We did it! We— Ah.” Cindy stumbled in mid-cheer, but the black bird caught her. She hid her face, muttering, “I can take care of myself, Saki.”

Relieved, I turned to the pair and waved my rod. “We’re all done here,” I said. “I suggest we withdraw.”

Celebrim responded with a smart “Yes, sir,” and Cindy with a sheepish “You got it.”

But just as we prepared to leave, Toni screamed bitterly, clutching his right arm, “Wait, Headhunter! This time, make good on your nickname!”

In other words, “End my life.”

Celebrim banished her scythe into thin air and said in glacial tones, “I humbly

decline. I take no interest in gentlemen who grow drunk on revenge and turn to imitations to aid them.”

The color drained from the old steward’s face. “I... I am...! I am...” Words failed him then, and he crumpled, sobbing silently into the flames.

Had his warning to Tuna and the information he’d let slip in conversation stemmed from a guilty conscience? We would never know now. Still, I wanted to believe.

A little bird alighted on my shoulder.

“Carnienite troops are closing in,” I warned the maids. “We should hurry.”

Saki’s birds led us safely through the Old City. We emerged from the labyrinthine ruins to a view of the city of water glittering in the morning sun. No wonder people called it “the millennial capital.” The sight took my breath away.

I was still staring, entranced, from a branch jutting out over an old waterway when a voice from below called, “Mr. Allen! Ma’am! Cindy!” Saki waved wildly from a gondola.

I raised my left hand to greet Lydia, who was stroking the soundly sleeping Atra. Then I indicated the bank with the tip of my rod. Suzu—the otter-clan girl steering the lead gondola—answered with her oar.

No sooner were we waiting in position than Saki and the other maids leapt into the shallows, unafraid to get their uniforms wet. They flung their arms around Cindy, calling her name and not caring that her hair had stayed long, although it had regained its normal color.

“S-Saki, everyone,” Cindy said. “That hurts, you know?”

“You idiot,” Saki sobbed. “Really, how could you be so stupid?”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Both number sixes and their subordinates broke down in tears.

Celebrim, meanwhile, seemed to weigh nothing at all as she boarded a gondola and peered into a basket. “Oh, M-Miss Atra!” she cooed. “Y-You look so charming in your sleep.” Nothing fazed her.

Saki looked up and shook her head. “No, you’re not getting off that easily. As punishment...”

“A-As punishment?” Cindy echoed. The way she trembled was worth a chuckle.

“I’m the older sister, and you’re the younger one. Is that clear?”

“H-How did you know abo—? Ah.” Cindy looked at Celebrim and me.

“Well, you know how it is,” I said, shrugging. “Sometimes you just forget to disable your communication orb.”

“Lady Lydia, is it me, or does he not play fair?!” Cindy demanded.

“Give up,” Lydia answered with equanimity. “He’s been like this since I met him.”

She stood up as her gondola reached the bank. I held out my arms, and she jumped into them, muttering, “Unbelievable. You’re late, dummy.” Apparently, I’d made her worry.

Hugging Lydia and watching the maids’ ongoing reunion, I found myself remembering Zel again. Today, I’d saved Cindy. Had my friend wanted me to save him back then, when he’d covered our retreat from a vampiress alone? He didn’t resent me, did he?

To my left, Lydia sighed. “Silly,” she said, reaching out and plucking leaves and twigs from my hair. “That rotten dhampir, Zebert Régnier, would never resent you. He was grateful, if anything. From the bottom of his heart. Then he made his dearest wish come true—and died. Am I wrong?”

I hesitated. “Lydia.”

She jabbed her finger at me, poking my cheek. Her smile glowed in the dawn light. “That’s your problem—you’re too soft on other people and too hard on yourself! Have more confidence and— No, scratch that. Forget I said anything.”

“I wish you wouldn’t build me up and then knock me down again,” I said.

“Never you mind!” Lydia exclaimed. Then she started muttering something under her breath.

(“I’ll definitely have trouble if he gets any more appealing. He already accepts strange rings and gets bracelets from Lily and leaves me—his wife—behind, and...”)

“Jeez!” she cried. “This all started with Tiny! She’ll be in for a scolding the next time I see her.”

I let out a hollow laugh. How else could I respond to this flare-up of hostility toward Tina?

All of a sudden, I heard wingbeats and felt a breeze from above. “Humph. So, you survived,” Niche said as he landed his wyvern.

“Please forgive our late arrival,” added Paolo Solevino, following on his own mount.

Niccolò and Tuna looked up from their gondola, both red-eyed.

“N-Niche?!”

“Mister Paolo.”

Niche dismounted. “These are our last two wyverns,” he said, face emotionless. “Use them as you see fit.”

“We appreciate it,” I replied. “Celebrim, please see that the girls get this. The memo is for Lily. If anyone has better ideas, let Stella make the final decision. But please tell her to stay in the southern capital if she’s still not feeling well.” I drew a bundle of letters from my pocket and tossed them to the maid, who caught them one-handed.

“And give Caren this paper,” Lydia added.

What could she have to send Caren?

“Certainly.” Celebrim tenderly stroked the sleeping Atra, then leapt astride a wyvern. “Well then, Lady Lydia, Miss Atra, Mr. Allen, I shall return to the southern capital.”

“Good,” Lydia said. “Give my grandmother and the rest of them my best.”

“Take care!” I called.

“Saki, Cindy, everyone,” Celebrim added, “be sure to listen to Mr. Allen.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the maids chorused, making flowing curtsies.

As her wyvern flapped its wings, lifting gently off the ground, Celebrim turned her gaze to Paolo. “Your brother was once a brave man. However...I pray that you do not lose your way.”

The old manager bowed deeply and replied, “Much obliged for your warning.” His back trembled slightly.

The wyvern gained altitude, wheeling above our heads. Then it brayed and flew off northward.

Four days remained until Darknessday, today included. Our time was running out.

I felt Lydia’s warmth on my left arm as I turned to the otter-clan girl and the other beastfolk gondoliers. “Suzu, all of you, I sincerely appreciate your help. But you’ve done enough. Staying with us may put you in danger, so please hurry away as—”

“E-Excuse me!” the otter-clan girl interrupted. “My grandpa said to bring you to our place if the Nitti hideaway got found. You’re our family, Allen, and beastfolk never turn our backs on family.” She stood up straighter—not only her back, but her ears and tail expressing determination. “And that goes double for the new Shooting Star. Every beastfolk in the city owes Shooting Star so much.”

They already found out about my title?!

Lydia rested her head on my left shoulder and whispered, “What did I say? You think too little of yourself.”

Suzu pressed a hand to her chest, and the other gondoliers followed suit. “Come with us to Cat Alley,” she said. “The city’s beastfolk are on your side!”

Chapter 4

“Good morning, Carlotta,” I, Carlyle Carnien, greeted my wife. Her face looked so young as she reposed like this in her luxurious bed.

I opened the pristine white curtains, admitting soft dawn light through the large glass window. Outside, blue roses bloomed among the myriad flowers that colored my wife’s garden. We had planned and built it up together, sometimes arguing, often laughing. A stabbing pain pierced my breast as I recalled those golden days that I must reclaim at any cost.

I looked out over my home, the city of water. With countless gondolas and barges crisscrossing its canals, it hardly seemed like a city at war. Although I had wanted a villa on the central island, my wife had favored the high ground on the city’s outskirts, where birds could more easily visit her garden. I felt glad that I’d agreed.

Returning to the bed, I sank into a chair and smiled at Carlotta. “I know,” I said, “let’s spend some time in the garden later.”

She didn’t respond.

“The Committee of Thirteen postponed its vote on the peace proposal,” I continued, taking Carlotta’s hand—grown thin as a child’s—and stroking her pale-aqua hair. “For us, gaining these few days is tantamount to victory. We’ve come another step closer to our goal.”

Recalling Niche Nitti’s bitter glare filled me with elation. I’d paid him back somewhat for the business at the Water Dragon Inn. Then again, I’d planned to demand time to prepare no matter what arguments he advanced.

“Just a little longer,” I told my wife, clasping her hand as though it might shatter. An illness of unknown cause had kept her sleeping for the past year. “Please wait just a little longer, and I swear that I’ll wake you. I’ve seen the miracles that the church’s Saint performs with my own eyes. Once our work is complete—”

A cautious knock cut me short. I answered it as Marchese Carnien.

“Enter.”

“By your leave.” In stepped the House of Carnien’s former butler, his hair entirely white after many years of service. Since his retirement, I had placed this villa in his care.

“My lord, Marchese Folonto has arrived. Shall I show him in?”

“Do so,” I replied, half-exasperated that my older friend hadn’t allowed the early hour to dampen his enthusiasm.

My sworn ally Fossi Folonto entered—a large, solidly built brunet dressed in formal attire with a longsword hanging from his belt. “Sorry to barge in on you like this,” he said.

“Don’t be. I planned to call on you later,” I responded, looking out the window. Far in the distance, I glimpsed a towering lighthouse of which my wife had been fond.

“The demisprite sorcerer was right,” Fossi informed me. “Last night’s raid on the Nittis was a tactical failure. My soldiers retrieved Toni Solevino, but he has one foot in the grave, and Lagat was the only inquisitor to return. Still, we incinerated the secret archive. They’ve lost one source of new information.”

The ace up the Church of the Holy Spirit’s sleeve, Alicia “Crescent Moon” Coalfield, was absent from the city. She had gone to eliminate the four elderly southern marchesi who favored peace—and whose strength had seen them through the Southern Wars alive. So, even with Edith, ranked seventh of the apostles, we found ourselves at a disadvantage against the Lady of the Sword and her “Brain,” who had proven even more capable than rumor made them.

But the Saint foresaw everything, and she had sent us a formidable reinforcement in the person of a higher-ranking apostle. Blanketing the entire city in magical jamming *single-handed* had surpassed even my wildest expectations.

“And we succeeded in flushing out Niccolò Nitti,” Fossi continued. “For all intents and purposes, we won. We would have had our work cut out for us capturing him in a warren like the Old City. And once Crescent Moon returns

from ‘tidying up’ the south, the Lady of the Sword and her ‘Brain’ will cease to be a problem.”

“Edith expressed the same opinion,” I said. “But the Leinsters are poised to strike. Their target is—”

“The Fortress of Seven Towers, I presume. If it falls, so will Atlas’s capital. And then their griffins will be able to reach this city and return in a single flight—just what they need to land troops. I didn’t think they would risk storming the fortress, but I underestimated Scarlet Heaven. I suppose a general of her international renown wastes no time.”

Crescent Moon’s monstrous power defied classification, and the demisprite sorcerer was among the continent’s finest. The other apostle and the inquisitors were likewise elite fighters. Yet the Leinsters could likely overwhelm them with sheer numbers—all the more so if other ducal houses committed forces to the fight.

We only needed to hold them off for a few more days, until next Darknessday. But we *did* need to hold them off.

Fossi frowned. “Shall we reinforce Atlas?”

“Against the Leinsters, we’d only be sacrificing any ordinary force we sent,” I replied. “Old Rondoiro got that much right.”

I recalled my arguments with the veteran marchesa in committee meetings before the war. I would have liked a chance to speak with her privately.

