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Author
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Angel That Broke
the Star Oath

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. It features a young woman with long, flowing black and white hair, wearing a white dress with blue accents and a blue flower in her hair. She is looking down with a sad expression. In the foreground, the back of a young man's head with brown hair is visible. The scene is set in a dark, forest-like environment with falling petals and a large, dark winged figure in the upper left.

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“What do you
expect me to say?
I’m just a normal
student at the Royal
Academy.”



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters

Allen

A young man who fails to appreciate
his own unrivaled control of magic.
He finds himself trapped with
Stella at an enigmatic altar.

Characters



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

ALLEN

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



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

CAREN

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



Thunder Fox

ATRA

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



Hero

ALICE ALVERN

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



First princess
Lady of Light

CHERYL WAINWRIGHT

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



"The kingdom's most viciously
devious sorcerer"

THE PROFESSOR

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



Allen & Co. head clerk

FELICIA FOSSE

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



Twin Heavens

LINARIA ETHERHEART

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

Characters

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



Duke Howard
“God of war”

WALTER HOWARD

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



Duke Howard’s eldest daughter
Royal Academy student council president

STELLA HOWARD

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



Duke Howard’s second daughter
Little Lady of Ice

TINA HOWARD

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



Tina’s personal maid
Little Lady of Wind

ELLIE WALKER

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

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



Duchess Leinster
Bloodstained Lady

LISA LEINSTER

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



Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter
Lady of the Sword

LYDIA LEINSTER

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



Duke Leinster’s second daughter
Little Lady of Fire

LYNNE LEINSTER

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



The Leinster Maid Corps’s number three

LILY LEINSTER

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

Characters

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

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

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

GRAHAM WALKER Head butler to the Ducal House of Howard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VIOLA KOKONOE Loyal servant of the False Saint.

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

Prologue

White light washed over the dying knight sprawled on the crude altar. This old church lay within the walls of a holy citadel, the seat of power in the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit. Beside the altar, one hand raised, stood none other than our white-robed and hooded Saint. I ranked as the least of the Church of the Holy Spirit's apostles, but even I could hardly fathom the scale of Her Holiness's mana as it cured the knight's mortal wounds.

It's a miracle!

I felt so moved that I wanted to weep, keeping my surreptitious guard from behind a pillar. A quiver ran through the beast ears hidden by my hood. With both wolf-clan and demon blood in my veins, I had no place in the church's worldview. I didn't even know what my parents looked like. By the time I became aware of the world around me, I had already been enslaved as a soldier of the curial officers who oversaw espionage and assassination. My evaluation had read simply:

"With the vast mana of a demon and the sturdy flesh of a beast, the subject should prove useful in experiments with magic beyond any decent knight or common believer. Though horned, it shall not be subject to immediate disposal."

They hadn't treated me like a person. And yet, Her Holiness had taken my bloodstained hands and granted me the robe and station of an apostle—all despite her own *human* blood! She had even freed many more slave-soldiers, giving them warm food and beds. And above all, she had shown me the light of creating "a world without tyrants, where no children cry."

No one else can lead us to salvation!

All the more reason why losing not only the robe and dagger she'd granted me but even a holy dragon at Rostlay filled me with bitter regret. One day, I would have my revenge on the despicable Stella Howard and the Hero. When I did, it might prove amusing to capture that "defective key" the noblewoman fancied—Allen, I thought his name was—and—

The gasps of knights and physicians filled the old church.

“Oh!”

“Can it be?”

“It’s a miracle.”

“Long live Her Holiness! Glory be!”

The knightdom shared a border with the Wainwright Kingdom, a veritable den of unbelievers, and we weren’t far from it here. Although major battles had long since ceased, skirmishes remained numerous, and more fighters died or suffered injuries with each passing day. Duke Algren’s forces seemed particularly intent on fighting. When Her Holiness had declared her intention to come here, I’d had the temerity to object. Now, however...

The numinous radiance ceased, and the once dying knight—a man nearing middle age—sat up in a daze. A lady knight with close-cropped brown hair threw her arms around him, weeping. The one I served never erred.

While I lamented my lack of insight, Her Holiness cast an affectionate gaze at the pair, then turned and said, “Please, bring the next sufferer. My power amounts to little. But as I have had the fortune to stand here today, I wish to heal as many as I possibly can. Please lend me your aid.”

Just then, sunlight streamed through the cracked stained glass behind her. Her peerless fall of light-gray hair shone with such mystical splendor that all of us present stared wide-eyed and drew in our breath. I shook.

Her Holiness will save us—and the whole world too!

“We hear and obey!” the knights and physicians chorused, hearts united as one as they saluted and then broke into a run. The knight on the altar shed huge tears as he and the lady knight bowed again and again and left the church on their own feet.

Her Holiness was watching them go with a smile when an elderly knight, gray-haired and bearded, led several more knights carrying a wooden chair into the room. The leader, Commander Dale of the Knights of the Holy Spirit, dropped to one knee.

“Your Holiness, please take this seat while you await the next sufferer,” he pleaded.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly.” Ever humble, the one I served shook her head.

The knights fell to both knees and bowed so low their foreheads touched the floor. “Please, I beg you, sit. I cannot deny that we Knights of the Holy Spirit have met with defeat on many battlefields. I cannot bear the shame! Yet mortified though I am to admit it, we cannot now repay your tender mercy in any way but this.”

The knights had taken advantage of the Algren rebellion not only to seize almost complete control of the kingdom’s eastern capital but to march on its royal capital as well. They had also dispatched forces to the League of Principalities, where I’d heard they had achieved their objectives in the city of water. Yet the fact of their defeats on all fronts remained.

“Dale.” Her Holiness dropped to one knee and took a wrinkled hand in both of hers without a moment’s hesitation. I couldn’t hide my shock, and the knights looked equally speechless, but the Saint continued, “You mustn’t say such things. The Knights of the Holy Spirit fought valiantly on every battlefield. True, you sacrificed much, and perhaps you didn’t achieve everything we could have hoped for in the cities you assailed. However...” Spotless white mana filled the air.

How...how utterly divine.

“Your efforts have brought us real progress. We’ve gained great prizes, especially the Great Tree’s most ancient bud from the royal capital and the prince’s tablet from the city of water. Please don’t abase yourself; hold your head high, like a knight in a storybook. And if you must blame someone, let it be me. On the day the great spell Resurrection is completely restored and our dream becomes reality, all those who perished shall claim their just reward.”



The battle-hardened knight's shoulders shook as his sobs echoed through the old church. At last, he dried his eyes and stood, murmuring, "My thanks. Your words touch me deeply."

"For the Saint and the Holy Spirit!" the lesser knights chorused, striking their breastplates and scabbards before filing out of the church.

For Her Holiness the Saint!

I was still praying to the one I served, who had lowered herself into the chair, when I heard a snort.

"Another transparent ploy. I see you haven't changed," said a young man's voice. I felt a surge of annoyance, although I didn't let it show. The newcomer hadn't let me detect so much as a hint of his presence.

I won't deny his skill, but how dare he insult Her Holiness?!

Suppressing my darker impulses, I forced myself to calmly cast wards of silence and perception-blocking. "Apostle Io," I said over my shoulder, "should you not be keeping watch around this holy citadel?"

Atop a stack of crates, legs swaying, sat a diminutive demisprite sorcerer. His long white hair framed golden eyes. A pristine white robe covered limbs as dainty as a girl's, and a witch hat of the same hue adorned with a black, eight-petaled flower perched on his head. His metal staff hovered in midair.

Io "Black Blossom" Lockfield, second of the apostles, had crushed the heart of the impregnable Fortress of Seven Towers single-handed and assassinated its daring commander Robson Atlas, who had caused Her Holiness concern. In the city of water, he had handily stalled some of the kingdom's mightiest warriors. But for all his magical prowess, I found him insufferable, not to mention haughty. I'd lost count of how many times I'd thought of killing him.

"Fool," Io scoffed, as usual. "I've already surrounded it with more wards than *you* can count. Only the Hero, the Dark Lord, or one of those pesky dragons could break these defenses in a frontal assault. The Saint doesn't need any other protection—not that loathsome vampiress, not the Kokonoe swordswoman off in Lalannoy with that Atlasian spearwoman who lost her country to the humans, and not the other four apostles scattered all over the

map. Was that clear enough for you, Least of Us?”

It took me a moment to force out an “I beg your pardon.”

The “loathsome vampiress,” the legendary Alicia “Crescent Moon” Coalfield, was recuperating in the pontiff’s domain. Her Holiness’s servant Viola Kokonoe; the third-ranked apostle, Levi Atlas; and the other members of our order had each undertaken missions requiring the utmost secrecy. And following the defeat at Rostlay, I had been judged “insufficient protection” if Her Holiness were to come under attack during her travels.

I hope Stella Howard rots in hell.

While I ground my teeth, Io hopped off his crate. “Don’t you agree?” he offhandedly asked a dark corner. “Give us your thoughts, mighty Prime Apostle and master of Falling Star.”

A patch of shadow dissolved to reveal two men. One looked young, wore a white robe trimmed with azure, and held a timeworn wooden staff—the head of our order, known as the “Sage.” I’d barely exchanged two words with him, and I didn’t know what he looked like under his hood, but he had Her Holiness’s trust. The other, a tall man, wore an apostle’s robe trimmed with dark green.

Who’s this?

“I concur, problem child of the Glenbysidhes,” the Sage replied before I could reach a conclusion. His remark struck a nerve, judging by Io’s disgruntled sniff.

The demisprite sorcerer couldn’t stand any mention of his origins. He lowered the brim of his white witch hat and changed the subject. “I assume that’s your replacement for our pitiful, doddering number four who let Lalannoy’s pet freak get the best of him? I don’t care about the least of us, but he’d better not get in *my way*.”

“Idris has fallen?!” I blurted out.

Her Holiness had personally chosen us seven apostles, and our duties might well include dying for her grand vision. Still, while Idris, the fourth of our number, had been even more arrogant and less likable than Io, his ability went without question. The ancient vampire from an eastern land had lost his dominant right arm, leaving him far from the height of his power, but I’d still

never expected to hear of his defeat.

The prime apostle nodded without acknowledging my shudder. His lips curled slightly. “I’ll vouch for him. After all...” Shadows swelled in the church. A cloud must have covered the sun. “This man killed a four-winged devil with his own hands.”

I gasped, struck speechless. Even Io seemed impressed.

“Well now,” he murmured, “a devil slayer in this day and age.”

Devils, implacable enemies of mortalkind, numbered among the mightiest beings in our godless world. And this man had killed one?

“If what you say is true, I can understand giving him our vacant fourth seat,” Io continued. “*If*. He must have led quite an unusual life to— Hm? What’s this mana?” The second-ranked apostle fell silent squinting at the mystery man. What had he noticed? I couldn’t deny his knowledge or skill in such matters.

Before I could make up my mind, soft early-winter sunlight streamed into the church once more. Little birds slipped through gaps in the broken stained glass and alighted on Her Holiness. I could have been looking at a painting.

“Well, no matter,” Io said, rubbing his forehead. “I’ll take you at your word for the present. So, where will you send our new number four? Lalannoy again, I suppose?”

“That decision isn’t mine to make.”

The words had barely left the prime apostle’s mouth when my silencing and perception-blocking spells vanished—along with him and his companion, leaving Io and me the only apostles in the church. I couldn’t begin to guess how he’d done it.

I was still reeling from the gulf between our powers when Her Holiness turned to me. “Edith, to my side.”