“We have no choice,” I decided. “It will be a blow to my own forces, but I’ll send my elite—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

I lunged to protect my wife, and Fossi drew his longsword as an evil wind gusted black petals through the room. The garden full of blooming flowers began to wilt, and a small demisprite sorcerer emerged from a circle in the shape of a black blossom. His hair was pale and beautiful, his limbs slender, and his eyes golden. He wore a robe of purest white and a witch hat of the same hue, adorned with an eight-petaled black flower. His hand gripped a metal staff I’d never seen before. Io “Black Blossom” Lockfield was the Saint’s number-two

apostle—and the other ace up her sleeve.

Damn. Even at my most alert, I still can't sense him.

“My good apostle,” I said, even as I shuddered, “would you care to elaborate on that remark?”

“I meant what I said,” he replied. “Well now. So *this* is your poor, poor wife.” He vanished—and before I knew it, he was seated on the bed, looking down at Carlotta.

“Have you considered that you take too many liberties?” I asked slowly, mustering all my reason to hold my rage in check.

“Hm? Oh, forgive me. I don't mean to insult you, Carlyle Carnien. I regard your way of life with a touch of pity and a dash of respect.”

A moment passed in silence. Then I said, “Fossi.”

“O-Of course.” I heard my friend resheathe his blade.

The apostle floated into the air and announced, “I will halt the troublesome Leinsters. The cursed child and defective key are Crescent Moon's prey—I'm forbidden from laying a hand on them. But the Saint's prophecies have no flaws. They account for everything. As for you, prepare the principe for sacrifice to the Cornerstone by Darknessday. Do that, and...” Another vile gust laced with black petals disturbed Carlotta's lovely hair. My rage surged, but the apostle paid it no mind. “Your wife shall be saved. Produce results before I return to this city.”

Another black floral circle appeared, and the apostle vanished.

I neatened Carlotta's hair, combing it with my fingers as I sought calm.

Results, is it?

“I'll return home and revise my mobilization plans,” Fossi said, turning to go.

“Please do,” I replied. “I'll spur Bazel to act.”

Here was a man I could depend on. I truly believed that.

At the door, Fossi paused and murmured, “Don't rush to your death, Carlyle. Your wife would never wish for that.”

“I know. Dying isn’t on my agenda.”

The door opened, and Fossi left the room without another word.

“No, I won’t die,” I whispered, brushing my darling wife’s warm cheek. “Not until I wake you up. For that...”

I would sacrifice anything—the House of Carnien, my sworn friend, the League of Principalities, the city of water, and naturally, even my own life.

A sudden breeze rattled the windows as if to condemn me.



“What?!” I cried. “You found out what’s happening in the city of water, Emma?!”

“Yes, Lady Stella. At least some of it,” the black-haired and dark-skinned maid confirmed. I’d heard that she hailed from the southern isles.

I started to rise at this long-awaited report—then sank back into my chair.

Outside the window hung a waning moon and long-tailed comet. Caren and I were alone in the room, relaxing in our sleepwear after a bath. The girls had gone to the archive in search of books, while Felicia and Sally had gone to fetch the detailed map of the Fortress of Seven Towers we’d commissioned. Lily was in the kitchenette, singing “please taste delicious” out of tune while she brewed tea.

Caren sat on her bed, ears pricked to catch every word spoken.

I looked at Emma, urging her to continue.

“We just received a cylinder containing an urgent message from Lady Sasha, who remains at the front to monitor enemy communications,” the maid said. “Magical transmissions in the city of water have partially resumed. Earl Sykes adds that ‘the jamming is no longer the work of a single sorcerer, but of several.’”

“‘The jamming is no longer the work of...’ You mean one person has been doing it all this time? That’s...hard to believe,” I murmured, pressing my sea-green griffin feather to my chest.

“What about my brother and Lydia?” the wolf-clan girl asked softly.

“No news yet, I’m afraid,” Emma replied. “Pro-and anti-war factions within the city reportedly clashed, damaging a famous hotel and plaza, and have been locked in a standoff ever since. And owing to political instability, the doge has postponed his plan to visit the southern capital and negotiate in person.”

“I... I see.”

“Caren.” I instinctively moved to my best friend’s side and hugged her. Then, squeezing both her hands, I did my best to lift her spirits. “Don’t worry! We’re talking about the Lady of the Sword and her ‘Brain,’ remember? Right about now, they’re probably—”

No, Stella. Don’t picture it.

In my mind’s eye, Lydia wore a white dress and held a parasol as she blissfully strolled through the beautiful city of water, arm in arm with Mr. Allen. An uncontrollable surge of jealousy left me at a loss for words.

“Quit it,” my best friend said and gave my forehead a flick for good measure.

I yelped, raising my hands to cover the surprisingly painful injury.

“If you want to cheer me up, you could at least finish your sentence.” Caren winked. “But thanks. You’re right. This is Allen and Lydia we’re talking about. And Atra’s with them.”

“Yes,” I agreed, blushing as I lowered my hands. How could I have forgotten about the adorable great elemental and let my imagination run away with me?

Caren was prodding my cheek when the door burst open.

“We’re back!”

“P-Pardon us.”

“Oh, honestly.”

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne had returned with a hefty volume in hand. All three wore capes over their nightgowns.

No sooner had the girls arrived than Emma made a practiced bow with an “If you’ll excuse me” and departed. She must have gone to fetch Felicia.

“Hm?” Lily poked her head in and declared, “Looks like we’ll need extra tea!” before cheerfully returning to her work.

“Welcome back,” I greeted the girls.

“I see you’ve borrowed another awfully thick book,” Caren added.

“Yes!” A lock of Tina’s hair waved as she presented the cover. The book compiled anecdotes about the sea in and around the Atlasian capital. “Talking with you made me curious. I can’t wait to read it.”

“I’ll, um, I-lend Lily a hand,” Ellie said and made for the kitchenette.

“Miss First Place is a slave driver,” Lynne added, pouring a glass of ice water. “I thought we’d be at it till midnight.”

My sister deposited her book on the table and practically leapt to the redhead’s side. Seeing how close they were warmed my heart. Tina had made a good friend.

“You’re always exaggerating, Miss Second— Wait, is Felicia still in the bath?”

“She went with Sally to pick up that map,” I said. “They should be back any—”

“L-Lady Lynne!”

The door flew open without a knock, and Sida burst in. The maid in training wore her glistening brown hair in pigtails, and the emblem of her deity, the Great Moon, dangled from her neck.

Lynne blinked, then held out her glass. “What are you panicking for, Sida?” she asked. “Calm down. Here. Have some water.”

“Th-Thank you very much.” Sida gulped down the water and let out a gasp. “Delicious!” Then, gripping her emblem, she reported, “Ms. Celebrim Ceynoth has returned from the city of water! Mr. Allen sends—”

“Please pardon my interruption,” said a tall maid with flawless dark skin and a silver clip in her long pale-scarlet hair, making her belated entrance.

“Celebrim! You’re all right?!” Lynne cried, literally jumping up and racing over to hug her.

“Why, Lady Lynne. I’m quite safe. I’ve only just returned.” Celebrim nodded to

us, gazing lovingly down at the red-haired young noblewoman.

Tina and Caren gave a start, while I covered my mouth.

She's back from the city of water? Then that means...

Ellie and Lily emerged from the kitchenette, trays in hand. The scarlet-haired maid blinked in surprise and said, "Huh? When did you get back, Celebrim?"

The nervous atmosphere relaxed, and I felt myself untense with it.

"I departed the city of water on a Nitti wyvern this morning—a new speed record," the tall maid replied, producing several letters from a pocket.

We were speechless. All except Lily, who crowed, "Ooh! My mother should be delighted to hear it!"

If I remembered correctly, the Nittis numbered among the League of Principalities' most prominent houses, and their current head served as the doge's deputy. So, Celebrim had flown from the city of water to the southern capital in record time on a foreign wyvern? It hardly seemed possible.

We had yet to get over our shock when the gorgeous maid said, "My ladies, these are for you" and began passing out envelopes. My heart leapt the moment I received mine.

"What are these?" I asked hesitantly.

"Messages from Mr. Allen," Celebrim replied.

Tina, Ellie, Caren, and I gasped.

A bolt of joy shot through me. I couldn't suppress a smile as I opened the letter, taking care not to rip it, and devoured its contents.

He's concerned for my health. And this is...the same plan for taking the fortress that I came up with?

Lynne cleared her throat. "Celebrim," she said, "when will this 'secret weapon' from my dear brother arrive?"

The rest of us exchanged bewildered looks. What secret weapon?

"Early tomorrow morning, I believe," answered Celebrim. "I recently confirmed that it has left the royal capital."

“O-Oh. That’s good, then,” Lynne murmured as her face lit up. “Wh-What is it, Tina? Ellie?”

“A grin that big isn’t decent, Lynne,” my sister gibed.

“Oh, I’m so jealous,” Ellie chimed in, and yet another play-fight began.

“Don’t I get one?” the scarlet-haired maid asked casually while she served tea.

“You do not,” Celebrim replied. “Merely a note.”

“Just a note, huh?” Lily grumbled as she took the paper. Then her expressive face brightened, and she spun on the spot. “Well, well, well!” she lilted, laughing.

“What did Allen write, Lily?” I asked, striving to control my voice.

Keep calm, Stella. Remember, you got a letter too.

Lily came to an abrupt stop, pressed her hands together, and beamed. “He says the bracelet came in handy. Thank goodness. And he sent a new spell formula.”

We fell silent, stung by this display of the firm trust that Lily and Mr. Allen shared.

“U-Um...? O Great Moon, wh-what should I do at times like this?” Sida dithered, baffled by the change of mood.

It’s not fair. I could do just as— No. Stop that, Stella. You have responsibilities now.

I gave my cheeks a light slap, straightened my back, and said, “Celebrim, did Mr. Allen say anything else about what he wrote to me?”

“If anyone has better ideas, let Stella make the final decision. But please tell her to stay in the southern capital if she’s still not feeling well,” the maid recited. “He seemed to place great faith in you.”

I managed a “Th-Thank you,” but it soon gave way to giggling. Unable to restrain myself, I hugged the letter and my griffin feather.

Mr. Allen trusted me. That was all I needed to stand and fight, even if the

whole world turned against me. What a simple woman I was.

Caren finished reading her letter and turned back to Celebrim, ears and tail bristling. “I’m relieved they’re all safe,” she said. “But would you care to explain *this?*”

Cups clattered as my best friend slammed an unaddressed paper onto the table. We startled, Sida squealed, and Lily froze with an inquisitive “Hm?”

Celebrim poured herself tea in a spare cup and raised it. “Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen are both enjoying their time with darling Miss Atra in the city of water to the fullest,” she replied. “Involvement in some rather thorny problems notwithstanding. As to the contents of that paper, I cannot say.”

“Is that so?” came the wolf-clan girl’s glacial murmur. She sparked with violet lightning, making her ears and tail stand on end.

We all gathered round to peer over her shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Ms. Caren?”

“Caren?”

“May we see?”

On the table lay a torn scrap of obviously fine paper, evidently a cutting from a hotel guest book. It bore two handwritten names.

Allen Alvern

Lydia Alvern

A dismal silence settled over us. Even Lily made a disgruntled “Hmm,” while Sida faltered, “E-Er, um...”

Wh-What on earth is—? Stop. Calm down. Be calm, Stella. This doesn’t mean that Mr. Allen and Lydia are actually...you know. They must have had a good reason for... Oh, Mr. Allen, how could you?

Frantic footfalls sounded from the corridor, and Felicia rushed in with her hair in disarray. After a few gasps for air, she said, “I... I heard Celebrim is back from the city of—”

She let out a squeal and toppled as her breath gave out. Emma and Sally caught her, crying, “Miss Fosse?!” in unison.

The rest of us looked at each other and exchanged nods. This problem could wait.

I watched as Felicia drank water and then read Mr. Allen’s letter, pouting and looking embarrassed at the same time. Once she finished, I began, “Mr. Allen and his companions are currently stranded in the city of water. And it sounds as though they’re short on time.”

“Allen suspects that the Church of the Holy Spirit plans to do something in the city next Darknessday,” Caren added. “Whatever they’re up to, you can bet it won’t be good.”

“We need to capture the Fortress of Seven Towers and secure a safe griffin route to the city as soon as possible,” Felicia said gravely from the seat where the two maids had propped her up. “But as things stand, we’ll have a hard time pushing the army farther into enemy territory. We can’t very well let people starve in the territory we’ve occupied, so getting our supply lines in order will take time.”

The armies of the Duchy of Leinster and the southern houses were the best of the best, but no number of battlefield victories would mean anything if they couldn’t keep their troops supplied.

Ellie hesitantly raised her hand. “But isn’t the fortress incredibly well defended?”

“It certainly is,” I agreed. Sacrificing too many troops would play right into the church’s hands. Still, I gave my other little sister a pat on the head. “But we can break through if we all work together. I just know it. After all, we learned from the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.”

“B-Big Sis Stella.” Ellie hesitated. “You’re right. I’ll do my best.”

She’s grown more than I could have believed since our time in the north.

“Tina, what about the question we discussed? Have you figured it out?” I asked my sister, who was furiously leafing through her book.

“It’s just as we thought!” she replied. “The tide peaks only two or three times a year, and the next one will be Lightningday afternoon—tomorrow!”

The clock was ticking. I had already sent a draft of my battle plan to Duke Leen, as well as to Duke Liam and Under-duke Lucas at high command, but could we really make it in time?

My best friends sensed me waver and spoke up.

“Stella.”

“You’ve got this!”

You’re right. This is no time to second-guess myself.

Tina’s, Ellie’s, and Lynne’s eyes also shone with determination. Lily was hugging her young cousin from behind.

I laid Mr. Allen’s letter on the table where everyone could read it.

“Personal thoughts on taking the Fortress of Seven Towers”

Locks of Tina’s and Lynne’s hair stood to attention. Ellie and Caren seemed to share their enthusiasm.

“Allow me to explain the plan of attack that Mr. Allen devised for us, along with my own ideas,” I said. “Then tell me your frank opinions. Time is short, so I’ll cut to the chase!”



“Thank you all for gathering here on such short notice. I am Lucas Leinster.”

My dear uncle’s deep voice rang out in the early-morning air of the headquarters from which he was to command the assault on the Atlasian capital.

My hand instinctively went to a pocket of my new scarlet-and-white uniform. The officers tensed as well, and so did Tina, Ellie, and Caren, with whom I’d traveled from the southern capital during the night.

And yet Lily, standing by behind me, had the nerve to whisper, “Lady Lynne, can I wait outside?”

“Of course not,” I whispered back. My cousin failed to appreciate the gravity

of the situation. Tina and Ellie were gripping the sleeves of their uniforms—military and maid, respectively—and even Caren was digging her fingers into the long skirt she'd donned to match Lily.

"I have summoned you for only one reason," Uncle Lucas announced. "Today, we topple the Fortress of Seven Towers."

A stir filled the vast pavilion.

"A bold ambition, Your Highness!" Tobias shouted, shooting to his feet in his flashy scarlet armor. "But I recall that Scarlet Heaven and Duke Leinster already rejected a proposal to take it by storm."

"Tobias speaks the truth. Has something happened to force our hand?" asked Marquess Thorgeir Hugues, a bald man in heavy plate whose girthy limbs belied his short stature.

"Your concern is warranted," my dear uncle replied. "But a crisis looms in the city of water! And my niece Lydia and Allen of the wolf clan are caught in the thick of it. Celebrim."

The beautiful maid bowed with the utmost courtesy and reported her recent findings to the assembly.

"The city of water teeters on the brink of civil war, torn between its hawks and doves. The Church of the Holy Spirit is operating behind the scenes and will likely make its move by next Darknessday. According to Mr. Allen"—she paused for effect—"their machinations may very well threaten the entire west of the continent. In my humble opinion, the fortress must fall."

Another stir shot through headquarters. All present knew my dear brother, at least by reputation, so no one questioned his analysis.

At last, Earl Nolan Bor—accompanied by Sir Ryan of the royal guard as his temporary attendant—broke the silence. "We will lose too many in a frontal assault. I do not speak from cowardice. Order us to lead the charge. Let our blood suffice!"

"Wait a moment, if you please," Tobias interjected. "My Scarlet Order will naturally be first to the fray."

“My heavy infantry will serve as the whole army’s shield,” said Marquess Hugues. “The rest of you may follow at your leisure.”

More commanders joined the three noblemen in shouting for the right to lead the charge. Tina, Ellie, and Lily listened calmly, although Caren seemed confused. When it came to morale, my house and the Howards truly defied common sense.

My dear uncle raised his left hand, and a hush fell immediately. “I applaud your valor!” he boomed. “But we have already settled on a plan of attack. Caren.”

Our student council vice president rose, looking tense. “I am Caren, daughter of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan. Allow me to explain our strategy on behalf of Her Highness Lady Stella Howard, whose ill health prevents her from leaving the southern capital.”

The officers’ eyes widened, and murmurs broke out.

“I know that name.”

“The champion who flew west alone!”

“I’d heard the reports, but...”

Caren seemed to have garnered quite a reputation.

Despite her visible embarrassment, she came forward and tapped a raised-relief map with a pointer. “First, we won’t storm the walls. As you’ve all warned, our losses would be too great.” She looked at Lily and me. “A few days ago, Lady Lynne Leinster, her maid Lily, and I conducted reconnaissance in force around the fortress. It has three outer walls. A many-layered fire-resistant barrier shields the main gate, and not even a Firebird can breach it. The seven spires also projected a formidable strategic barrier, and the defenders were well armed with spell-guns. We believe that even an aerial griffin assault would result in heavy casualties.”

“Then as I said—”

“Nolan.” My dear uncle silenced Earl Bor with a look.

“Attacks from the walls will clearly hamper any attempt to cross the northern

moat as well,” Caren continued. “The fortress deserves its reputation for impregnability.”

Three nested walls, a mighty gate, a strategic barrier, and ocean, river, or moat on all sides. With long-range spell-gunners to man it, the fortress would be nigh untakable.

Caren paused, then delivered her conclusion. “Therefore, we must shatter the enemy’s defenses with our first strike.”

Tina rose from her seat beside me and dipped an elegant curtsy. She played a consummate duke’s daughter at times like this...although a lock of her hair was whirling with excitement.

“Duke Howard’s second daughter, Tina, at your service,” she said. “Allow me to supplement this explanation. Ellie.”

“Y-Yes’m.” Ellie closed her right hand, and a series of dates and numbers appeared in midair. The sudden display baffled the seasoned officers and left them hanging on Tina’s words.

“These represent predicted high tides near the fortress,” she said. “On this date, I believe that the water will nearly reach its western wall. And the seawater will be drawn into the northern moat.”

The commanders stirred, taken aback.

“A spring tide?”

“How could she possibly calculate such a thing?”

“Wait. If Lady Tina is as brilliant as rumor makes her, then perhaps we should listen.”

Caren rapped her own palm with the pointer. The sound drew all eyes.

“According to this forecast, the water level will peak this afternoon. And so...” Caren drew a circle on the opposite bank of the moat, right in front of the main gate. “First, Lady Tina will use the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf—newly improved by my brother, Allen—to freeze the moat...and create a ‘road’ for our charge. Lady Lynne Leinster and Miss Ellie Walker will assist with her magical control.”

The outlandish plan drew gasps and cries of approbation from the crowd.

Lady Stella had seemed like a saint of the battlefield when she'd unveiled this plan the night before. "My father created a road of ice on the northern front," she had said boldly. "I don't see why we can't do the same in the south."

Caren's pointer drew a straight line from the far bank of the moat to the gate. "Second, I will strike the main gate as a lightning battering ram. At the same time, Ms. Celebrim and Lily will destroy the isolated southernmost spire, weakening the strategic barrier. Once we breach the gate, we will call on your valor to carry the day. Oh, and my brother also devised the spell we'll use to break down the gate."

"This operation matches Allen's written recommendation, which Celebrim returned with yesterday, in almost every detail," Uncle Lucas added. "He also suggested striking multiple spires simultaneously, but that would call for more of our finest fighters than we can spare. New activity in Bazel demands my mother and brother's attention."

The Bazelians had finally done more than hide behind their walls, doubtless responding to politics in the city of water. Still, my dear grandmother and father must have been gnashing their teeth in frustration.

"I understand the proposal," Tobias said, choosing his words with care. "That said..."

"Is it truly feasible?" asked Nolan.

Marquess Hugues stopped rubbing his bald head and rested his hands on the table. "We have a duty to shelter children," he said with conviction. "I am loath to place them on a battlefield. And given the practical concerns, I beg Your Highness: order us to storm the walls."

My dear uncle hesitated, looking thoughtful. "If you insist, Thorgeir, then perhaps—"

"Wait just—"

"I see no problem," a dignified voice cut in from behind me before I could finish my objection.

My cousin's lovely scarlet tresses fluttered as she strode forward to stand protectively beside Caren. She wore the face of Lily Leinster, a far cry from her

typical expression.

“No problem whatsoever,” she continued. “Lady Tina Howard has more than proven her competence in the eastern capital. Caren’s courage and martial prowess have won even Lady Lydia’s respect, and a test this morning demonstrated that her strength exceeds our measurements of the gate’s defenses. Most importantly...” Her expression brimmed with confidence—a sign of absolute trust. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my dear uncle and Tobias furrow their brows slightly. “Mr. Allen says it’s possible. So why hesitate? He wrote, ‘If the army objects, I see no objection to adopting a different plan. Without unity of purpose, swift victory will prove impossible.’ Is that not so, Your Highness?”

This direct appeal from his daughter brought a frown to my dear uncle’s face. Reluctantly, however, he said, “It is.”

“If we fail to capture the fortress and a calamity befalls the city of water,” Lily continued, going in for the kill, “we will be placing all responsibility on Mr. Allen and Lady Lydia yet again, just as we did with the monstrous Stinging Sea. Would that not go down in the annals of the Under-ducal House of Leinster and the entire southern nobility as an unprecedented disgrace?”

Silence filled the vast pavilion.

Then a bold commander slammed his red-armored hand on the table and shouted, “Agreed on all counts! My Scarlet Order stands ready for anything!”

The other leaders changed their tune with the same breakneck speed. I’d expect no less of my house’s vassals.

“Your Highness, give the House of Bor our chance for glory! Please! I beg of you!”