“A-At once,” I replied. Her gentle voice made me feel like a powerless little girl again. Under his breath, Io muttered a disgusted “Fool,” but I ignored him, nervously approaching the altar and bending one knee.

“Your hand,” said the Saint.

“O-Of course.”

Hesitantly, I extended one hand, and tender fingers closed around it.

“Y-Your Holiness?! Your sacred hands are, er, that is...” I faltered, too shocked for words.

Oh, what an honor.

“You needn’t fear,” Her Holiness continued, love in the eyes like precious jewels I glimpsed beneath her hood. “No one here would ever dream of harming me.”

“Y-Your Holiness.”

She touched my cheek next, and my whole body burned. I couldn’t contain the sudden flare of heat. In my eyes, Her Holiness seemed more divine than any god.

“You’ll scare away the sufferers if you keep up that fierce scowl,” she said. “Try to smile for me. Please?”

“Y-Yes, p-please forgive me,” I replied, aware of my blushing cheeks and pounding heart. The awkward grin I somehow managed garnered a “Thank you” from Her Holiness. Body and soul awash in ecstasy, I couldn’t muster a word in response. I thought I caught Io mumbling something behind me, but what did I care?

(“Unbelievable.”)

Footfalls alerted me to the knights’ return. I looked up to find the one I served radiant with pure-white mana, left hand on her heart.

“Come,” she said, “as always, let us save as many wounded souls as we possibly can. You’ll help me, won’t you, Edith?”



“Now, Your Holiness, if you’ll excuse me. Please have no fear that anyone will interrupt you at your prayers—Io and I will keep a close guard,” the girl said, bowing to me with the same puppylike expression she’d worn when we first met. What an amusing contrast she made to Io’s grimace.

“Thank you, Edith,” I replied in the mild tones of the church’s living Saint. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. Or you, of course, Io.”

“Y-You do me too much honor!” the girl exclaimed, while Io only snorted.

The sturdy church doors thudded shut behind them. A barrier so potent I could see it with my naked eyes went up around me. Once I removed my hood and dispelled my perception-blocking, the mana lamps and moonlight cast my silhouette on the wall—complete with gray-haired ears and tail.

The church despised beastfolk, yet it revered me as its Saint. No matter how many years passed, the absurdity never lost its humor. The knights I’d saved that very day might take their own lives if they ever found out. I giggled, my old pendant bouncing as I twirled in place, toying with the fantasy.

If they’re all going to die anyway, I’d better find them even nicer battlefields to do it on!

“So, has anything happened I should know about?” I asked my accomplice once I’d had my fill of mocking laughter.

Shadows wavered, and the self-styled “Sage” revealed himself, staff in hand. Never a man to waste words, he cut to the chase without so much as pushing back his hood.

“The summoning circle I left in the Sealed Archive eleven years ago activated. Someone in the kingdom must have realized the secret of ten-day fever.”

A sweet thrill ran through my ears and tail.

Ah, you never disappoint.

“Who else but my Allen?” I swayed, hands pressed to my burning cheeks. I couldn’t contain my joy. Stone Serpent must have shared it, because my surroundings petrified as my spirits surged. “He must have pieced together the scantest of clues to reach the truth. Of course, I doubt he understands all of it. Perhaps he worked through the Walker girl. She is one of his students, or so I hear. And her parents gave you quite a fight.”

The Walkers had shown great strength in the Sealed Archive eleven years earlier. My accomplice, the “Sage,” might well have lost to them.

Instantly, the floor froze solid. “I battled a Walker and a Great Tree warden in this godless world,” the man spat bitterly. “I only triumphed because they prioritized halting the flow of mana to the altar. But in the end, they bought Crom and Gardner enough time for the Star Oath to bar the way. Not even we would find it easy to reach the altar beneath that World Tree sapling now.”

My accomplice couldn’t have relished the reminiscence. He rarely showed such emotion. If not for help from my younger self and the fact that the secret altar camouflaged by the Sealed Archive had sapped the World Tree sapling’s power, he would have died in that fight.

“Only joking!” I sneered, chuckling. “You failed to kill Gardner or Crom, and the curse never covered the whole city, but you *did* kill a Great Tree warden who would have become a thorn in our side, and you managed to force the mana of *everyone* who died from ten-day fever into the underground altar. I consider that one of your successes.”

The man fumed silently, obviously put out. Despite our long acquaintance, we were merely using each other. But although our wishes differed, the same obstacles stood in our way. I also owed him *something* for tracking down Rupert, my sister Atra’s murderer, so I wouldn’t turn on him for the time being.

“Allen reaching the Sealed Archive is cause for celebration,” I continued. “But you’re the most intimidating man alive. I don’t see why you felt the need to drop your work deciphering those old tomes and banned books you stole or the prince’s record of the spells to drive a World Tree mad just to report it, unless — Oh! Did you want to give me a nice surpri—?”

The man pounded the floor with the butt of his staff. “An angel has manifested,” he said as the ice shattered. “Three skilled fighters overcame my serpent, but it still has enough life in it for me to sense a few things. That said, it seems alloyed, not a pure manifestation. The mana we channeled to the altar stagnated, which may explain the mixture. Even the Great Moon’s most secret ritual has its limits.”

“Goodness.” I held a hand to my mouth. I had expected further developments. In fact, I had planned them. But...an angel? Not a devil, the fruit of the Howard or Leinster cursed child losing control?

“You mean my sister wasn’t the only potential White Saint born? There’s been another in such a short time?” I asked seriously, wiping the shock from my face.

“I’m off to investigate that very question,” the man replied. “I hear one of the Howard girls earned herself the nickname ‘Saint’ on the northern front, but that hardly seems relevant. The younger sister is a cursed child and a vessel for Frigid Crane. If the elder one were— No, it’s not worth considering. Such things simply do not happen.”

“I suppose not.”

No gods walked our world, so it could never witness a genuine miracle. If, against all odds, one sister had the makings of a White Saint, harboring the potential to become an angel, while the other inherited a great elemental despite her status as a cursed child, I would expect my own sister to spring back to life at any moment. It would be no less miraculous.

“Considering that they breached depths sealed off by the World Tree,” said the man whose knowledge reached back five centuries to the age of strife, narrowing the azure eyes beneath his hood, “then as you say, the defective key and the Walker girl must be among the trio that overcame the serpent. The remaining member touched the holy sword and became an angel, just like a hundred years ago. I can’t glean any more at this stage.”

Not even the false Sage could observe every development in the distant royal capital. Mortals weren’t gods. Holding my long light-gray hair out of my eyes, I gazed up at the massive church insignia hung high overhead.

“Of the seven imitation great spells, we have Radiant Shield, Resurrection, and your Falling Star,” I mused, meeting the man’s gaze. His azure eyes held intelligence and a bottomless obsession to rival my own. “And we acquired Watery Grave from the city of water. That leaves three.”

“The Dark Lord still holds Dividing Wind,” he said, “and we don’t yet stand a chance against one who commands forces from the age of gods. As for the rest, Blaze of Ruin lies in Lalannoy. The cult of the Great Moon hid Quake Array, but I flatter myself that I can find it. And...”

Shadows flickered, and a tall man in an apostle’s robe appeared. Bloodred

eyes gleamed behind his narrow spectacles. He wore his jade-tinged white hair in a loose ponytail, and an old dagger hung at his hip. Here was our new fourth apostle, my gift to Allen.

My accomplice spun aside. The moon dangling from his left ear caught the light, reflecting eight crooked crescents that overlapped to form a flower. “Six great spells and the sum total of my five centuries of research will suffice to kill the vile ‘Hero.’ Once we steal Thunderbolt, even the seven dragons will be ours to slay. The weakened great elementals—except for your Stone Serpent—and the Dark Lord can wait until after that.”

“Aster,” I called at the back of the quietly vanishing *apostate*.

The fourth apostle’s eyes shifted slightly. I read regret and sorrow in them, although he was supposed to have been robbed of all emotion. Already, I felt my spirits lifting.

“Visit the royal capital with our newest apostle and bring back this ‘angel,’ if you can,” I commanded, grinning from ear to ear. “I can see to our other *concern*.” I chuckled. “I can’t wait to see what Allen does when he encounters my new doll! I just know he’s going to love it.”

Chapter 1

“Let me see if I have this straight,” I said. “The two of you tried to storm the Sealed Archive and got a thrashing from Romy for your pains? Didn’t you listen to Ellie’s report? The Great Tree’s thorns are blocking every route to the surface. My brother gave her water from a sanctuary, and she still barely made it out. No half-baked force will get anywhere trying to rescue him and Stella! What if you’d gotten yourselves lost down there too?!”

“W-Well, when you put it that way, C-Caren...” The object of my interrogation faltered, avoiding my gaze. This small, platinum-haired girl in a Royal Academy winter uniform was Lady Tina Howard, and her ducal house owned this mansion in the royal capital.

An older girl cowered behind her.

“M-Miss Caren, that glare of yours is scaring me,” complained Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, who wore a black ribbon in her long scarlet hair and a distinctive foreign jacket patterned with interlocking arrows. The bracelet on her left wrist reflected the blaze in the fireplace.

I touched the school beret I’d inherited from my older brother, Allen, also called “the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.” I needed to keep calm. Times like these brought out drastic measures, especially from the Lady of the Sword, Lydia Leinster. But even she was restraining herself—at least after one of the kingdom’s foremost sorcerers had explained the hundred-year-old tragedy of the girl who had reached angelic heights only to fall and become a devil. As we spoke, Lydia was leading Princess Cheryl Wainwright and the professor—the sorcerer in question—to negotiate with Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner, the man responsible for the Sealed Archive and the ringleader of the aristocratic diehards. We could expect results before too long.

“Tina, Lily, don’t make the situation any more convoluted than it already is by running off on your own initiative. Didn’t you listen to what happened a century ago? The best thing we can do now is wait,” a red-haired girl chimed in from her

chair beside a window looking out on the nighttime cityscape. Lady Lynne Leinster had been keeping watch at the bedside of Ellie Walker, who was still asleep in her nightgown. Atr the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals, lay curled up on Lynne's lap in the form of a fox cub.

"I...I was only worried about Mr. Allen and my sister," Tina protested, shrinking with every word. "I've never seen Ellie panic like that before."

"I hear the church laid a trap inside the Sealed Archive," Lily added, equally defensive. "And Lady Stella can't cast offensive magic. Even Allen will have a hard time keeping her safe as well as himself."

"I understand your concern," I said, "but you're both 'Highnesses.' Every person in the kingdom knows your names. I realize you got permission to stand by near the Sealed Archive as an 'urgent response team,' but try to spare at least some thought for your own positions."

"W-We're sorry," chorused Their Highnesses—scions of the Four Great Ducal Houses that guarded the Wainwright Kingdom's borders, entitled to the style by historical circumstance. Anything they did drew attention, for better and for worse.

I put a hand on my left hip and stared at the two wilting noblewomen. Tina wielded a supreme spell, currently the most powerful weapon in the ducal houses' arsenal. Before meeting my brother, however, she'd been branded a "cursed child," incapable of any magic whatsoever. I could understand her feeling deeply indebted to him, and I knew that despite her youth, she felt...fond of him as a man. Lily, meanwhile, had told her family, the under-duke and -duchess, that Allen was her husband-to-be, and she'd half meant it. But that still didn't excuse their reckless, thoughtless two-woman assault.

I was just about to resume taking them to task when...

"Is that true, Anna?"

A snatch of Lynne's orb conversation with her house's head maid caused me to pause and reflect.