“Make way for your elders, young upstarts. I’ll show a true Hugues charge.”

My dear uncle clenched his fists. “I rely upon you all,” he said. “Now, I hereby declare this council—”

“Please pardon my intrusion.”

Our maid corps’s beautiful, bespectacled, black-haired, and dark-skinned

second-in-command stepped through the pavilion's entrance. She held a long, thin black box.

"Romy?!" I exclaimed, just as Lily cried, "M-Ma'am?!"

Shouldn't she be in the royal—? Don't tell me...

Romy nodded, soaring morale showing through her icy demeanor. "Romy, second-in-command of the Leinster Maid Corps, has returned. Lady Lynne, this is for you." Bowing low, she presented the box.

A "secret weapon" from the royal capital...

I stood stiffly and accepted the gift. Then I opened it.

Tina and Ellie shrieked as fiery mana burst forth. Caren muttered, "Isn't that...?" Everyone else seemed just as surprised.

The box held a crimson dagger. Not even the numerous seals imprinted on its sheath could fully contain its arcane power.

"The dagger of fiery serpents which the former prince Gerard wielded immediately prior to the rebellion," Romy announced, eyeing me from behind her spectacles. "The professor assumed custody of it following that incident, but I have brought it here at Mr. Allen's fervent request. He evidently dispatched a letter to that effect before he left for the royal capital."

"My dear brother wants *me* to have *this*?" I asked. First came joy, then confusion and fear. The pressure bore down on me, driving me to panic.

"I understand your plan of attack," Romy continued, spreading her skirt in a graceful curtsy. "Please command me to join Ms. Celebrim and Lily in assaulting the spires. I promise you that I shall smash this renowned fortification's eponymous towers to dust."



With the council of war behind me, I left the pavilion, stood on the north bank looking out on the fortress, and sighed. True to Tina's predictions, the tide was rising nearly to the walls. I couldn't see defenders on the tower before me; they must have assumed that we couldn't possibly assail them.

Everyone else was on their way to make their own final preparations. I,

however...

“Dear brother,” I murmured, dropping my gaze to the crimson dagger at my waist, “I... I can’t possibly...”

I’d realized as soon as I’d laid my hands on it that this dreadful enchanted blade was far beyond me. I couldn’t imagine myself wielding it.

“What are you thinking, sighing before battle?” a voice demanded. “Are you *trying* to jinx us?”

Tina strode up with Lady Stella’s azure ribbon in her hair and her rod in hand. She advanced past me and said offhandedly, with her back turned, “Just leave it behind if you don’t think you can handle it.”

“Th-That’s easy for you to say. You don’t have to—”

Tina turned around. Unable to bear her earnest gaze, I hung my head and grumbled, “You’re right. I don’t think I can do it. I mean, I’m Lynne Leinster, not the Lady of the Sword. I don’t know what to do with such an outlandish gift out of the blue.”

“Oh, really? You mean you can’t trust our tutor?”

“I... I said no such thing!” I shouted, stung. “My dear brother saw me for who I am! Not ‘Lynne Leinster,’ but just ‘Lynne’! So—”

Then I realized.

Of course. My dear brother has seen the real me ever since that summer day we first met. Grinning all the while and whispering in my ear, “Lydia gives us both a hard time, doesn’t she?” And he gave this dagger not to my dear sister but to me.

“I’m guessing you have your answer?” my platinum-haired peer asked, smiling. “I’m the same way. I don’t believe in myself any more than you do.” She held out her trembling left hand. “Remember, Lynne: Tina Howard couldn’t cast a spell until a few months ago. But our tutor—Allen—gave me the most fundamental role in this operation. He had complete faith that I’d been practicing my spell control every single day! He would never have sent a formula for Blizzard Wolf that uses some of the silver-snow he gave me in the

eastern capital otherwise!”

“Tina.”

She made it into the Royal Academy at the head of our class and proved herself exceptional, but she’s still forging ahead. While I...

I touched the dagger’s sheath and felt a mighty pulse of mana.

“Mr. Allen and Stella believe in and care about me more than I do myself,” my best friend continued, tightening her grip on her rod. “So I have to try! Lynne, I’m serious about wanting to walk side by side with Mr. Allen. I won’t let Lydia or Stella beat me! Will you?”

“I... I want my dear brother as much as— Oh, jeez! Tina!”

She laughed. “I’d feel like I was neglecting my duty if I didn’t bring out your lovable side every now and then!”

“Whatever duty you think you have, abandon it this instant!” I snapped.

As we giggled together, my doubts melted away. We held out our fists and brought them together.

“Tina.”

“Lynne.”

Then, in unison, “I won’t let anyone beat me!”

Dear brother, I...I feel the same way Tina does. So—

“Lady Tina! Lady Lynne!” Ellie cried, flinging her arms around us without warning.

“Wh-What’s come over you?” I asked, while Tina let out a squeal.

Ellie merely giggled and hugged us tighter. Something soft pressed against my face.

I know I’ve seen them in the bath, but I still refuse to accept this! And if you ask me, Lily, Felicia, and Lady Stella are just as deplorable!

Soon, our only upperclassman to avoid that particular sin walked up. “You three certainly seem relaxed,” she said. “Lynne, come here.”

“Caren?” I replied.

When I approached the wolf-clan girl despite my confusion, she unsheathed her own dagger and demanded, “Draw the Dagger of Fiery Serpents, and keep your grip firm.”

“What?” I gasped, nonplussed.

“Allen’s orders. He says we can ‘probably’ trigger them. Now hurry up.”

“R-Right!” I scrambled to draw my new weapon from its sheath. No sooner did it slide free than formulae on the blade activated to restrain its mana.

The headmaster’s and professor’s mana!

The drawn dagger felt heavy in my hand. Its single edge gleamed dully but did no more.

Then Caren entered Lightning Apotheosis amid a shower of sparks. Without ceremony, she swung her own dagger down at mine, and the metal collided with a crash like I’d never heard before.

Lightning and fire flowers filled the air. Then Tina, Ellie, and I all gave a start as my dagger turned bright crimson and pulsed with flame as though it had a life of its own. Its mana had grown—and by an order of magnitude.



Caren sheathed her dagger with a skill I couldn't help but admire. "Apparently, that dagger started out as one of a pair that Twin Heavens gave to Allen the Shooting Star," she explained and gave her sheath a pat. "The other one is right here."

"A witch's gift?" Tina murmured.

"Amazing," added Ellie.

They both clung to my shoulders, at a loss for more to say.

Dear brother, how could you send me such a treasure?

My wolf-clan upperclassman straightened her floral beret. "There are no sinful weapons, Lynne. Only sinful wielders. Can you see what I'm trying to say?"

This dagger's former wielder, Gerard Wainwright, had been consumed by power. But my dear brother believed that Lynne Leinster could master it!

"Yes," I said, pressing a hand to my heart and feeling my cheeks redden. "Yes!"

"Good. In that case—"

Vast shadows fell over us as three griffins flew overhead. Astride them sat Celebrim with her great scythe, Romy with her massive hammer...and Lily, who waved and shouted, "Lady Lyyynne!" as she brought her mount lower.

"Change of plans," said the student council vice president, raising her left index finger. "Lynne, join in the assault on the towers! This is Stella's idea, not Allen's. Aren't you itching to stretch your wings and fly solo?"

I thought for a moment, then shouted, "Yes! Yes, I am!"

"Lynne..." Tina murmured.

"Oh, Lady Lynne," Ellie echoed.

I flashed my nervous best friends a fearless grin. "I'll be quite all right—unless *you* miss your first strike, Tina. So don't hold back!"

"I... I don't need you to tell me that!"

“Y-Yes’m!”

“Well then,” Caren said, holding out her left fist.

I raised my own to meet it.

“Let’s get this over with and then get going—to the city of water! The Lady of the Sword may act like she’s on her honeymoon, but we’ll take Allen back from her and smash the church’s schemes while we’re at it!”

In unison, Tina, Ellie, and I responded, “Yes, we will!”



“Hold on tight, now, Lady Lynne,” Lily chirped as her griffin rose sharply away from the cheering allied camp.

“I... I don’t need reminding,” I replied, clinging to my cousin’s waist. Levitation magic still eluded me.

Below us, the hulking fortress maintained its silence. I didn’t even spot many soldiers on the walls.

“Lynne, inform me when you reach the designated altitude,” Caren ordered over my communication orb. “Once we breach the walls, we’ll race to see who gets to their headquarters first.”

“Understood,” I responded. “I won’t go down easily!”

Laughter closed out the call.

That reminds me...

“Lily, my dear uncle *does* know that I’ll join in the assault on the spires, doesn’t he?”

“Lady Stella explained things ahead of time!” my cousin replied. “She asked him to ‘respect your decision.’”

“She did?”

My student council president had chosen to remain in the southern capital, but I would need to thank her once the dust had settled.

The other maids awaited us high in the sky.

“Celebrim, Romy!” I called, raising a hand. “It’s a pleasure to join you!”

“Lady Lynne, how you’ve grown,” the former second-in-command replied via orb, wiping her eyes and giving her scythe a welcoming flourish.

“I won’t fail you,” her successor added, adjusting her spectacles before brandishing her hammer. “Nor you, Lady Lily.”

“I’m a *maid*!” Lily fumed.

I chuckled, then called my vice president. “Caren, we’ve reached altitude!”

“Understood.”

That short response ended our contact.

I withdrew a small telescope from my pocket and confirmed our target: seven soaring spires and, in their center, the long-abandoned church that housed enemy headquarters. Across the broad moat, the massive main gate shone with a dull, metallic gleam. And now that I took a good look, I could see it stood a fair distance from the bank. Once Tina froze the moat, we would need to hit the towers hard to divert attacks from Caren.

Within the walls, knights fell in around a robust man I took for their commander, who was gesticulating with his baton. They didn’t strike me as disheartened.

Cold air brushed my cheek.

“Did Tina do this?” I wondered, lowering my spyglass to find a whirl of countless icy flowers filling the air over the entire fortress.

My best friend’s voice rang from our communication orbs.

“Begin!”

I hurriedly turned my telescope to the bank opposite the fortress. White and azure ribbons adorned Tina’s rod as she held it aloft, poised to cast her spell. Ellie stood behind her, hands raised to help control it. Tina’s crystal began to radiate cool, clear light as a tremendous, jaw-dropping torrent of mana surged forth.

The allied camp let out a cheer so loud I could hear it in the sky. Then it raised

more ice-resistant barriers than I could count.

An icy wolf began to take shape amid the snowy gusts, taking on a deep, deep azure hue as—

Tina let out a silent scream and fell back half a step. I heard her groan via my orb.

“Don’t rush, Lady Tina! Slow and steady!” Ellie called, pressing on Tina’s back as she struggled to regain ground.

They were trying to control a new Blizzard Wolf, imbued with some of the witch’s silver-snow. They’d shown me the formula, so I knew the spell’s difficulty had skyrocketed. Ellie’s masterful control was supposed to compensate, but would she really be enough?

Ice was already beginning to cover the water near the bank as a fierce blizzard grew—a *black* blizzard, stained the color of night.

“Tina!” I shouted into my orb without hesitation. “The darkness is too strong! Rein it in!”

Tina grunted with exertion, and Ellie screamed her name as they struggled to control the spell. But despite their desperate efforts to manifest it completely, their prospects looked grim.

Then came a chipper “Get those towers for me, Lynne!”

“L-Lily?!” I cried. But before I could even try to stop my cousin, she was gone.

Short-range teleportation?! Was that Black Cat Promenade?!

I scrambled to seize the griffin’s reins and maintain altitude as Tina’s and Ellie’s confused shouts rang from my orb.

“Lily?!”

“D-Didn’t you leave to attack the spires?!”

Innumerable fire flowers pushed back against the inky blizzard. My cousin’s scarlet hair trailed behind her as she landed and placed her left hand on Tina’s rod.

“Calm yourself and work carefully,” she advised in a voice that radiated

dignified refinement. “I know how challenging Allen’s formulae can be...” The furious black blizzard ever so gradually subsided, and the fire flowers clustered protectively around Tina and Ellie. “But they’re kind and gentle as well. They won’t run wild unless you fear them. Believe.”

Without warning, Tina’s mana soared to new heights. Even the unflappable Celebrim and Romy murmured in astonishment.

“Could it be?”

“Goodness.”

The new flood of mana began to condense as two wings of ice formed on my best friend’s back.

“I already know that!” she shouted. “Ellie!”

“Yes, Lady Tina!” the maid responded at once and set about taming wild bursts of stray power. She seemed to be rewriting part of the formula on the spot, just as my dear brother often did.

I shivered at my friends’ growth, but I also rallied my courage. I wouldn’t fall behind!

The full force of Tina’s mana concentrated into a single point, forming a small sphere. For a moment, all sound vanished. Then my platinum-haired peer brought down her rod, shouting:

“I *will* catch up to my tutor—to Allen!”

An azure blizzard swept over the moat...and a colossal wolf of ice materialized, howling as it came!

The allied troops joined in, shouting and beating their armor for all they were worth. On the fortress walls, defenders scurried into action. They must have realized what we were up to.

The icy wolf pawed the ground several times, then took off like a shot. It froze the great moat solid in an instant and pressed on, creating a glacial expanse.



How is it this powerful? Did Frigid Crane lend a hand from inside Tina?

Meanwhile, a great bell sounded from the fortress. The seven towers shone and began constructing their strategic barrier.

The maids called to me.

“Lady Lynne.”

“That’s our cue. I must have words with Lily later.”

“Understood,” I replied, abandoning speculation.

Blizzard Wolf was already pressing against the strategic barrier, drawing the defenders’ fire as it strove to break through.

“I’ve got this!” Caren barked, then cloaked herself in electricity and charged. She became a streak of lightning, racing across the ice field toward the gate at breathtaking speed. Her crackling aura changed shape with each step forward until it took on the appearance of a gigantic wolf head in full howl—a true “Lightning Wolf”!

I praised my upperclassman with all my heart as I drew my sword and dagger. “Celebrim! Romy! There’s our target!” I commanded, pointing my sword at the fortress’s southernmost spire.

“Yes, my lady!” both maids responded as their griffins picked up speed.

I urged my own mount forward too. The tower loomed closer every moment. Blizzard Wolf and Caren must have been chewing through the strategic barrier because only two of its seven layers remained.

“Allow me to take the lead,” Celebrim said. She leapt off her griffin before Romy could finish shouting “Ma’am!” let alone stop her.

A sweep of the Headhunter’s scythe tore a rent in the strained barrier. One layer remained.

“Oh, honestly. You never change!” the second-in-command grumbled. She leapt too, putting all her might behind her massive hammer...and smashed the barrier to splinters.

The defenders on the wall froze, their faces masks of alarm.

Both maids landed on the fortress roof and shouted in unison, “Lady Lynne!”

I crossed my sword and dagger, sprang off my griffin’s back, and plummeted toward the spire.

Blizzard Wolf’s mana is fading. For Caren’s sake, I need to make this blow count!

With a piercing yell, I activated my best Scarlet Sword and swung it horizontally at the onrushing tower. I felt no impact whatsoever as I sliced the thick stone wall in two. The tower was toppling, spouting flames as it fell.

“Huh?!” I blurted out, more surprised than anyone.

How could it be that easy?!

I landed on a nearby roof, watching Celebrim and Romy scatter the stunned defenders out of the corner of my eye. Then my dagger flashed—almost joyfully, it seemed—and an enormous fire serpent appeared, launching itself at the second tower.

W-Wait for me!

“You won’t stop me!” Caren roared from my orb.

Flashes of lightning shot through the area around the gate. Reverberations of sundered metal and gouts of flame followed.

She managed to break through?!

“Success!” Caren reported jubilantly. “I demolished the main gate!”

“All forces, charge!” commanded my dear uncle.

Then came a flurry of orders from other commanders.

“Scarlet Order! Let us be second to the fray!”

“Ride! Ride!”

“Support the assault force and advance. We’ll secure the gate.”

In the meantime, the maids had already subdued the area around the spire.

“Lady Lynne,” Celebrim urged.

“Let us be on our way as well,” Romy added. “To the third tower.”

I looked at the second and saw it already collapsing in the coils of the fire serpent.

Dear brother, h-have you perhaps heard of moderation?!

“R-Right you are,” I said, nervously eyeing the crimson dagger. “And once we’ve toppled every tower, to enemy headquarters!”

“Yes, my lady!”

We dashed off along the wall, noting the obvious disorder of the enemy troops.

Tina’s mana was fading—and no wonder, after the spell she’d unleashed. We would need to handle the rest!

“Lynne, let’s meet at enemy headquarters,” Caren called over my orb, interference somewhat distorting her voice.

“Very well. And take care!” I replied. “Lily?”

“Sure thing!” Lily piped up. “You can count on me to guard Miss Caren! After all, we might be sisters-in-law someday!”

“I will *never* have a sister-in-law!” Caren snapped. “There’s only enough room at my brother’s side for me! Now, try to keep up!”

Honestly, the nerve of my cousin.

Up ahead, I could see Romy pressing her right hand to her head too.

I looked around and spotted allied griffins wheeling through the sky now that the strategic barrier had weakened. Below, some of the stunned enemy troops wailed reports.

“S-Sir! It’s the main gate and the towers!”

“G-Griffins are coming!”

“The enemy is charging, with the Scarlet Order in their vanguard!”

“F-Fire from the ramparts can’t stop them all!”

My dear uncle and his commanders must mean business.

In the meantime, the fiery serpent had pulverized a third tower.

Am I imagining things, or does it look rather proud of itself? But what does that matter?! I could never face my dear brother again if I let a magical creature with a will of its own upstage me!

I piled on more strength-enhancing magic and picked up speed.

Only four towers left!



“And that’s the last of them!” I shouted, swinging the Dagger of Fiery Serpents at the westernmost spire—the only one still standing. A massive snake of flame emerged from the glowing crimson blade, smashing and coiling through the masonry. In no time at all, it had reduced the tower to a burning ruin.

“Splendid work, Lady Lynne,” Celebrim said.

“This way, please,” added Romy. “Your steed awaits.”

The veteran maids had subdued the enemy knights and men-at-arms who had massed to defend the final tower and already gotten back astride their griffins.

“Thank you both,” I replied, slowly replacing the dagger in its sheath at my waist. The fire serpent vanished, although it didn’t seem altogether willing. Once I conjured the creature, I couldn’t control it whatsoever until I resheathed the blade.

Dear brother, we’re going to have a long talk about this when I see you in the city of water!

I hopped from the roof onto my griffin. As it climbed, I gained a clear view of the vast fortress’s plight. All seven towers lay in ruins, and holes gaped not only in the main gate but at several points along the once-strong walls as well. The aftermath of Tina’s Blizzard Wolf must have weakened them. Allied griffins danced wildly through the skies above, supporting our ground forces with strike after strike. Victory cheers and dark smoke rose everywhere I looked.

The plan worked!

I hadn’t heard a peep from my orb in some time, but I put that down to the flood of new users taxing our communications.

Once we take this fortress, Atlas will have to—

“I never tire of admiring your noble profile, Lady Lynne,” Celebrim’s voice sounded from my orb. “Yet to my sorrow, I must leave to support other units. Look there.”

With her scythe, she indicated the road before the soaring church at the fortress’s core. Through the billowing smoke, I saw an allied force in matching scarlet armor locked in fierce combat with enemy knights. They were giving as good as they got against the Scarlet Order, the finest that the southern houses had to offer.

The enemy commander’s elite guard!

“I leave matters in your hands, Romy,” Celebrim added.

“I will not fail you.”

“Take care, Celebrim!” I called as the gorgeous maid saluted me and sent her griffin into a steep dive. I returned her salute with my left hand and said, “Romy, we should—”

Before I could say “go too,” lightning and flame skewered a building near the fortress’s center. I could see shattered glass fall in a glittering shower.

“Miss Caren and Lily casting from a distance, I suspect,” the hammer-wielding second-in-command calmly remarked.

“We’ve no time to waste!” I shouted, tugging my griffin’s reins and sending it racing through the air. “Tina! Ellie! Tell me what’s happening where you are!” I called into my orb as we soared over the fortress so vast it could pass for a small town.

The response came back staticky and hopelessly garbled.

“Ly...enemy inter...”

“Be care...could be...reinfo...”

“Why would the enemy jam our communications this late in the battle?” I murmured. “And how could they receive reinforcements?”

“Lady Lynne!” Romy cried. “The sky!”

Alarmed, I stopped my griffin and turned it around in midair. In the sky above the fortress hung an immense black flower.

“A... A mass-teleportation spell?!” I exclaimed.

The Flower Sage, Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe of the demisprites, had transported us all from the royal to the eastern capital in an instant. Her strategic teleportation spell, Phantasmal Falling Star-Blossom, was still fresh in my memory. But her magic hadn’t seemed nearly this sinister.

Every soldier on the ground gazed skyward, enemy and ally alike. Then they let out a collective gasp as the circle pulsed with dark-gray light, and several dozen fully armored, pike-wielding spell-soldiers dropped within the walls. I also glimpsed a small white figure dart into enemy headquarters.

Are these the reinforcements Ellie warned about?!

“They’re coming from below as well!” Romy pointed, her gaze hardening behind her glasses.

A tangle of roots and branches burst from the ground without warning, rapidly engulfing stone roads, walkways, and buildings as it grew. Could this be...?

“Hermitage of Verdant Billows?!” I cried. “One of Twin Heavens’ taboo spells that my dear brother mentioned?!”

Wails and screams from the people below me cut through the worsening static. I brought my griffin to a higher altitude to survey the situation, and what I saw took my breath away. The plants and spell-soldiers were attacking not only my allies but the league’s knights and soldiers as well.

“Can’t they tell friend from foe?!” I demanded. “Where is the sorcerer?! Where are they?!”

“Lynne!”

“Lady Lynne!”

I turned toward the shouts and saw a wolf-clan girl armored in lightning dashing along the rooftops. A scarlet-haired maid ran beside her, mowing down roots with a pair of greatswords.

“Caren! Lily!” I yelled.

“The sorcerer is in enemy headquarters!”

“Let’s get going!”

“Right!” I called back. But just as I made to tug the reins, roots and branches launched themselves at me with tremendous speed. I was caught off guard, but a black-haired, bespectacled maid sprang into the empty air.