"Question the daughter of the Star Shooter, and in the City of the Shield, let the final key, the White Saint, and the youngest of the Great Tree wardens

descend into the Record Keepers' archive. In its depths will you face, unlooked for, the paltry obsessions of mortalkind."

For the past several months, Stella had struggled with a magical abnormality that confined her spellcasting to the element of light. To cure her, Allen had called on the dragonfolk and obtained an oracle from the flower dragon. As if draconic prophecies weren't already more than we could handle, fresh discoveries shed new light on ten-day fever, a disaster that had struck the capital eleven years earlier. Signs pointed to a battle between the Church of the Holy Spirit and Ellie's late parents in the Sealed Archive, along with spell formulae belonging to Stella and Tina's mother, Duchess Rosa. How could we face all this alone?

My fingers tightened on the hilt of my dagger, a gift from Allen, just as Lynne set her communication orb on a table.

"Caren, I'm afraid I have bad news," she said glumly. "Negotiations with Gardner have failed. We can't launch an immediate expedition into the archive. My dear sister and the professor will return here for now to avoid a direct confrontation. My dear mother, Uncle Lucas, Aunt Fiane, and Princess Cheryl will keep trying to reach an agreement."

"I see," I murmured slowly.

"No!" Tina cried, clapping her hands to her mouth.

Lily scowled but said nothing.

I looked out the window to cool my fury and saw my own dim reflection: a wolf-clan girl with silver-gray hair, ears, and tail wearing a Royal Academy winter uniform and beret. My brother, Allen, meant more to me than anyone else in the whole wide world. I was of the wolf clan, and he was human, but even if we didn't share blood, we were still the only siblings either of us had. Younger sisters everywhere had a duty to keep their brothers safe at all times, yet here I was. Faint traces of mana escaped me, and I exhaled, suppressing them before they crackled into violet sparks.

No one could take Stella's place in my life either. Many in the royal capital still held beastfolk in contempt, still more so in the elite halls of the Royal Academy. My best friend had been the first person there to look at me without prejudice.

I doubted I could keep my composure if anything happened to her any better than if it happened to Allen.

No people passed on the streets outside. Solitary mana lamps illuminated empty lanes. I couldn't see the mansion that housed the Sealed Archive from here, but I supposed the kingdom's best troops must have it surrounded. My other best friend, Felicia Fosse, would be spending a worried, sleepless night helping to keep them supplied in her capacity as Allen & Co.'s head clerk.

I recalled the explanation that the professor had given us in the Lebufera mansion. A hundred years ago, a member of the Royal House of Wainwright had lost control of the great spell Radiant Shield and demolished several towns through their incompetence—or so the falsified records claimed. The failures of Gerard, the former prince, had left no doubt that great spells could run wild, but the princess behind the historical disaster had been known as the most capable royal in her house's long history. She had supposedly surpassed all others with swords and spells, not to mention her kind and gentle heart.

"All the more reason," the professor had said, "why no one can fathom what caused her—Princess Carina Wainwright, a potential White Saint—to fall and become an eight-winged devil. And although I speak like an authority, the same goes for the meaning of 'White Saint.' Only the term has come down to us from ancient times. Not even Duchess Letty or Lord Rodde can explain it, and they joined the then Hero in sealing her beneath the palace. It took seven days and nights of brutal combat, and even then they barely succeeded. I'd assumed that the royal family concealed the facts to save face, but if the Church of the Holy Spirit played a role, I might need to reconsider. We mustn't forget the flower dragon's message either."

Touching the cold, triple-paned window, I struggled to piece together what I knew. A hundred years ago, the kingdom had witnessed the birth of a "saint," an "angel"...and an eight-winged devil. Her fall had nearly leveled the capital. I also recalled one of the phrases on the note Duchess Rosa left in the city of water: "artificial angels." It seemed related...but I couldn't work out how. I wasn't the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. I wasn't my brother. I could never hope to connect the dots and bring the truth to light.

Crack! A log in the fireplace split open, and Atra stirred on Lynne's lap. I

heaved a deep sigh.

“Waiting for Lydia and Her Royal Highness seems like the best thing we can do right now,” I told the girls, brushing my fingers against the windowpane. “Taking action will have to wait.”

After a moment, Lynne nodded. “I can see that.”

“As you say, miss,” Lily added a little stiffly.

Knights and soldiers were hurrying along the road. New units arriving, I assumed.

“Caren!” Tina called. I turned to find her with her left hand on her slender chest, her hair clip glittering with mana. “How...how can you stay so calm?! Mr. Allen and my sister have gone missing!”

Atra gave a start and leapt to Ellie’s bed, where she curled up once more.

Of course. I always knew she had her heart in the right place.

Stella might be the future Duchess Howard, but as a houseless orphan adopted into the wolf clan, Allen had no social standing to speak of. Princess Cheryl had appointed him her “personal investigator,” but she hadn’t ennobled him. The “Silver Wolf” remained the only commoner to officially receive a title in the two hundred years since the War of the Dark Lord, his reward for slaying a mad dragon. Created a viscount for his lifetime, he had died young, and even his name had been lost to history. Yet no class prejudice marred the pure concern Tina felt for my brother.

“That’s simple,” I answered in my capacity as vice president of the Royal Academy student council, working hard to keep my joy from showing. “Lydia has earned a reputation far and wide for sulking interminably whenever Allen’s not around, yet she’s still tackling this problem rationally. Need I remind you what she did in the south, the royal capital, and the east during the rebellion? If things really were desperate, she wouldn’t be negotiating with the head court sorcerer—she’d have charged into the archive alone ages ago.”

Tina and Lynne exchanged a look.

“You’ve got us there,” Lily admitted, forcing a grin.

On the southern Avasiek Plain, Lydia Leinster had cut down a gargantuan spell-soldier and invoked the taboo spell Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend to lay waste to an army. In the royal capital, she had stormed enemy headquarters and crushed it single-handed, while in the eastern capital, she had struck at the rebels' supreme commander. The Lady of the Sword had strength to spare—but only because she had Allen. Neither her prowess nor her heart could hold up without him.

I winked and waved my left hand. “Also, I’ll need to interrogate Allen about this when he gets back, but I think he cast some kind of spell on Lydia before he left—probably one that lets them vaguely sense each other. There is *something* down there—what Atra and Lia said tells us that much—but it doesn’t pose any mortal danger at the moment.”

Tina and Lynne made noncommittal noises, half convinced and half impatient. Moments like this reminded me how young they still were.

“Your Honor!” The scarlet-haired maid raised her hand, making her ample bosoms even harder to miss. “I move to convene a formal inquiry as soon as Allen gets back!”

Both young noblewomen looked down, muttering.

“I...I haven’t finished growing yet.”

“I st-still have my whole future ahead of me.”

Tina aside, something tells me Lynne will grow to become a threat.

Shaking off the thought, I returned my attention to the smiling maid. “Motion approved. That said, Lily, you haven’t been cleared of suspicion yourself. Remember that duel you roped my brother into? Would you care to tell us just how serious you were about that?”

Lady Lily Leinster pressed her hands together and beamed. Her chuckle held not a hint of malice. “Why, I’m *always* in earnest!” she lilted. “I’d just *love* to have you for a sister-in-law, Caren!”

“There are no sisters-in-law in my future! Not now, not ever!”

“I object to your monopoly!” Tina interjected.

"I second Tina's objection!" added Lynne.

"Objection overruled," I replied.

"You're abusing your vice-presidential authority!" my underclassmen whined in unison, but I shook my head. This was one issue I wouldn't budge on.

"*Whaaat?*" Lily exclaimed, index finger on her chin. "Where's the harm?! Come on! How about a hug?!"

"N-Not agai—"

Before I knew it, she was on me.

Talk about speed!

I squirmed, but in vain. The Leinster Maid Corps hadn't made Lily its number three for nothing. While she nuzzled her cheek against mine, a grave look returned to Lynne's face.

"My dear brother and Stella have gone missing, but they aren't in imminent mortal peril," she reiterated.

"But what about the Scarlet Order? Or the royal guard?" Tina asked, taking over for her. "Don't forget every officer of the Leinster Maid Corps in the city; my house's butler, Graham 'the Abyss' Walker; Under-duke Lucas Leinster; and the court sorcerers with their leader Gerhard Gardner." Her gaze met mine, and I saw a fear of looming danger in her eyes. "The kingdom's best and brightest have assembled, my father included. And they haven't come to rescue Mr. Allen and Stella. They're here in case the worst happens, to—"

"Yes, I know," I interrupted, slipping out of Lily's grasp before the platinum-haired noblewoman could finish. "Tina, Lynne."

I'm starting to understand how Allen must feel.

The pair in front of me and the blonde girl lying on the bed were growing and improving by the day. I couldn't be happier for them.

"We'd better get ready to act at a moment's notice," I said, nodding emphatically to my juniors. "Lynne and I will draw lots to decide who gets to do the actual rescuing."

“Certainly, ma’am,” Lynne replied, grinning boldly while Tina and Lily gaped, speechless. But only a moment passed before Tina’s hand shot into the air.

“Excuse me, Your Honor! I object!”

“Overruled,” I replied.

“What?!”

Tina’s shout roused Atra, who raised her head and looked at me. She and Lia—Blazing Qilin—had calmed down a lot since Allen and Stella first disappeared. I took their composure as another reason not to panic, although I still didn’t understand what they’d meant in the Lebufera mansion by “trouble” and “nice girl, but scary.”

“You and Lily got to be the emergency response team, remember?” I said, stroking the fox cub’s head. “No one gets two turns in a row.”

“B-But...” Tina fumbled for a response.

“Miss Caren, this is an emergency,” Lily supplied. “I really think we ought to choose the most capable of us.”

“But Lily, surely you’re our maid corps’s number three? Would you really abandon your duty to guard Ellie while she sleeps?” Lynne asked promptly, sitting with her legs crossed and looking quite mature.

The scarlet-haired maid reeled, her lovely eyes wide as she collapsed onto the bed—careful not to disturb Ellie. “You sounded just like Lady Lydia,” she groused, looking up resentfully.

“I won’t stay a child forever,” Lynne replied, spreading her arms in an exaggerated gesture.

“Oh, Lynne, you big meanie!” the older girl wailed, pouting adorably. Had I just witnessed what made her so well loved?

Mana flickered, giving me visions of countless blazing feathers.

“Caren!” Tina and Lynne shouted in unison, spotting a Howard car pull up in front of the mansion.

“I see *someone’s* back,” Lily chimed in.

Atra gave a drowsy start and returned to the form of a little girl with beast ears and long white hair tinged with violet.

“Tina, Lynne, let’s take this to a different room,” I suggested, gently stroking the child’s head. “I’d hate to wake Ellie. Lily, would you stay and keep an eye on her and Atra for us?”



I opened the door from within, only for a scarlet-haired child wearing a wool hat and a puffy coat to burst into the council chamber. “Caren, here!” The great elemental Blazing Qilin greeted me with enthusiasm, twitching her lionesque rounded ears and tail.

“It’s good to see you again, Lia.” I smiled at her, and her tail wagged faster. She didn’t look like a being of immense power any more than Atra did.

“Don’t forget to take off your coat,” said a beautiful young woman with long scarlet hair, following close on Lia’s heels. She wore a coat over sword-fighting garb, complete with an enchanted blade at her hip. Anko, the black-cat familiar, rode on her shoulder—an unusual combination.

Tina and Lynne broke off their conversation and sprang from their chairs, looking tense.