“Not on my watch, you don’t,” she said, pulverizing the plants with a swing of her massive hammer before landing on a stone walkway, where she slowly raised her weapon again.

“Romy!” I cried.

“Please proceed, my ladies. I will—”

A spell-soldier leapt from the ground to strike at the second-in-command, far more agile than any I’d encountered before.

“I do not appreciate interruptions,” Romy said, deflecting a pike thrust. A merciless hammer blow crushed her assailant’s head. The spell-soldier spouted black fluid—not red blood—and fell still.

Are these ones not...people?

“I will hold this position,” the maid repeated, adjusting her glasses as she gave her hammer a graceful one-handed twirl. “Have no fear. These creatures seem a touch quicker than those that appeared at Avasiek and the eastern capital, but their durability appears to have suffered. Lily, perform your duty as a maid.”

“Yes, ma’am!” my cousin lilted. Then her expression turned grave. “Take care, Romy.”

A fresh spell-soldier leapt up. Romy sent it flying with a backhand blow, then courteously dipped her head. “Certainly, Lady Lily. Miss Caren, I hope that you will look after them both.”

“Count on it. Now, let’s go!” Caren answered and took off at a run.

Lily followed suit with an embarrassed “H-Honestly!”

I prayed for Romy’s safety as I tugged my griffin’s reins and shouted, “Fly! Fly

as fast as you can!”

We plunged through a gaping hole into the former church that served as enemy headquarters and immediately beheld a scene of breathtaking slaughter.

“What happened here?” I stammered.

My companions were at a loss for words.

These people must not even have had a chance to fight back. The light from ancient stained glass windows revealed at least a dozen fallen knights and staff officers. They lay with shock still on their faces, staining broken chairs and tables, countless papers, and unfurled maps with their fresh blood.

Only one person remained standing.

“Hm? Oh, you’re here already,” the boy said, turning. “What a nuisance. If only you’d kept playing until my work was done.”

He wore a pristine white robe with a white witch hat—much like the one that my dear brother’s former schoolmate Teto Tijerina affected. He had white hair as well, creating a striking impression. He stood no taller than Ellie, and I found it hard to believe that his slender, childlike limbs could have perpetrated this horror. And yet...

“C-Curse you, demisprite,” groaned a man approaching middle age. “You and your Ch-Church of the Holy Spirit.”

More fresh blood spilled onto the floor. The boy’s left hand gripped a single-edged dagger, buried deep in the breast of the enemy general, Robson Atlas.

I dismounted my griffin and took my place beside Caren and Lily, sword at the ready. They both stood poised for combat.

“You there,” I said. “What... What is the meaning of this?!”

“Cleaning,” he replied. “A tiresome chore. I might have had more fun going south. Still, this responsibility falls to me.”

“‘Cleaning’? ‘Responsibility’?” My voice shook. I couldn’t make sense of what I was hearing.

This boy's mana seems bottomless. And if he's a demisprite, I doubt he's as young as he looks.

Caren's eyes narrowed. "You dress like a church apostle," she said as her cross-headed lightning spear raged brighter. "I'm guessing you caused this atrocity?"

"Well now." The boy casually tossed the man to the floor, then used a cloth to wipe the blood from his dagger before sheathing it. I noticed a black flower on his hat. "You're quite a clever wolf. And Lightning Apotheosis! A freak of atavism. While I'd love to collect you as a research subject—"

A massive Firebird slammed into the boy and set off a fiery explosion. The remaining stained glass shattered, and the inferno toppled walls along with it.

I shielded myself with my sword and called, "Lily—"

"Disgusting," my greatsword-wielding cousin said bluntly, her scarlet hair rising and swaying with mana. I'd never seen her so furious.

"I see. Two Leinster scions and one lightning wolf."

To our shock, an ill wind scattered the flames, and the apostle emerged holding a metal staff.

My communication orb sounded faintly.

Understood.

"Not bad," the apostle continued. "Constructing that teleportation spell is seven kinds of tiresome, but I see I didn't do it for nothing. Rejoice! I shall grant you an opportunity to make yourselves useful to me—Io Lockfield, second among the apostles! Rejoice that I came here from the city of water and not that lowly dimwit Edith. Once I manage to collect you, I might even consider putting that self-important vampiress in her place."

"Their second-in-command," Caren murmured.

Lily kept silent, and my eyes widened.

I'd heard of Lady Stella's battle with the apostle Edith in the northern land of Rostlay. The sorceress had commanded a skeletal dragon and even cast a taboo spell, Reverie of Restless Revenants. And this apostle outranked her!

“I’ve heard enough of your whining,” Lily declared, leveling a greatsword at the boy. She must have understood the orb’s message too. “Apostle or not, who you are doesn’t change what we’re here to do! Besides, if your bosses booted you out of the city of water and sent you into enemy territory alone, they must care even less about you than that bunch we fought at Avasiek. Are you *sure* you’re not a sacrificial pawn?”

“What?” Something changed in the boy’s demeanor. The eyes beneath his hat brim flashed golden. “Me, one of only two apprentices to Floral Heaven, the culmination of a millennium of Glenbysidhes, a sacrificial pawn? Me, anointed with the name of ‘Io,’ lesser than sham apostles whose names I never bothered to learn?”

“Don’t be silly! You can’t match other demisprites at teleportation, and your taboo spells don’t measure up to a witch’s,” Lily taunted in a singsong, calmly weaving spells all the while. She was playing for time. “And to top it all off, we know a sorcerer whose finesse leaves you in the dust.”

The air suddenly grew heavy, and the whole church rumbled. Black floral wards blocked the doors and the hole through which we’d entered. Emotion vanished from the apostle’s eyes as he floated off the ground. I felt something worming through the earth below us.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll make your deaths brutal.”

“Lynne! Caren!” Lily shouted.

“Right!” we responded in unison.

For a startled moment, the apostle left himself open. We used it to dart into range. Then we let out roars as I struck him with my Scarlet Sword, Caren with a massive, cross-headed lightning spear, and Lily with her greatswords swathed in fiery flowers.

A staggering explosion ensued. A section of the church’s roof fell in. Flames danced.

I know we landed a direct hit. He must have suffered at least some—

“I see. You taunted me, then struck the first blow with all your might. Not a bad strategy.”

A shiver ran through me as I turned to find the apostle evaluating our attack from the air behind us. Dark-stained demisprite wings spread from his back.

“Casting even an inferior Firebird at your age is a feat, and your Lightning Apotheosis is fairly polished,” he continued. “Considering your youth and the waning power of the great elementals in this age of magical decline, I suppose I ought to praise you.”

Some of his words piqued my curiosity, but I couldn’t afford to dwell on them. Caren and Lily looked as grim as I felt.

“However...” No sooner had the apostle’s lips twisted in a sneer than his pitch-dark mana erupted. To make matters worse, countless roots and branches pushed up through the floor, engulfing the corpses. “You can’t defeat me. Your meager talents fall far short of my master, Floral Heaven, and my master’s senior apprentice, the late Lady of Ice.”

None of us spoke.

Judging by their name, Floral Heaven must be related to the Flower Sage. But who is the Lady of Ice? One of the legends of the age of strife goes by that nickname in fairy tales. But in the present day...it does have one claimant, albeit with an added “Little”: Miss First Place. And that means...

I tightened my grip on my sword and renewed my wavering resolve.

This might be the clue to Tina and Lady Stella’s late mother, Duchess Rosa Howard, that my dear brother has been searching for. I can’t lose hope now!

Caren and Lily took a step forward, apparently sharing my sentiment.

“You realize you can’t win, but you’ll fight anyway? Tiresome, but I can sympathize,” the apostle said, squinting at us. He raised his staff high, and black flower petals began whirling together at high speed.

Judging from his mana... A taboo wind spell!

“Don’t let him finish casting!” I yelled.

“I won’t!” Caren responded at once.

We shot off through the burning church as fast as our legs would carry us. Our battle cries rang out as, blasting plants aside, we struck from both sides at once.

Yet the boy sneered as we bounced off his stout magical defenses.

“Useless.”

A moment later, Lily’s Firebird dove! The spell struck true, but black petals soon swallowed and extinguished its inferno.

My cousin conjured countless fire flowers from the bracelet on her left wrist, enveloping the apostle. Then she let out a sharp yell and drove both greatswords home at once. Lily’s best slash crashed into the barrier with an impact that sent a spiderweb of cracks through the walls. But black petals soon scattered her fire flowers and extinguished them as well.

“Tedious,” the apostle sighed.

My cousin let out a cry and Caren and I screamed, “Lily!” as his further-fortified defenses flung her back. Caren caught her.

Even as relief washed over me, I swung my sword to the side. Hundreds of flame spears surrounded the apostle and fired in rapid succession—but to no effect. A chill black wind blew them all away.

The apostle gazed down from his sphere of inky petals, staff raised as he deployed a jet-black tornado. “Three kinds of tiresome,” he said. “Die already and make yourselves useful to me. Still, I may as well take your pointless struggles as payment for a little demonstration. Let me show you a witch-crafted tactical taboo: North Wind of Dark Death.”

I ground my teeth in frustration.

He outclasses us by so much that we can’t even land a blow! There must be some other— Ah.

My eyes dropped to my fearsome dagger, still in its sheath.

But...

Violet sparks and fire flowers flew.

“Lynne!” Caren shouted. “Worry later!”

“Believe in yourself, Lynne!” Lily joined in. “And in Allen!”

I steadied myself. “Yes! Yes, you’re right!” My mind made up, I thrust my

sword into the floor and gripped my dagger.

“What?” The apostle showed surprise for the first time. “Could that be an Etherheart—?”

“Lily’s right. It doesn’t matter who you are!” I shouted, squeezing the hilt as tight as could be while I worked up my courage.

Please, give me strength—strength to keep everyone safe!

I drew the blade with all my might, and...

“Well now,” the apostle murmured, just as Caren and Lily gasped my name.

The colossal fire serpent sprang forth and danced through the air, incinerating the plants. Then the blade sucked it in again. Crimson flames enveloped me...and I understood. I knew the powerful feelings of the *witch boy* who had wrought this dagger and of the *girl with short platinum hair* who had once carried it. They had wanted to protect those precious to them, even at the cost of their own lives.

The dagger drew the flames back into itself until they formed a sword blade. I closed my eyes for a moment and prayed.

I swear to tell my dear brother of your wish and your regrets.

As the sword’s fire began to swirl, I addressed the apostle.

“My name is Lynne Leinster. The new Shooting Star, Allen of the wolf clan, entrusted me with this dagger. And someday, I will overtake the Lady of the Sword! You won’t find *this* blow so light.”

A Leinster must always be audacious, my dear mother had taught me. So I grinned boldly and raised the dagger straight over my head. Caren and Lily touched their weapons to it. We exchanged nods, then roared together: “Block it, if you can!”

We poured all our mana into the spell with that war cry, then let it loose. A moment later, the serpent rematerialized, far larger than when it had demolished the spires, and launched itself at the apostle with its jaws gaping wide! His confident exterior showed its first crack as he activated his own taboo wind spell.

Fire serpent and jet-black tornado collided and began tearing the church down around us. Though racked by searing pain, we gritted our teeth and struggled for control.

The apostle clucked in annoyance, his composure restored. “Why would the Fire Dragon Dagger aid a little girl like—?”