“Lydia!”

“Dear sister!”

Lynne’s sister, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, had known my brother since their Royal Academy entrance exam. To my annoyance, she even spent every break she could with him. She helped Lia out of her coat and hat, then scooped the child up and sat her on the sofa. Lia wore white like Atra, although she stood just a little taller.

“Fluffy?” the scarlet-haired child mused, grabbing a cushion. “But divine wolf fluffier!”

Our tension relaxed as she started burying herself in the sofa. Meanwhile, Lydia cast off her own coat, took a chair, and crossed her long legs. Anko immediately vanished, taking up a perch on a bookshelf before I knew what was

happening. I still didn't know how the familiar did it. "It's a tricky spell," Allen had told me, "but isn't it beautiful?"

"How is Ellie?" Lydia asked, motioning us to sit while she poured herself a glass of ice water.

"Still sleeping," Tina answered.

"She must be exhausted," added Lynne. Neither girl returned to her seat.

"I see."

I heard a man's voice issuing orders out in the hall—probably Roland Walker, a Howard butler.

"Let her sleep," Lydia continued. "I assume Anna's kept you informed, but I'll sum up our situation anyway. You know what Allen always says: it helps to review these things." The noblewoman snapped her fingers, and an enlarged map of the city marked with names and forces appeared in the center of the room.

I didn't expect so many of them. And what's that faint red circle centered on the Sealed Archive?

"Allen and Stella are still missing. A new sanctuary is forming around the Sealed Archive, rendering detection spells useless. Cheryl and my uncle Lucas are urging Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner to launch an immediate expedition, but he claims we 'need more information,' and he won't budge. Still, Ellie's report really seemed to rattle him. It looks like Lords Crom and Gardner—whom we *still* can't reach—kept him in the dark." Lydia only narrowed her eyes and slowly shook her head, but you could cut the tension with a knife.

Gerhard Gardner, descended from a long line of marquesses, made no effort to hide his disdain for beastfolk and the houseless. I heard he had resisted admitting Allen to the archive at all until the bitter end.

"L-Lynne," the platinum-haired young noblewoman murmured, tugging on her red-haired peer's sleeve.

"I know," Lynne replied, and they sat on the sofa to either side of Lia. For all

her earlier insistence on a speedy rescue, Tina had caved to the pressure Lydia exuded.

“You like next to Lia?” the scarlet-haired child asked, looking up quizzically from the cushion she was still hugging.

“Of course!”

“You’re simply adorable.”

“Lia adowable!” The little girl’s leonine ears perked up as her whole body swayed.

Maybe we shouldn’t have left Atra in the other room.

I resigned myself and sank into a free chair.

“My mother, my aunt Fiane, and Graham Walker have taken command,” Lydia resumed, setting down her glass, “and they’re directing units to join the bulk of the royal guard in cordoning off the area around the archive. Owain Albright is already on the scene.”

I’d seen Duchess Lisa Leinster, “the Bloodstained Lady,” fend off Lydia’s best swordplay with a parasol. Under-duchess Fiane Leinster, “the Smiling Lady,” had fought Tina, Ellie, and Lynne one after another without breaking a sweat. Both numbered among the kingdom’s finest swordswomen. And now the commander of the royal guard, who had defended His Majesty and the royal family all through the rebellion, had joined them.

Lydia rested her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand. “Now, let’s get a little more detail about what happened a hundred years ago.”

“Pardon the intrusion, my ladies.”

Tina, Lynne, and I gave a start and turned to the door. We hadn’t sensed the bespectacled man standing there in his hat and coat until he’d spoken. No wonder even other nations held the professor in awe.

“Dear me,” he said, adding an exaggerated shrug as he crossed the threshold. “I just finished wrangling with that pigheaded court sorcerer, and now you want me to explain state secrets without a moment’s rest. I’d really rather tell Teto and her fellow students as well, and hopefully win them over to—”

“I’ll fill them in later,” Lydia interrupted without mercy. “And don’t waste your time trying to get them on your side. Do you honestly think they’d fall into line and follow orders when Allen is involved? With Gil out of the city, only Yen will even *try* to rein them in. You know what the others are like.”

Teto Tijerina had been one of Allen and Lydia’s underclassmen at the university. Though she was an accomplished sorceress, she insisted on calling herself “normal.” As for the professor’s other students, I had only spoken personally with Gil Algren, currently holding the eastern border as acting duke, but this exchange gave me a pretty good idea of what to expect. Apparently, they all owed Allen debts of gratitude.

The professor gave another dramatic shrug. “I see your point. Anko.”

The black-cat familiar gave a meow. The door shut of its own accord, and potent wards of silence surrounded the room.

“I realize I’m repeating myself, but permit me to warn you one last time.” Allen and Lydia’s mentor began raising his right hand slightly. “As I touched on at the Lebufera residence, the facts I am about to relate are among the kingdom’s most closely guarded secrets. The official story attributes all damage to a failure to control Radiant Shield. Only a select few know the truth, and you may suffer consequences for learning it. Do you still wish to hear?”

Tina, Lynne, and I exchanged looks and gave curt nods. Then, all at once, we broke into rueful grins. We had all made up our minds a long time ago. What did “consequences” matter compared to the fear of losing Allen and Stella?

The professor quietly removed his hat, urged on by a look from Lydia. “Nerves of steel, I see. I should have expected as much from Allen’s students and sister. I’ll tell you as much as I know.”





Now, where to begin? I don't know any more about the events themselves than I already told you. Princess Carina Wainwright, considered a potential White Saint, became first an angel, then an eight-winged devil, and embarked on a rampage. Why, I can't say. But in the process, she spawned monstrous manifestations of Radiant Shield, overrunning numerous towns before seven days and nights of fierce fighting, with innumerable sacrifices, finally sufficed to seal her beneath the royal palace. The then Hero, Duchess Letty the Comet, and Lord Rodde claimed the victory.

Nothing else has come down to us future generations. We have no documents whatsoever. The royal family's archive of forbidden books might hold some clue, although His Majesty claims not to know of any. I believe we may take him at his word. So, let's review another subject for the moment.

I believe you already know of cursed children? Yes, that's right—extremely rare individuals born without the ability to work magic. Those who live to the age of twenty transform into devils, although Lydia and Tina no longer need to fear that fate. You've both escaped the yoke, just like Duchess Letty and Crescent Moon did when Shooting Star saved them two hundred years ago. So you see, Allen has already achieved a remarkable feat. Except for Shooting Star himself, no one else has ever saved *two* cursed children, not even indirectly.

But haven't you ever found it strange? We all know the word *devil*. We also know *angel*, its counterpart, referring to a diametrically opposed type of being. That seems rather odd once you stop to think about it. Dragons, devils, and vampires run rampant in fairy tales, but all three exist in the real world as well. And most view mortal races with either intense animosity or complete disregard—as I expect Lydia will understand, having fought them herself.

You see, dragons, devils, and vampires command rather too much power for mortals to combat. From their perspective, we're little more than ants creeping along the ground. The average swordsman or sorcerer couldn't even put up a fight. They would simply be obliterated. Even the very best warriors and spellcasters would struggle to hold their own against blows that reshape the landscape and defenses that shrug off tactical taboos, to say nothing of

supreme magic. I doubt anyone but the Hero and the descendants of legends whose lives come down to us in storybooks could get the best of them in a fair fight.

Thus, since antiquity, mortals have feared such beings and at times even worshipped them. Think of the black dragon that assailed the royal capital, the flower dragon that delivers oracles in the west, and the water dragon that descended on the city of water to consecrate the newest patch of sacred ground. All three illustrate my point nicely.

So, what about angels? The vast majority of storybook creatures exist in the world around us, even if tales embellish them somewhat: the Hero and the Dark Lord, millennia-old monsters, weapons with wills of their own, the eight great spells wielded by legends of old. And let us not forget the Eight Great Elementals who oversee the world's order, the seven dragons that guard the planet, or the White Saint who saves multitudes and the Black Saint who brings disaster. We mustn't take old tales lightly. They may conceal grains of truth.



The professor swallowed a mouthful from the glass of water he'd poured himself. Tina and Lynne brooded over what he'd said, while Lia mimicked their grave expressions. I recalled something that my mom had told Allen and me as children: "The dragons keep the planet safe for us, you know?"

The scarlet-haired noblewoman propped her chin on her hand, showing no regard for manners. "You certainly like beating around the bush. Allen, Teto, and the rest of your students might play along, but you're stuck here with us now, so cut to the chase. Or do you want me to tell Anko on you?" she demanded without a drop of mercy. Nothing that didn't concern my brother or her family counted for much in Lydia's view.

"Tell on'?" the child repeated, blinking her big eyes at the noblewoman.

"You don't need to tell on anyone!" Tina cut in.

"That's right, Lia," Lynne added from the child's other side. "We wouldn't want you doing anything naughty."

Between Lia and Atra, I supposed none of us could help doting on children.

The professor raised his glass and sighed. “Don’t you think you’re being a little harsh? It wouldn’t hurt you to follow me on a little—”

“Professor.” Leaving Lia to Lynne, Tina rose and faced the master sorcerer. No one could mistake the intelligence in the girl genius’s azure eyes as she said, “Princess Carina wasn’t the first person to be called a ‘White Saint,’ was she? But none of the others reached the point of becoming angels or causing harm. What happened to her one hundred years ago gave us our first proof that the old tales are true. And”—she stood straighter, right hand on her heart—“the flower dragon’s prophecy identified my sister as another White Saint. That’s why the kingdom’s finest have assembled in the city—they’re standing by in case the worst should happen. Am I wrong?”

I held my peace, and Lynne covered her mouth. Even Lydia furrowed her brows slightly.

No wonder Allen wants to see what this girl will grow into.

Lady Tina Howard had an uncanny knack for grasping the essence of things.

“Excellent.” The professor applauded. “You know Lords Crom and Gardner oversee the Sealed Archive. Well, signs indicate that their duties as Record Keepers extend back into the mists of time. Prince John located a passage in a tome from the age of strife that hints as much. But please, do not misunderstand me. None of us wish to harm a hair on Stella’s head. To begin with, it should no longer have been possible to reach the areas below the palace through the Sealed Archive. The Great Tree had blocked the passage, you see. We hoped all would go smoothly, and we called in Lisa and Fiane in case it didn’t. We even pulled the wool over Lucas’s eyes with that scuffle for Lily’s hand to give them a public excuse. No century-old tragedy will repeat itself if we have anything to say about it. And I haven’t even mentioned our greatest insurance.”

Strangely, I knew exactly what he meant. Tina and Lynne must have felt the same because those oh-so-expressive locks of their hair shot to attention. But while our gazes converged, the scarlet-haired noblewoman remained unfazed.

“True,” she said. “I *am* at his side. Now, give me permission to storm the archive, and I’ll sort this out in no time.”

The three of us gaped at her.

“I suppose I can’t argue with that,” the professor said wryly.

Th-The nerve of her!

Watching her ostentatiously stroke her bare right ring finger, I felt a surge of indignation. At the same time, I found myself agreeing. How could the Lady of the Sword possibly lose once she joined forces with her “Brain”? I had no plans to give up my spot at Allen’s side. Still, I might want to think about spending more time with him. Moving in with him as soon as I started university sounded like a good start.

My underclassmen seemed to be working out plans of their own, if their muttering was anything to go by.

“We’ll spend winter break in the northern capital. If I join forces with Ellie...”

“I won’t let you forget about me, dear brother.”