The dagger that formed the core of Caren’s lightning spear began to shine bright violet. The next thing I knew, our fire serpent became a pair.

“That dagger is Shooting Star’s— No!” the apostle cried as the new serpent sank its fangs into his floral sphere. Cracks ran through the barrier. And then, it shattered.

As the fire serpent devoured him, the apostle let out a long, high-pitched shriek...and sent out a massive shock wave. Caren and Lily braced me from behind as I threw the last of my mana into deflecting it.

At last, my vision cleared, leaving me gasping for breath and barely able to stand.

“Lynne,” Caren called, moving to support me.

“Oh, wow,” Lily said, peering ahead of us. “We sure did a number on this place!”

Forget the church walls—our spell had punched a hole clean through the triple walls of the fortress. And it seemed to have blown out all the flames as well. I could see the ocean up ahead.

I dropped my gaze to my dagger.

Oh, dear brother. Still, at least now—

“I admit, you surprised me. I never dreamed you could draw out so much of its power.”

We looked up in silence to see a sphere of black flowers. The petals scattered and fell, revealing the disciple Io holding his staff. Not a blemish marred his white hat or robe.

“Now, may I take it your futile resistance is over?” he asked, lips twisting in a sneer.

I let out my breath and replied calmly, "Yes."

"I suppose so," Caren agreed.

"All done!" added Lily.

The boy raised the brim of his hat, perplexed. "What do you...?" He clicked his tongue.

The door was sliced open, ward and all, and two beauties stepped through.

"Stay right there, if you please," said a woman with long scarlet hair and a drawn sword.

"Move, and my spear shall show no mercy," added a jade-haired elf, spear in hand.

Lisa Leinster and Leticia Lebufera spoke with the assurance of unassailable strength.

These were the reinforcements Ellie meant!

"Dear mother! Duchess Letty!" I cried.

"So sorry we kept you waiting, Lynne."

"Caren, Lily, we shall see to the rest."

"And I hope you haven't forgotten about *me*," yet another new voice added with a ladylike laugh. A cheerful "Of course not, venerable mistress" followed.

"Dear grandmother?! " I exclaimed as Lindsey Leinster alighted behind Io, dressed in scarlet sorceress's robes and holding a timeworn staff. With her came Celebrim Ceynoth, her scythe at the ready.

"The Bloodstained Lady, the Comet, Scarlet Heaven, and the Headhunter," the boy-like apostle spat, grimacing. "Four kinds of tiresome. The odds are against me, and I've already completed my objective. I'll withdraw."

Then, raising the brim of his witch hat, he glared at Caren, Lily, and me with his golden eyes. "I won't forget your faces, and I swear to kill you next time. See to it you survive until then. Io Lockfield, one who will transform the world alongside the Saint, commands you."

Suddenly, a blinding light flashed. I raised my arm to preserve my vision, and

then...

He got away?!

When I opened my eyes, the apostle was nowhere to be seen.

Caren, Lily, and I sighed and slumped to the ground where we stood. We'd had a close call. If my dear mother had arrived even a moment later—
“Lyyynne!”

A familiar girl's shout snapped me out of my reflections. I looked up, my brain sluggish. Then my eyes went wide.

“W-Wait!” I cried as, without warning, Tina threw herself off her griffin.

“L-Lady Tina?!” wailed Ellie, who held the reins, scrambling to cast a levitation spell. She managed it just in the nick of time, and my platinum-haired peer tumbled into my arms. But the spell failed to fully cushion her impact.

“That hurt,” I groaned through a burst of pain. “Wh-What on earth were you thinking, Tina?! Oh, jeez.”

I rubbed Tina's back as she clung to me, weeping in silence. If only she were this considerate all the time.

“Lady Lynne! Lady Tina!” Ellie cried, throwing herself on my back and making us both yelp. She must have abandoned the griffin in midair, and unlike Tina, she was bawling her eyes out. “Thank goodness! I'm so, so glad you're all riiight!”

My eyes met Tina's. We both looked at Ellie's wrinkled-up face and burst into giggles; then all three of us shifted into a group hug.

I did it! I really pulled it off!

That night, the Principality of Atlas proposed a truce independent of the rest of the league.

Epilogue

“I see,” said Lady Stella. “A new apostle—and a demisprite, at that. You’re all better now, Lynne.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied. “And what about *your* health?”

No sooner had the fortress fallen than the beautiful girl sitting across from me had come from the southern capital to work her magnificent healing spells on friend and foe alike. She’d continued treating the wounded well after sundown, so although I expected she would be all right, I did worry.

Tina had flopped her upper body onto a table, and Ellie and Caren looked equally weary. Only Lily had energy to spare, and she’d left this pavilion in the allied camp to fetch sweet treats.

“I feel fine, thank you,” Lady Stella replied. “Healing magic seems safe.”

“Stella, do you realize all the wounded people were pressing their hands together and calling you ‘saint’?” Tina cut in, looking up. Then she clenched her fist. “I can’t believe she saw this coming. That’s my comrade for you! I say we run with it and spread the word of ‘Saint Wolf’!”

By “comrade,” Tina meant the Hero, Alice Alvern. I’d heard the two of them had hit it off in the northern capital, but for some reason, the Hero called *me* “comrade” too. And I had absolutely *no* idea why! Not an inkling!

Lady Stella frowned and touched a lock of platinum hair near the front of her head. “I merely did what I could, Tina, and Sally helped too. I’d hardly call that saintly. I must warn Alice about that the next time I see her.”

“Stella, is Felicia in the southern capital?” Caren asked, removing her floral beret. Our bespectacled young superintendent general of logistics hadn’t joined us.

“She pitched a fit about wanting to come, but you know how she gets when she sees blood.” Our student council president let her hand drop limply.

“You made the right call,” her vice president agreed.

Felicia would surely have fainted. The apostle’s spell-soldiers hadn’t even been people. And although they’d turned to ash and vanished without a trace after the battle, she was still better off not coming.

“Anyway!” Tina shouted. A lock of her hair stood to attention as she surveyed us all. “Now we can go to the city of water.”

We had brought down an impregnable fortress and secured a truce with Atlas. So with our griffins...

“Mr. Allen wrote that the church is plotting something for next Darknessday,” Lady Stella said. “And today is—”

“Lightningday!” Tina and I chorused.

“W-We have three days left,” added Ellie.

Caren slid her finger over a map on the table. “Celebrim took less than a day to reach the southern capital from there on a well-trained griffin. What’s our plan, Stella?”

We were running out of time. If we were going to the city of water, we would need to leave as soon as that evening.

Lady Stella took a sea-green griffin feather from her breast pocket and felt it. “I’ll remain in the southern capital.”

Tina, Ellie, and I went wide-eyed. Caren held her peace.

“I can cast light-elemental healing spells now, but fighting would be a challenge,” our platinum-haired saint continued calmly. “And even though we concluded a separate peace with Atlas—no, *because* we did—the Ducal House of Leinster must defend this territory. From the other four northern principalities, I mean. I spoke with Duchess Lisa earlier, and she told me that storming into the city of water with a large army will prove difficult. Both sides suffered too many casualties. If I join Mr. Allen and Lydia now, when I can’t fight, I’ll only get in their way.”

Tina and I gaped, while Ellie murmured, “Big Sis Stella...” But our student council president had more to say.

“So I’ll stay behind to heal the wounded and assist Felicia. And since I hear that Princess Cheryl will visit the southern capital, I’ll ask about Floral Heaven and the Lady of Ice. Her Royal Highness knows so much. Now, on to the matter at hand.” Lady Stella gave us an impish look. “Who wants to go to the city of water?”

“I do!” Tina and I shouted, shooting our hands into the air.

Ellie, however, looked down and said, “I... I want to stay and help you, Big Sis Stella. So many people got hurt fighting here, and they need all the healers they can get.”

“Ellie,” Tina murmured, her concern obvious.

“Don’t worry,” I cut in, shooting her a look before she said any more. “I promise I’ll give my dear brother and sister all the help they need.”

Tina felt torn between wishing her best friend since childhood would join us and wanting to respect her decision. But if she came out and said that, the angel-hearted Ellie would have second thoughts. None of us could afford to stand still. We needed to forge ahead if we hoped to ever walk at my dear brother’s—at Allen’s—side. Ellie had made up her own mind to take a step forward, and I didn’t want to stand in her way.

“Humph! You make it sound like you’ll do it alone, Lynne,” Miss First Place said, taking my hint and getting in on the act.

“I intend to,” I retorted. “I want to reach my dear brother’s side ahead of you and Ellie, so I mean to keep improving.”

Tina growled at me in earnest.

Even Ellie pouted, “Oh, d-don’t count me out, Lady Lynne.”

Well, that ought to do it.

“No more fighting,” Caren said, clapping her hands. She’d been watching us the whole time. “And don’t forget: the only spot at Allen’s side is reserved for *me*.”

All three of us objected at once.

“Tyranny!”

“Y-You’re not playing fair, Ms. Caren.”

“Have *you* forgotten that my dear sister ran off with him?”

Lady Stella chuckled. “I hope you’ll give me a turn too, Caren. At least every now and then.”

“Stella,” Caren replied, “I can’t trust you any more than Lydia at times like this.”

“Fine, then. But give him a letter from me in exchange. I secured promises to provide griffins that can fly by night from Duchesses Lisa, Lindsey, and Letty. They said that they can’t treat us like children anymore after all we’ve done. So, Caren—you, Tina, and Lynne will be going to the city of water.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Tina and I answered instantly.

Caren tapped her dagger’s sheath.

I can’t believe she already concluded negotiations with my dear mother.

“And I assume you’ll be joining them,” Lady Stella added as Lily slipped through the tent flap carrying a hamper stuffed full of pastries.

“Well, I *am* a maid! The mistress already gave me her permission,” Lily replied, joining her hands with a musical laugh. Her floral hair clip glinted.

“The under-duke objected, but I suppose I can’t argue with that,” Lady Stella admitted reluctantly.

Tina leapt to her feet, white-and azure-ribbon-adorned rod in hand. “What are we waiting for?! Let’s pack and get go—”

“Begging your pardon,” a new voice interrupted. “I bear bad news.”

“Romy? What’s wrong?” I asked, seizing Tina’s and Ellie’s hands. The maid corps’s second-in-command looked grimmer than she had during any of her exploits that day.

“The four southern marchesi who formed the league’s anti-war faction came under attack,” Romy said. “An unconfirmed report claims that their leader, the venerable Marchesa Rondoiro, ‘the Impaler’...fell in battle.”

It sounded as though we would be flying into a raging storm. I prayed silently,

touching my dagger.

Dear brother, please be safe!



Suzu of the otter clan steered her gondola through the city's underground waterways toward Cat Alley. The walls gave off a faint green light, but it made the passages seem mystical rather than unsettling.

More than a day had passed since we'd fled the archive, owing to the care we were taking to avoid detection. I took out my pocket watch and checked the time. Night must already have fallen outside.

"We're almost there, Allen," Suzu called. "Not much longer now. Nobody knows about these underground waterways except us beastfolk. And even we don't use them most of the time."

"The eastern capital has similar channels," I said. "I played in them all the time when I was younger."

"Really? That's so neat. Would you mind giving me a tour sometime?"