The tension ebbed, leaving me a moment to relax. I might be simpler than I’d thought, although I’d never accidentally say so out loud, like Stella sometimes did.

The professor grinned, ready with some choice remark—then bolted to his feet. “What is this mana?”

We all noticed it at almost the same moment and rushed to the window. I saw the remains of roofs, walls, and paving stones spouted into the air over the Sealed Archive. A moment later, a boom rattled the triple panes as writhing gray briars rose into view. Tina and Lynne squeezed each other’s hands, shaken by the impossible scene.

“I-Is that...?”

“The Great Tree? But what turned it that color?”

A volley of fire and lightning lit the darkness, then another, and another. The glow of massive military barriers brightened the night sky. The knights of the royal guard must have been fighting to contain the growth to the archive grounds. But despite all their efforts, the mana still reached us here.

I don’t believe it! The Great Tree’s on a rampage?!

“Pardon me, Lydia, but I must excuse myself. I’m told a barrier of thorns preceded the angel’s advent a hundred years ago, and we know the Great Tree has a will of its own. Meet me outside the archive. I’ll talk sense into that fool Gardner. And if that fails...” Without warning, the professor vanished, his last resort unspoken. I didn’t see Anko either.

Does this mean an angel is coming?

I had to force myself to digest what that meant.

With both hands, Lydia shoved the window wide open. “Caren, we’re leaving,” she announced matter-of-factly amid the chill gusts of a winter night. “A shortcut through the Sealed Archive will get us underground, then we’ll rescue Allen and Stella. Lia, you know what to do.”

“I don’t need you to tell me!” I snapped, warming our surroundings with a temperature-control spell I’d learned straight from Allen.

“All ready!” Lia chirped. Before I could even start bundling her against the cold, she flashed dimly and was gone. The mark of Blazing Qilin pulsed on the back of the scarlet-haired noblewoman’s right hand.

How did she get this in sync with a great elemental already?!

The rest of us had come a long way in the past few months, but so had the Lady of the Sword. My brother never stopped moving forward, so Lady Lydia Leinster kept forging ahead with all her might to stay beside him. She had no other reason. Tina, Lynne, and I bit our lips in even greater frustration than before.

Lydia, meanwhile, looked up at the roof. “I know you’re there, Lily,” she said casually, scarlet hair dancing on the wintry wind.

Immediately, the maid in question poked her head around the window frame—upside down—and nimbly flipped into the room. She must have combined eavesdropping with guard duty.

Cheery as ever, Lily brought her hands together while Atra peeked out over the collar of her coat. “You bet I’m here! All ready and raring to—”

“Stay here and guard Tina, Lynne, and Ellie,” Lydia interrupted. “Atra, you stay

and help them watch the house.”

“...go?” Lily trailed off, stunned by the unexpected order. She tried to steady herself by fingering her hair clip and the bracelet on her left wrist—the twin of the one Allen wore—while a puzzled Atra repeated, “Watch house?”

A moment later, Tina and Lynne got over their own shock, sputtering with indignation.

“Excuse me, Lydia?!”

“Dear sister?!”

“Don’t argue. We don’t have time or breath to waste,” Lydia said, wearing a look she reserved for the battlefield. The girls fumed, but I doubted it would get them anywhere.

Lily let go of her bracelet and let out a deep breath. “Lydia, tell me why,” she said with none of her usual frivolity. If anything, she seemed refined, almost dignified—a reminder that this would-be maid’s blood ran as blue as any other lady in the room.

For once, Lydia looked a little uncomfortable under her cousin’s gaze. “Based on what we’ve learned so far, Ellie’s parents played a major role in the ten-day-fever outbreak, and they fought the mastermind behind it in the Sealed Archive. You *do* realize Ellie had that revelation dropped on her after eleven whole years, don’t you? We can’t leave her alone in that state, especially when the damage from the Great Tree might spread. Allen would say the same. Have any of *you* ever been on the wrong end of a talking-to from him? I have, and it scared the living daylights out of me! Not an experience I’m looking to repeat.”

Tina, Lynne, and Lily fell silent.

“Yes, I know what you mean.” I nodded emphatically as a shiver ran up my spine. My brother was kind, maybe the kindest person in the kingdom—no, make that the world. He helped the weak, stood up to the strong, and always put others first. And that only made him all the more terrifying when he really lost his temper. He’d only taken me to task once, when we were little, but I felt certain I’d still cry if he ever did it again. What could compare to the terror of thinking that he might hate me, even for a moment?

Even setting that concern aside, we couldn't all run off and leave Ellie sleeping here. I doubted that even the Church of the Holy Spirit could cause trouble in the royal capital, apart from the trap they'd left in the archive, but we couldn't be too careful. Lydia's orders made perfect sense once I stopped to think about them.

The Lady of the Sword gave Tina and Lynne a pat on the head each, flicked Lily's bracelet, and combed her fingers through Atra's purplish-white hair. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll bring Allen and Stella back safe. That's a promise."

"All right," Tina reluctantly replied.

"Yes, dear sister," Lynne said with no more enthusiasm.

"Take care, now," Lily chimed in.

"Promise!" cheered Atra.

Seeing that she had them convinced, Lydia gestured instructions to me. No cars or carriages for us—we'd go on foot. We bumped fists, nodded to each other, and leapt out into the vast darkness of the royal capital.

"We'll join up with my mother first!" Lydia shouted to me in midair, a daredevil grin on her face. "Try to keep up with your sister-in-law!"

"How many times do I have to repeat myself before it sinks in?!" I shot back. "I don't *have* a sister-in-law! Not now, not ever!"



Lydia sped along the rooftops toward the archive's entrance, propelled by a blend of strength-enhancement and wind magic. I couldn't help admiring the way her long scarlet hair danced in the wind. Still, I wouldn't let her beat me. Cloaked in lightning, I took off after her as fast as my legs would carry me, matching pace alongside her.

"Not too shabby, Caren," she called.

"Don't think you're the only one who's gotten stronger!" I snapped. But no sooner had I pulled ahead of her than she passed me right back.



We went on like that, trading barbs every time one of us took the lead, until a grim fortress of a mansion loomed into view: the Sealed Archive under the joint stewardship of the “Record Keepers,” Marquesses Crom and Gardner. Every soldier in or outside the grounds seemed to be fighting to stem the creeping tide of gray brambles.

Without warning, Lydia dropped soundlessly onto a roof near the archive. I joined her a moment later—and gasped as the ground shuddered. For a moment, every lamp went out. The knights and other troops holding the road outside let out a shout as a plume of dust shot skyward.

“Wh-What in the world...?” I murmured, holding on to my beret. Looking down, I saw long, thin shapes writhing, as numerous as they were massive.

Don’t tell me...

“It broke through a strategic barrier and escaped the mansion?!” In a panic, I reached for the dagger at my hip, but a dainty hand stopped me.

“It will be fine, Caren,” Lydia said with total conviction.

I peered skeptically down the street. Amid the obscuring dust cloud, a silhouetted war hammer smashed a thorny gray vine aside, and a flash of light chopped it into bits.

I know those moves!

The airborne remains flickered with ashy light, attempting to regenerate, only to disintegrate as little blue wards sealed each one in turn. I couldn’t begin to identify the spell, although I felt sure Allen would have seen through it at a glance. I only knew one thing: the people who had delivered those blows were a force to be reckoned with.

Sometimes, I get the feeling that the world’s a little too big.

While I teetered on the edge of exasperation, the strength of the barrier covering the mansion rose by leaps and bounds. I could feel someone’s determination to make sure things didn’t get any worse than they already were. Then a petite, chestnut-haired maid landed in front of us.

“I do hope you’ll forgive me, Lady Lydia, Miss Caren,” she said, with one of her

typical low bows. “I seem to have missed a spot while cleaning.”

“Anna!” I exclaimed. “You have nothing to— Huh?”

In mid-sentence, I noticed the figures standing on the roofs of nearby buildings and atop mana lamps. The Ducal House of Leinster’s maids silently awaited orders, each holding her own preferred weapon: a war hammer, a sword, twin knives, a sorceress’s staff, a greatsword, a massive battle-axe, a scythe, and a long spear. Including Anna, I counted nine of them.

Wait, every officer in the corps?! Lily is number three, and number four, Emma, works at Allen & Co. One of the number sixes, Saki, is busy guarding Niccolò Nitti in the southern capital. But all the rest are right here!

While I fell into a stunned silence, Anna curtsied. “The mistress awaits you at the archive entrance. Please allow *us* to clear up any trouble outside.”

“May fortune favor you, Lady Lydia, Miss Caren!” the maids chorused in unison, cheering us on.

Lydia moved her lips slightly, then gave a disgruntled nod. “It’s in your hands.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” I added, bowing deeply before I took off after the scarlet-haired noblewoman. I could hear the roar of the earth splitting behind me.

We vaulted the towering iron fence into the mansion’s grounds. The moment my feet touched down alongside Lydia’s, a strange unease stirred in my tail. Immediately, I cast the intermediate spell Divine Lightning Detection, but it dissipated just as we’d been warned it would.

So, it’s like the sanctuary in the city of water, only not as strong?

I glanced at the noblewoman beside me for confirmation. She said only, “Don’t worry. I can sense his mana,” and started walking. I hurried to catch up.

The red-haired vice commander of the royal guard—Lydia’s older brother, Lord Richard Leinster—looked up from the charred remains of a vine crumbling into stone and spotted us. More of the knights who had fought through the monthlong siege of the eastern capital’s Great Tree with us stood around him,

although I didn't see Celerian Ceynoth, Ryan Bor, or the guard's youngest knight, "Lucky" Valery Lockheart.

"So, you came." Lord Richard grimaced, resting his sword on his shoulder. "I expected you, Lydia, but I didn't think Caren would tag along. My mother and Anna guessed right."

"Fill us in, genius," Lydia demanded, not even bothering to respond.

Meanwhile, I surveyed our surroundings. The royal guard and the southern houses' elite Scarlet Order formed the corps of the forces holding the grounds. Massive holes gaped in the roof, walls, and entryway of the old-timey building. Bent bars covered shattered windows. Luckily, however, it looked like no one had died. Now that the last of the gray vines had apparently fallen, robed court sorcerers showered the wounded in healing spells from their tall staves.

Out of the blue, a crash resounded from the rear of the mansion, and a fierce gust followed. More briars must have sprouted from the escape tunnel that Ellie had used sacred water to tear open.

"We cleared a path to the archive entrance," Richard said, pointing to the building's front door, "but we have no idea what's going on underground. Even our communication orbs are starting to fail. Whatever you do, make it quick. My uncle won't be able to hold the commander back forever, and we won't be able to hold the surface if we lose him to the underground."

Commander Owain Albright had a reputation for daring, but it sounded as though he and Under-duke Lucas Leinster didn't see eye to eye.

Lydia strode off toward the entrance without another word. I followed. With detection spells off the table, rescuing Allen and Stella would come down to luck.

"See you later!" I called to the red-haired nobleman and the other knights I privately considered my comrades in arms. "And take care, all of you!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The clang of gauntlets striking breastplates echoed.

"Thanks, Caren." Lord Richard smirked. "Keep an eye on my sister."

"Two eyes!" I answered cheerfully and entered Lightning Apotheosis.

Armored in crackling electricity, I caught up to Lydia in the blink of an eye. She had paused before the entryway to tie back her scarlet locks with an unremarkable black cord.

“That string won’t win you any points for fashion,” I taunted.

“Anything that keeps my hair out of my eyes will do for now. Allen will help me pick out a new ribbon once I get him back,” Her Highness replied unaffectedly and slipped between the weighty front doors. As much as I hated to admit it, Lydia looked gorgeous with any hairstyle.

“Rejected,” I countered, falling into step beside her. “Sisterly privilege. If Allen takes anyone shopping, it will be me!”

“You’re only a year away from university. Don’t you think it’s about time you learned to live without your brother?”

“Like you’re one to talk!” After a moment to cool down, I added, “But now’s not the time.”

“True. We’d better hurry.”

We advanced warily through the mansion, guided by the portable mana lamps set up along the route. The ceiling, walls, and floor had all suffered serious damage, although the building must have been shielded by powerful wards of its own. All of a sudden, the corridor dead-ended in a wall of debris. That last eruption of briars must have blocked the path.

“Stand back,” Lydia said, drawing her enchanted sword in a single flash of elegance. The splintered remains of a sturdy door split in two, caught fire, and finally toppled to either side with a resounding thud.

Another short walk brought us to a hall with a massive pit. The moon and stars peered down at the wreckage of stone walls and columns through the blown-off ceiling. The place could pass for a ruin.

Allen, Stella, please be safe.

“Lydia, Caren,” a woman’s voice called.

I looked down into the pit and saw the remaining half of a spiral staircase rising from a circular hall bathed in a mystical glow all its own, just as Ellie had

described. We leapt into the pit without hesitation, kicking off the staircase on our way down. Mana lamps hanging from stone pillars gave enough light to see by, but the hall still rubbed me the wrong way. My ears and tail bristled, and I knew why.

“That’s the door Ellie told us about,” I murmured. “The way into the Sealed Archive.”

The door, if you could call it one, swayed hazily in the center of the circular chamber. Despite the wreckage all around, I didn’t see a scratch on it. The thing was eerie. Uncanny, even. It reminded me of how I’d felt the time old Dag of the otter clan had ferried me through the eastern capital’s great underground canals when I was little. Only I’d had Allen with me to hold my hand then.

Awaiting us were Duchess Lisa Leinster, her uniform as scarlet as her flowing hair, and the petite Under-duchess Fiane Leinster, her own scarlet hair just long enough to hide her ears. An enchanted longsword and rapier hung from their respective belts. Beside them stood the grim-faced professor and Anko, the familiar perched on the head of the white wolf Chiffon. And they weren’t the only ones.

“You’re late!” Princess Cheryl Wainwright barked, head held high. She was spoiling for a fight and didn’t care who knew it. Her overflowing mana lit up the room, making her long blonde hair and white sorceress’s robe shine even brighter than usual.

Don’t tell me Her Royal Highness is going down into the archive with us?!

She could hold her own against Lydia, if I believed Stella and Ellie’s report of their “friendly” tussle in the palace, but she was still our future queen. Could she really afford to take that kind of risk? I remembered Allen’s frown when he’d described her in their student days. “Cheryl has her heart in the right place,” he’d told me. “But I can’t shake the feeling that she’d go to any lengths to help Lydia and me if we let her.” He might have been right.

Lydia cast a disbelieving glance at the princess before turning to the duchesses. “Hello, mother, aunt.”

“I won’t stop you now,” the Bloodstained Lady replied.

“I can’t wait to see how much you’ve learned!” the Smiling Lady added cheerily.

With two of the kingdom’s finest swordswomen to vouch for us, nothing could keep us from—

“Wait a moment, if you please.” A middle-aged man landed protectively in front of the entrance, barring our path. A monocle covered his left eye, and his white hair hung well below his shoulders. He held a wooden staff and wore a white sorcerer’s robe. Several books hovered around him.

“On whose authority do you intend to enter the archive?” Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner demanded, loathing plain on his face. “Their lordships have empowered me to act on their behalf, and I don’t recall approving a *second* intrusion.”

“Is this any time to quibble about procedure?” the professor countered icily. “You must appreciate the danger as well as we do, and there are only so many ways to get under the palace. Would you prefer we pass through the catacombs?”

“Exceptions are just that: exceptional. His Majesty has issued no approvals. If you insist...” Gerhard waved his left hand, and armed court sorcerers emerged from behind the seven pillars.

Would he really fight this out?!

Fiery plumes blanketed the entire hall. Gerhard remained motionless, but a shudder ran through his underlings.

“Is that all you have to say?” Lydia spat, openly hostile. “We’re in a hurry. You can try to stop us if you want, but I hope you’re prepared for the consequences.”

Oh no.

I looked to Princess Cheryl, who, at least on paper, had the power to issue orders. But while I silently begged her for help, she muttered, “I suppose it could work, as long as we knock them all out and tweak their memories,” with a straight face.

A-Allen! Why didn't you spend more time teaching them common sense?!

Buffeted by the mana of two monsters—the Lady of the Sword and the Lady of Light—the court sorcerers instinctively raised swords and staves, poised to—

“Enough of that.”

“You really ought to work on knowing when you’re beaten.”

Seven skilled fighters fell in the wake of a scarlet flash. It can’t have been anything more complicated than strengthening magic, but the sheer speed strained credulity. And in its aftermath, Lisa and Fiane, the authors of the superhuman feat, ever so slowly brought the edges of their rigid hands to Gerhard’s throat.

“We’ll bow to your authority in times of peace.”

“But right now, this city is a battlefield.”

No sorcerer, no matter how skilled, stood a chance against these two at close quarters.

Gerhard Gardner struck the butt of his staff on the stone floor. “Your Highnesses,” he said with obvious reluctance, “I will grant entry to the Lady of the Sword, but never to that beastfolk girl. I made one exception, but to defy my ancestor’s dying injunction a second time—”

“Gerhard,” Under-duchess Fiane interrupted. Her expression remained soft, but her eyes shone with the intelligence and sincerity I sometimes glimpsed in Lily’s. “The Sealed Archive is a thing of the past. I know you’re wise enough to realize that. Even that door only works one way. Ellie Walker proved that anyone who enters needs to find their own way back. As for the vines reaching the surface, we can blame them on remnants of the ‘Stone Serpent’ that Allen’s party fought.”

Gardner said nothing. The duchesses withdrew their hands.

“‘Failure to act in a crisis is the height of folly,’” the under-duchess recited. “‘It is in such moments that you must think most clearly and find the courage to defend the weak.’ You taught me that yourself when I was still a student. Aren’t Allen and Stella the ‘weak’ you spoke of now? Would Gerhard Gardner, ‘the

Iron Wind,' countenance anything so disgraceful as titled nobles fleeing the battlefield and leaving a commoner to his fate? Where are Lords Crom and Gardner?"

A heavy silence fell. The briars were still rampaging. At least I assumed so, because the whole mansion shook.

This man is no fool. He knows how much danger we're all in, and he knows the marquesses ought to be ashamed of themselves.

The professor sighed and raised a hand. "Lisa and Fiane will enter the archive. Only Lydia can still sense Allen's mana under these circumstances, so she'll accompany them. And..."

I couldn't help standing straighter. I slipped off my beret and held it to my chest.

"...so will Caren," the professor finished, with a slight nod. "The rest of us will remain here and hold the escape route Ellie created. Gerhard, do you remember what you told me on a hilltop east of the city? Allow me to return the favor." Sparks flew between the men. I could tell their enmity ran deep. "I don't share your views or your way of life, and as long as I draw breath, I never will. But we can find common ground on one thing: keeping the kingdom and its people safe. The flower dragon's oracles don't err. Stella won't become an angel, much less a devil. Not while she has the new Shooting Star by her side."

"Your wishful thinking won't sway me. I know that boy will bring ruin and disaster to this kingdom one of these days. You want to speak of Shooting Star? Look where the world that put its faith in him two hundred years ago ended up once—"

Gerhard Gardner stifled his outburst of emotion as quickly as it had begun. He pounded his staff on the floor once again, and the spell books floating around him opened, pages flipping of their own accord. A spell formula began inscribing itself on the ground.

Is it me, or does this look a lot like a demisprite teleportation circle?

"If events play out as they did one hundred years ago, the sacred ground will continue to expand," the head court sorcerer explained. "My order exists to

shield the royal family and their capital. We cannot let such an incursion go unchecked.” He paused. “In case the worst should happen, we will blockade the Great Tree itself at the Royal Academy. Thus, we were never here. I pray that you do not make our situation worse.”

The formula blazed with rainbow-colored light, then disappeared. The other court sorcerers brandished talismans, teleporting after their leader.

The beastfolk-hating ringleader of the old guard, the man who had blocked Allen’s court sorcerer appointment, still undeniably loved his country. Why couldn’t anything be simple? Brainwork wasn’t supposed to be my responsibility.

A sigh escaped me. To think that Allen had spent all his years in the royal capital dealing with people like *that*.

But just as my spirits fell, Under-duchess Fiane walked over to me with a spring in her step. “Carey! It’s so nice to meet you!” she cried, beaming. I could see the resemblance to Lily.

“Th-The pleasure is mine, Your Highness,” I replied, bowing as I hurriedly snapped back to the present. “I can’t thank you and Duchess Lisa enough.”

The words had hardly left my mouth before the decidedly buxom under-duchess’s smile broadened. “Won’t you call me ‘Fia’?” she asked, pressing her hands together.

“And I’m plain ‘Lisa’ to you,” the scarlet-haired beauty beside her corrected me, narrowing her eyes.

“O-Of course, Fia, Lisa,” I answered, instantly cowed. What chance did I stand against these two?

“Oh, thank you!”

“That’s better.”

Meanwhile, Princess Cheryl kept a hand over her mouth, muttering something I couldn’t hear—although the annoyed look on Lydia’s face helped me guess. (“I must ask her to call me ‘Cheryl’ later. Oh, but perhaps I should skip right to ‘sister’?”)

Another “enemy,” although I guess I knew that already.

Having finished arranging her thoughts, the princess thumped her chest with her left hand and rounded on the scarlet-haired noblewoman. “Lydia! I’m going with you!”

“No, Cheryl,” Lydia answered wearily.

“Why not?! You aren’t the only one Allen saved!”

“I know that, but still.”

“Cheryl, I can’t hold the escape route alone,” the professor chimed in, all the while conjuring strange black boxes to drift through the air. “Join me with Chiffon. I’ll assign Anko to guard you as well.”

“In that case... But I...I have just as much right to—”

“Your Royal Highness,” I said, seizing her hands and staring into her teary eyes, “please leave this to me. I promise to bring my brother and Stella back safe.”

Our eyes locked for a moment, but Princess Cheryl looked away before I did. “That look isn’t fair. It’s just like *his*,” she muttered, drying her eyes on her sleeve. Then she folded her arms. “I see you really are Allen’s sister. Do you know you even sounded like him just now?”

“I’m the only sister he’s got,” I replied. How many times had those words supported me? Just saying them called up a swell of courage from deep in my chest.

“However!” Princess Cheryl pressed her index finger to my forehead. “I forbid —*forbid*—you to call me ‘Your Royal Highness’ except on public occasions. You’ll address me by name and nothing else, or I swear I’ll make you my sister-in-law. Bear that in mind, Caren.”

“E-Er...” I was still grappling with this surprise demand when a certain scarlet-haired noblewoman hid me behind her back.

“Don’t be silly, Cheryl,” she said. “Don’t you know Caren is going to be *my* sister-in-law?”

“You haven’t won yet, Lydia!” the princess retorted. Then they shared a

ladylike laugh as a clash of fiery plumes and shining lights brightened the whole hall—at least until I got over my shock and angrily forced my way between them.