"No, of course not."

"Thanks so much!" Suzu looked bashful. She had been piloting the gondola nonstop, albeit not without rest, so her good cheer counted for a lot—especially while we were isolated in enemy territory.

A scarlet-haired young woman leaned into me. "Stay close," she said, pressing her shoulder against mine so that we could feel each other's warmth.

As for the two maids behind us...

"Don't say a word, Cindy."

"I know, I know. Look, Miss Atra! That was a fish!"

A musical yip followed.

I couldn't expect help from that quarter. The other maids were traveling in other gondolas, as were Niccolò and Tuna.

I steeled myself and addressed the disgruntled noblewoman. "Lydia, you're making it, well, hard to move."

She skewered me with a look far sharper than the average sword. “First you didn’t take me with you at the archive, and now you’re making a fuss?” it seemed to say. “Well now.”

I raised my hands in token of complete surrender. What was I to do? She showed no sign of letting this one go.

“Just pretend we’re not here, Allen!” Suzu called.

“We’re mannequins,” said Saki.

“Please, Miss Atra! No more!” Cindy cried, followed by another merry yip.

They’re enjoying this altogether too much, if you ask me. It’s a bad influence on Atra.

“Hey. Do you *really* mind?” Lydia asked, looking needily up at me despite all the other people watching.

Needs must.

I started to wrap my arm around her shoulders—until a little bird landed on mine.

“Who’s it from?” the scarlet-haired young woman asked, lighting a mana lamp while I checked the paper wrapped around the bird’s leg.

“Niche,” I replied.

“His family steward betrayed us, remember?” Lydia said slowly.

“True. But Niche won’t. He’d rather die, or else name a date and time, lay all his cards on the table, and then issue a challenge. That’s the sort of man he is.”

Lydia announced her displeasure with a pout and a sullen groan. Atra peeked out of the rear seats to imitate her.

I knew this was a bad influence!

I rubbed the child’s head while I finished reading. Then the paper vanished, engulfed in fire—Lydia’s handiwork. The Lady of the Sword was returning to form.

She plucked a leaf off my head and left her hand on my hair as she murmured, “Explain.” Her unspoken meaning was “Don’t give Atra all the attention. I forbid

it. No fair.” Logic didn’t seem to enter into it.

“That archive means a great deal to the Nittis,” I said, tenderly brushing detritus out of Lydia’s hair. “That’s why terribly few people knew its exact location, even among those who knew it existed.”

Niche and Paolo had apparently used what little time they’d had to investigate Toni’s movements over the past few days.

“I guarantee Toni Solevino did not know the archive’s location until a few days ago.”

The end of the tunnel came into view.

“As I’ve said before,” I continued, “that information was limited to the Nittis themselves, a few beastfolk contracted to ferry supplies, and their go-between, Paolo Solevino.”

“But Toni showed up anyway,” Lydia said. “Which means...”

“He learned from someone who was neither a Nitti nor beastfolk. This person, to be specific.” I touched the note that Niccolò had partially deciphered—the only thing I’d taken with me from the archive. Bits of it had been erased and rendered seemingly illegible.

“I came here with my master, Floral Heaven, [...] Glenbysidhe, and my master’s senior apprentice, Io ‘Black Blossom’ Lockfield. We haven’t found a way to wake the [...] sleeping deep inside the Old Temple. Whatever shall we do?”

How had Niccolò made sense of so much, so quickly? He also claimed to remember everything he’d read even once, so I shuddered to think what he might accomplish someday.

The master’s nickname and surname identified them as a demisprite. According to *The Peerage*, the Lockfields and Glenbysidhes had intermarried just once in the past, and the Ios, chieftains of the dragonfolk, had played a part. Then there was the black, flower-shaped teleportation circle I’d seen at the archive. Toni had gotten his directions from “Black Blossom.” We could safely assume that a young Duchess Rosa Howard had written the note.

Lydia leaned her head on my left shoulder. “Listen—”

“I want to fight side by side next time,” I said before she could ask. And I meant it.

The gondola slipped out of the underground waterway into a seemingly ruined building. A moonbeam slanting through a broken window shone right on Lydia’s blushing face.

“U-Unbelievable! Th-Think before you speak, Allen!”

“Ow! N-No hitting! A-And I warned you to keep your voice down,” I protested, hurriedly raising my hands to stop her fists.

Atra gave us a puzzled look, then started pummeling my arm. She must have thought we were playing a game.

The otter-clan girl hugged her oar to her chest, gazed up at the starry sky, and sighed wistfully. “What is this feeling, I wonder. Jealousy? Or—”

“The urge to keep watching this innocent young couple flirt, perhaps?” Cindy interjected.

“Oh!” Suzu clapped her hands. “Yes! That’s it!”

The maid, whose long milk-white hair Saki was weaving into intricate braids, chuckled and launched into her recruitment pitch. “I’d say you have what it takes to join our maid corps. If you ever think of changing careers, I *highly* recommend it.”

“U-Um, becoming a maid isn’t really...”

“Don’t bother her, Cindy,” the bird-clan maid paused to say. “Think of the poor example you’re setting for Miss Atra.”

“Aww. I bet Miss Atra agrees with me. Don’t you, dear?”

Atra gave a quizzical look, then a cheer. Having taken to Suzu, she evidently favored the idea.

Oh, I see. So this is how they’ve been recruiting people.

Another little bird alighted on my shoulder and then flew off once I removed the paper from its leg. It said...

What?

“From the look of you, I assume the news isn’t great,” Lydia remarked, scrutinizing my face. She didn’t burn the paper this time. And she was right: the biggest news was bad.

“Another update,” I said. “First, Atlas made a sudden truce with the Leinsters. It may even consider leaving the league, so the committee’s in an uproar.”

What could have caused Atlas to change its stance so radically? Even if the girls got involved, it’s all too sudden.

“And the bad news?” Lydia prompted, fidgeting with her necklace.

“Is exceptionally bad,” I replied. If true, Niche’s shakily scrawled message spelled doom for the doves. “The four southern marchesi who advocated peace came under attack during a conference. Even Marchesa Regina Rondoiro may not have survived. And their assailants...”

I sent a warning, and Niche did his duty too. But even so...

I forced myself to finish in a rush. “Their assailants consisted of a woman in a black dress with long crimson hair and a sword fighter wielding a long foreign blade. Crescent Moon and her servant, I have no doubt. This puts the doves...at an insurmountable disadvantage.”

Lydia leaned close to me and murmured, “Say, Allen...”

“Yes,” I said. “They tricked us into taking the Fortress of Seven Towers.”

On a strategic level, we’d suffered a string of defeats. Atlas entertaining the drastic and dangerous step of withdrawing from the league had saddled the Leinsters and the southern houses with the principality and pinned them down for the time being. The southern marchesi who called for peace had been crushed. The pro-war faction would inevitably dominate the city of water for the next few days, and those few days would prove decisive. If the church’s Saint had directed all this, then we were up against...a monster.

And despite it all, our enemies’ final goal remained obscure. The scraps of information we possessed didn’t add up. The “Cornerstone” in the Old Temple, the sleeping entity mentioned in the note, the church’s pursuit of Niccolò, Black Blossom’s emergence, and the mass-produced spell-soldiers made from artificial vampires.

What should I do? What can I do?

In the midst of my brooding, Atra abruptly broke into song. Emerald globes drifted toward the child as she watched me, twitching her ears and tail with delight. She was trying to lift my spirits.

I guess I still need more training.

“Still, a truce will make contacting the southern capital easier. We can catch them off guard,” I said, touching Lydia’s bangs and then her necklace. “If the two of us stick together and keep at it.”

“As long as you’re with me, I have nothing to fear,” Lydia declared and bumped her head against mine.

Come tomorrow, a storm would ravage this ancient capital. But for this one moment, we savored peace.



Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been another four months. We've reached volume eleven, and once again, I barely made my deadline. Really. It came down to the wire.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although, as usual, I've revised... Er, well, I think some part of the web version is still in here. It's just, I rewrote it so many times that it became barely recognizable.

As far as the story goes, very few characters in *Private Tutor* are on my side. All the leading ladies demand bigger roles every chance they get. (I'm locked in a constant struggle with Saint Wolf.) They fight for the covers too, and they twist the plot out of shape without a shred of mercy.

Once again, I went into volume eleven thinking, "Your Royal Highness, thank you for waiting. Your time has finally come." I actually wrote a lot for her. And yet...

The scary thing about *Private Tutor* is that nothing goes according to plan. Who would have imagined that these two would steal the cover of volume eleven? Not the author, that's for sure. I found myself gasping in surprise while I wrote it. And that girl I'd built up such good relations with, of all people!

This leaves our angel as the only understanding leading lady left. I must...I must preserve her, at the very least...or I'll have no one left to advance the plot without derailing it!

Please cheer on our princess as Her Royal Highness fights fiercely for her right to appear, battling an anguished author and a cuddly canine behind the scenes.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:


My editor. I gave you plenty of headaches yet again this volume. I felt like I was going to turn to dust in the morning sun.

The illustrator, cura. Another volume of flawless artwork! After eleven books,

the hot springs illustration was much appreciated.

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: the final showdown. And then...

Riku Nanano



“It’s like
a castle in
the middle
of a lake.”

Allen’s younger sister

Caren

This wolf-clan girl achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits. She acts as a second tutor to the younger girls.

“No wonder
they call it
unassailable.”

Duke Leinster’s second daughter

Lynne

Lydia’s younger sister. Lynne is a prodigy who learned to cast the supreme spell Firebird—albeit imperfectly—and placed second in the Royal Academy entrance exams.

Private Tutor to the 11 Duke’s Daughter



“Aah... What a lovely bath.”

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. With Allen, she acts as a contact for negotiations in the city of water.



Partnered maid

Cindy

The Leinster Maid Corps's joint number six hails from an orphanage in the southern capital. Before the Leinsters took her in, she played a role in shadowy "experiments" since consigned to the darkness of history.

"Cindy, I'll come get you if you get in over your head."

Partnered maid

Saki

The Leinster Maid Corps's joint number six hails from an orphanage in the southern capital. This young bird-clan woman has a kind heart.

"The commonwealth army classified me as Dark Soldier 1,013."



“My name is
Lynne Leinster.
You won’t find
this blow
so light.”

“Let me show
you a witch-crafted
tactical taboo:
North Wind of
Dark Death.”

Black Blossom, apprentice of Floral Heaven

Io Lockfield

Among the Church of the Holy Spirit’s apostles,
he wields power second only to Alicia.
Although Io apparently merits a place in history books,
he remains an enigma.




11

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Illusions of History



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Private Tutor to the
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CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Epilogue

Afterword

“Even without
Mr. Allen, we’ll
do what’s in
our power!”

White Saint

Stella

Tina’s elder sister and the president
of the Royal Academy student council.
Under Allen’s guidance, Stella regained
confidence in her own ability as
the future Duchess Howard.



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Epilogue](#)

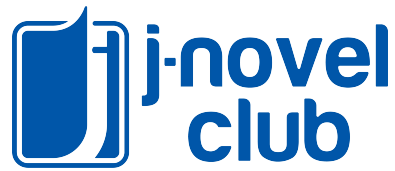
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[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

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[Copyright](#)



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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 11

by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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