“For the last time!” I fumed. “No one is *ever* going to be my sister-in—”

My protest ended in a squeal. The under-duchess had caught me in a hug from behind.

She could kill someone with these lethal weapons.

“She’s right, you know?” Fia said. “She’ll be *Lily’s* sister-in-law one day, which will make her my little girl!”

“Never,” all three of us retorted in unison.

“Aww!” Fia pouted even as she danced her way back to Lisa’s side, where I caught her giving a slight nod.

Wait, did she do that on purpose to help us relax?

Lisa and Fia advanced on the door, with Lydia and me close behind them. The professor waited to see Chiffon cuddle up to the princess, Anko still riding on the white wolf’s head.

“Lisa, Fiane, Lydia, Caren,” he said, with a wink and a wave of his hand. “You’re all strong. But we can glimpse the church and the ‘Sage’ behind this business. If the Great Tree’s power grows any greater, even you will be hard-pressed to escape. Don’t charge in recklessly. Take care.”

A moment later, the “door” swallowed us whole.



Before anything else, I saw a pitch-dark sky twinkling with stars. I was standing on something, although I hesitated to call it ground. It felt strange underfoot. I could sense Lydia close by, but that didn’t keep my nerves at bay.

What in the world is going on?

I reached for my dagger to cast a detection spell. Then, without warning, my vision cleared, and I stumbled straight into Lydia’s back.

“Caren,” she said, unruffled.

“S-Sorry,” I mumbled, backing away to assess our predicament.

Lisa and Fia had their blades drawn. They must have arrived a step ahead of us. We’d all been teleported onto a circular stage split three ways, every bit as large as Ellie had reported. Thorny vines spilled from the gulf that surrounded the platform along with the Great Tree’s roots and boughs, all petrified. They had torn down the cluster of bookshelves, wreaking havoc on what must once have been orderly rows.

“It’s a disaster zone,” I muttered to myself, grimacing.

“All that’s left of the Sealed— Caren, jump!” Lydia shouted.

I bounded left, drawing my Lightning Dragon Dagger. Shards of gray ice rained down, gouging holes in the platform where we’d just been standing.

Is this...?

Flames brushed my cheeks as two monstrous Firebirds took flight, barreling steeply upward. Lisa’s and Lydia’s supreme magic crashed straight into a creature clinging to the ceiling. The Stone Serpent had lost its icy wings and merged with the Great Tree’s roots.

The monster let out a silent scream as it plummeted to the platform, engulfed in crimson. Dust filled the air. The serpent deployed slaty Radiant Shields and called on Resurrection, attempting to heal its wounds, but it seemed to have exhausted most of its power fighting Allen’s expedition.

“We’re looking at what’s left of the Sage’s trap. The Great Tree coming alive must have given it a chance to suck up mana,” Lydia pronounced calmly, drawing Cresset Fox—the enchanted sword Allen had received from the legendary witch Linaria “Twin Heavens” Etherheart.

“Fia,” Lisa called.

“You got it!” The petite under-duchess shot forward to deal the coup de grâce, smiling all the while.

How is she so fast?!

The serpent writhed in agony, mana pouring from its body amid the searing inferno. Even so, it opened its jaws wide and started gathering power. It meant

to fight back.

I entered Lightning Apotheosis and manifested my cross-headed lightning spear. But just as I was poised to charge, a hand gripping an enchanted sword blocked my path.

“Lydia?! What—?”

“She’ll be fine,” the noblewoman interrupted. “Just watch.”

The serpent’s maw flickered with gray light, and—

“As if I’d let you fire that!” Fia vanished, rapier in hand.

A moment later, a high-pitched sound echoed through the chamber. Pierced through from head to tail, the serpent fell prey to a fresh gout of hellfire and completely disintegrated.

I know it wasn’t at full strength, but she just made Stone Serpent look like a pushover. That spell’s given us trouble in every city we’ve fought in.

While I gaped, Under-duchess Fiane Leinster gave her rapier a careless flick, instantly extinguishing the inferno around her. Her smile hadn’t faltered.

“Don’t underestimate my Aunt Fiane. She’s been my mother’s sparring partner since they were kids,” Lydia explained, casting the intermediate spell Divine Light Detection. A wave of light spread, then bounced back without getting anywhere.

“It looks like we can’t count on detection spells,” the noblewoman added. “Allen or Cheryl would find a way around that, but my light magic isn’t up to the task. Still...”

“Yes.” I nodded with feeling. We were still far off, but I could faintly—ever so faintly—feel Allen’s mana.

“Lydia, Caren,” Lisa said, touching the ground in the center of the platform, “can you sense Allen’s and Stella’s mana?”

“Only Allen’s, and only barely,” Lydia replied.

“I think he’s deeper underground,” I added.

“Yes, unfortunately.” A frown creased the renowned Lady of the Sword’s

beautiful face. A quick swish of her blade, and flames formed a barrier.

“Fia guessed right,” Lisa said. “The Sealed Archive is dead. This stone tablet no longer serves any purpose. Ellie’s report mentioned the testament of the Great Tree warden Remire Walker, but I can’t even read that now. We’ll have our work cut out for us tracking down Allen and Stella.”

Lydia and I were at a loss for words. I bit my lip.

Allen, Stella, please be safe.

Meanwhile, Fia walked to the edge of the platform and peered into the gulf. “I can’t see a thing,” she reported. “And to make matters worse...”

Lydia and I gave a start as fierce winds tore open her fiery wards, ruffling her scarlet locks and my silver-gray hair.

“We have company.” Fia flourished her rapier, indicating nearly a hundred creatures flapping above her head. Four wings supported bodies crowned with long necks and sharp beaks. Potent mana shrouded each form.

“Sea-green griffins made of *thorns*?” I gasped, stunned.

Lisa ran a finger along her enchanted blade, activating the Leinsters’ secret Scarlet Sword. “You’re looking at the Great Tree’s self-defense mechanism. I’ve only read about it in old books myself.”

“I remember learning that it caused an awful mess one hundred years ago,” Fia chimed in. “Look alive, girls!”

We promptly scattered, avoiding a rain of Divine Wind Spears. Allen would have handily dismantled the intermediate spells, but I’d never survive attempting such a delicate maneuver mid-combat.

One thorn-griffin after another opened its beak, throwing in a volley of Imperial Storm Tornadoes. I swept the advanced spells aside with my lightning spear and charged.

Lydia leapt into the fray, holding her sword at the ready while her free left hand crushed tornadoes. “Don’t fall behind, Caren!”

“I wasn’t planning to!” I snapped.

A group of thorn-griffins armored themselves in storm winds and dove at us. Maybe they'd gotten sick of casting spells that couldn't stop us. Either way, I couldn't have asked for a better opening.

I darted ahead and brought my spear down on the lead creature's wings with all my might, slicing through its magic gusts along with them. Casting the bi-elemental spell Heavenly Wind Bound, I kicked off the disoriented thorn-griffin to new heights.

"Try some of this!" I shouted, dividing my blade of lightning to run more creatures through before casting the advanced spell Imperial Lightning Dance. Violet arcs of electricity filled the air, sealing the fate of everything they struck.

Fiery plumes whirled as I felt a warmth on my back. Lydia had caught up to me with Black Cat Promenade.

"Well, well. You've gotten pretty good at that," she said even as her sword traced a wide arc. A scarlet flash split the air, cleaving straight through at least a dozen thorn-griffins in the act of pouncing on me from behind. As usual, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it.

Nevertheless, I landed beside her and snapped, "You aren't the only one who's grown! So don't assume that place at Allen's side is yours forever, because I'm just getting started!"

"Yes, yes," the scarlet-haired noblewoman replied, giving her left hand a limp wave as violet sparks and fiery plumes collided all around us. "So I have a sister-in-law who never learns. What else is new?"

"One 'yes' is enough! And I—"

A shower of burning, motionless bodies cut my rejoinder short. Even after they hit the ground, the flames persisted until there was nothing left. I looked up and saw— Where had all the thorn-griffins gone? I'd counted dozens!

Fia landed on a stone column, holding her skirt in place. "What strong girls you are!" she lilted, her smile growing. "My Lily has her work cut out for her. You know, Li-li—"

"You can't have Allen *or* Caren," the duchess cut in, having just annihilated the last thorn-griffin's head.

“Aww! Pretty please?”

I felt a headache coming on. No one in the Ducal House of Leinster had their head screwed on quite right. Still, at least I had a fresh excuse to tease Lydia.

But no sooner had I turned to her than we both stiffened, faces drawn, and raced to the brink of the seemingly bottomless chasm. We knelt down, not minding the dirt, and focused all our senses.

“What *is* this mana?” Lydia murmured.

“Allen!” I cried. I didn’t know what lurked in the depths of the ravine. I couldn’t sense Stella’s mana at all, but I’d spent enough time with my brother to tell when he was in a fight, and his opponent’s mana was strong enough to reach me even in this nascent sanctuary.

Could it be? An angel?

I could see anxious impatience in Lydia’s profile. Unless we hurried to the rescue soon—

“Goodness! What have we here?” Fia exclaimed as brambles sprouted from the floor and ceiling. The vines met in midair, knitting themselves into a colossal, seven-headed griffin.

An inferno brushed my cheek. Lisa had hurled a Firebird without a moment’s hesitation—only for countless overlapping shields to block the spell, although most shattered in the process.

It stopped a blow from the Bloodstained Lady?!

While I struggled to pick my jaw up off the floor, the woman herself said calmly, “It appears the Great Tree consumed the vestiges of Stone Serpent rather than the other way around. Even cheap, temporary copies of Radiant Shield and Resurrection pose a real threat with limitless mana behind them. Fia, Lydia, you know what to do.”

“Of course,” the other two Leinsters answered in unison, heaping magical enhancements on themselves. One’s rapier shone scarlet, while the other brought her sword behind her back.

“Caren, you’ll deal the final blow,” Lisa demanded, as if nothing could be

more natural, while her own blade turned crimson.

“Y-You can count on me!” I responded, straightening my beret and pushing the lightning coursing through my body to its limits.

Having assumed a fighting stance, the seven-headed thorn-griffin let out an earsplitting shriek. Immediately, Fia vanished from my sight, and ashen radiance shone eerily above the creature’s head as hundreds of shields converged. I felt the shock wave as they took the full force of the Smiling Lady’s thrust—she’d kicked off the ceiling, angling for a surprise attack, although I couldn’t begin to guess how she’d gotten up there. Fresh damage shook the Sealed Archive’s corpse.

Fia’s lips twisted. “It is *awfully* hard. Of course...” A dozen or more rapiers of fire materialized without warning, all thrusting at a single point in the wall of shields. “I know ways around that!”

The seven-headed griffin staggered as fire erupted from all over its body.

“Lydia, go left!” Lisa called.

“I know!” Lydia yelled back. Mother and daughter darted through the air, crisscrossing as their Scarlet Swords lopped three heads each off the creature’s left and right sides.

“Now, Caren!” they shouted in unison.

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” I roared, kicking off the ground with all my might, my spear thrust straight at the final head. I gathered all the lightning in my body. Then, howling at the top of my lungs, I sliced the thorn-griffin in half vertically while it struggled to regenerate.

Two Firebirds and more flaming rapiers than I could count pressed in on all sides, then found their mark at the same instant. Nothing remained.

Lydia landed near me and gave several self-satisfied nods. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. After all, you *are* my—”

“Not another word!” I snapped, clamping a hand over her mouth.

But at least now we can go and rescue—

The ground rumbled.

“Wh-What now?!” I shouted.

“Is it blocking the chasm?” Lydia muttered. “And th-this mana...”

Roots and branches of the Great Tree crawled in from all sides, closing off the gaping chasm with a wall of briars. And they didn’t stop there, spawning more of the thorn-griffins we’d just eliminated to encircle us—a veritable army this time. I couldn’t see us getting past so many without a drawn-out fight.

Fia paused for a moment of sober reflection, then conjured a fire barrier with a wave of her left hand. “Lisa.”

“Yes, Fia,” the other beauty replied in graver tones than I’d ever heard from her before.

No.

Holding her sword straight out to her right side, Lisa commanded, “Lydia, Caren, we’re retreating for the present.”

“But mother!” Lydia cried.

“Duchess Lisa, we can’t!” I shouted.

Shaken, we lurched toward her. Then we saw it—the infamous Bloodstained Lady’s shoulders were trembling ever so slightly.

“We don’t know what happened underground or what’s down there,” she said, “but there’s been a change in the Great Tree’s mana. It’s determined to shut us out. Even if we manage to break through, it may cut off our retreat. In which case, none of us may survive.”

“But what about him?! What about Allen?!” Lydia wailed, her long scarlet hair in disarray.

“My brother’s fighting someone!” I pleaded, probably looking just as frantic. “Maybe the ‘angel’ the professor told us about! Or maybe even a devil! We have to help him!”

“Liddy, Carey, we really ought to retreat,” Fia replied, slowly shaking her head. “There’s just too much we can’t be sure of.”

Lydia and I hung our heads, groaning.

Allen. Stella.

A hand came to rest on my shoulder. Lisa's gorgeous face filled my view.

"You know Allen," she said. "I'm certain he's keeping himself safe, and Stella as well. He's grown as much as any of you through all these disasters, and he won't break your hearts. Not ever. But I doubt he can spare the time or energy to seek out a way back. We need to return to the surface and find one for him."

After a long moment, Lydia and I both mumbled, "Right."

There's no time to waste. We'll hurry back to the surface and—

"Brace for more of those guardian creatures!"

Fia's sharp warning forced me to abandon my thoughts. Storm winds had torn through her barrier, bolstered by the force of sheer numbers. The flock of thorn-griffins had grown to several hundred strong, all diving straight at us. Our return was going to take a little longer than I would have liked.

Chapter 2

The black-and-white angel that had usurped control of Lady Stella Howard's body launched herself at me, beating her two pearly and two inky wings. Even Stella's lovely, azure-tinged platinum hair had turned black and white. Her azure ribbon came loose and drifted high into the air while a dark wind shrouded her torn white sorceress's garb.

The blue-rose sword in the angel's right hand, now stained jet-black, radiated mana I associated with the most dangerous beings in existence: dragons, devils, vampires, the Hero, the Dark Lord, and witches. The black and white flower petals that carpeted the ground around this ruined mausoleum beneath the palace cracked and scattered in the raging ice storm.



I can't risk offensive magic, not against one of my students. I'll just have to block all of—

The ring on the third finger of my right hand flashed. “With your mana? You’ll die. Dodge, Allen of the wolf clan,” warned the icy voice of Linaria “Twin Heavens” Etherheart, a legendary sorceress from five hundred years in the past.

“When did you get here?!” I grunted in exertion, straining my depleted mana to cast the elementary spells Light Mirror Shower and Divine Light Flash simultaneously. Dazzling rays scattered every which way, blinding the angel while I retreated for all I was worth.

The angel squinted—one eye profoundly white, the other, deepest black—and swung her sword out to one side. Then she raised her staff high, the orb at its tip brimming with frozen dark light, and brought it crashing down on the ground. A lethal cross sped through the air, mowing down blameless flowers and wreaking fresh havoc on the already ruined structure.

I yelped as I tumbled across the ground and into hiding behind a broken stone column. I had no strength to spare so soon after my battle with the ice-winged serpent in the Sealed Archive. Even the bracelet on my right wrist had exhausted its mana.

Gasping for breath, I quickly checked my surroundings with an ice mirror—and groaned.

“This can’t be real.”

To my disbelief, the onslaught had even cut through some of the black javelins that pincushioned the ground. Those Stellar Spears came from Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera’s most secret art, channeled through Flicker of the Dying Moon, an enchanted weapon she had wrested from the very hand of the Dark Lord in the war two hundred years ago, and they still couldn’t hold up in the face of the angel. In my own mock duel with Duchess Letty, I’d needed Lily’s help, Lydia’s mana, and one of Linaria’s secret spells to fend off the technique, and then only barely. I shuddered to think what would have become of me if not for that warning.

Hovering amid my light mirrors, the angel closed her eyes and let her sword

and staff hang limply at her sides, quietly beating her four wings. Her long hair danced with her white robe on the icy breeze, completing a picture as beautiful as it was frightening.

The problem is, I can't see myself getting away from her. And I'm even less confident I can launch a magical attack on Stella and mean it. If I'm going to get out of this, then...

"That blue-rose sword looks like the place to start," I muttered.

Stella had lost herself to the angel after pulling the weapon from the mausoleum's stone altar, seemingly in a trance. It seemed to me that we had stumbled into a site meant for some sort of ritual. And who could our enemy be but the eight-winged devil Duchess Letty had vanquished and imprisoned? I couldn't explain why she had fewer wings, and partly of the wrong color. Still, Remire Walker's testament had mentioned a "fallen angel," and his desperation made letting her reach the surface seem like a bad idea indeed.

I need to get that sword away from her. But how?

Without warning, the angel thrust her staff out straight in front of her. Cold, dark winds swirled.

What now?

While I watched warily, the whole subterranean space shook. Drifting beads of black and white light converged from all around us, forming thirteen shining shields. Circling as though with wills of their own, they made short work of my mirrors.

Slowly, the angel opened her eyes. She looked decidedly annoyed. Her mana, already orders of magnitude beyond mine, surged to new heights as fierce gale winds transformed our surroundings into a sheet of ice.

"I don't like my odds," I grumbled as a shiver pulled my grimace tight. Had Duchess Letty really defeated something stronger than *this*?

I'd faced a dragon, a devil, the millennium-old Stinging Sea, and even a pure-blooded vampire. The latter, most frightening because they understood mortals best, had ultimately cost me my best friend, Zelbert Régnier—although Zel had gotten his wish in the process. But even compared to those fearsome

opponents, the black-and-white angel still filled me with terror.

I doubt I'll ever get that sword out of her hands unless I risk my life to do it.

For a moment, I pictured Lydia ablaze with anger and the girls' furious looks.

I'm sorry, but I don't see what choice I have.

I tightened my grip on my staff. Immediately, the shields stopped in their orbits. But why?

The angel crossed her sword and staff, then swiftly slid them apart. The earth rumbled as swords and spikes of ice burst from it, seemingly intent on overrunning the whole cavern.

"I...I know this spell!" I exclaimed, enchanting my feet and wreathing the tip of my rod in flames. I ran, threading my way through the onslaught.

She copied Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend?! But that's a tactical taboo spell!

I kicked off a frosty sword blade and knocked a spike aside with my rod, thinking that I couldn't keep this up for long. Then the worst chill yet ran up my spine.

Swinging Silver Bloom, I narrowly deflected the angel's sword as it whirled down on me from behind, then stealthily cast a handful of spells. Ice mirrors formed in midair, giving footholds to kick off as I leapt backward.

The strike had carried more weight than I could have imagined. If not for Lydia drilling me in the basics, I couldn't have reacted to it at all. And I had yet to regain my balance when the staff followed up with a lightning-quick thrust of the dark ice blade on its tip. The thirteen shields likewise launched themselves into the fray, intent on hacking me apart.

The staff pierced my torso—or rather, my reflection's. The light mirror shattered in a blinding flash. It never hurt to keep my enemy guessing. While she was distracted, I landed in a gap between the blades and spikes and ducked back into cover.

Up in the air, the angel cocked her head, giving her own hand a puzzled stare.

"Swordplay and spellcraft are both next to useless," I murmured. "And to make matters worse..."

The inky glow surrounding the angel's sword intensified, while the dark orb on her staff took on the hue of night itself. The icy gale—black, white, and flecked with azure—was gaining force by the moment.

"She hasn't even gotten the hang of Stella's body yet," I groaned, my mouth bone-dry.

The ring on my right hand had been blinking a warning for a while now: "Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!" My mind was a whirl of indecision. Linaria had a point—fighting the angel alone was suicide. But Zel had chosen to face down the vampire Idris's colossal summoning spell to keep Lydia and me safe. If I ran away now, who could say whether I'd be able to relocate Stella anytime soon? Monsters of immense power rarely lingered in one place—hence my best friend's long, long journey.

"When you can't decide what to do, picture the future you. That'll give you the last push you need. And I know it sounds old-fashioned, but when you fall, fall forward!"

You're right, Zel. Stella Howard is my student. My duty to her won't change. I'll save her, and that's that!

Firm in my resolve once more, I glared at the black-and-white angel. She hadn't spotted me yet. All that time I'd spent practicing silent magic was coming to my rescue. I had a chance, although I couldn't count on any trick working twice.

A hint of irritation entered the angel's gaze. Her sword swished through the air, and her shields came together, shifting shape. From their fusion emerged innumerable azure snowflakes flecked with white and black.

"This looks more like Lily's magic," I murmured to myself. "I see now. So *this* is how Radiant Shield is meant to—"

A shower of snowflakes from overhead cut my musings short. They had turned razor-sharp, cleaving through icy blades and spikes with ease. I pushed my capacity to sense mana nearly to its limit, evading the assault as I made a desperate break for my goal: the remains of the ruined mausoleum.

Almost there. I just need a little more time.

An icy breeze brushed my cheek. The angel's almost supernaturally beautiful face filled my view as she raised her sword to strike.

Oh dear, my instincts told me. I'm done for unless I act fast.

I listened and hurled myself sideways as hard as I could manage. The angel's blade cut empty air—and a chunk of my sleeve, although I felt certain I'd gotten clear in time.

A snap of my fingers sent a little ball of light that I couldn't even call a spell hurtling into the blue-rose sword. The clear ice encasing the blade flashed into visibility, then faded from view just as quickly. The technique reminded me of Zel's and my sister's.

I fell to one knee, grimacing. "A taboo ice spell I've never heard of, a real Radiant Shield that attacks as well as it defends, and a blade of ice I can't even see." A hollow laugh escaped me. "I'm so far out of my league it's almost funny."

The airborne angel observed me coldly, making no response. She had slashed more quickly and moved her shields with greater precision than before. I might manage to dodge her next strike, but what about the one after that?

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed intact Stellar Spears lodged in the ground and debris.

I'll just have to risk it.

I exhaled, rapidly activating the spells I'd just deployed all around the angel. Tree branches sprouted from the icy blades and spikes covering the ground, reaching up to seize her sword, staff, and all four limbs. But the flower-shaped shields instantly raced to intercept, leaving trails of light in their wake. Not a single plant reached its target—just as I'd anticipated. In the meantime, I had reached the Stellar Spear stuck in what remained of a column.

Having dispatched my branches, the angel opened her mouth.

"Remnants of a bygone age."

I'd love to know more, but right now, saving Stella is the only thing that matters!

I seized the black spear. First came searing pain—a torrent of mana leagues beyond my own, reminding me just how impressive Leticia “the Comet” Lebufera really was. I grunted, gritting my teeth, and held my rod alongside the weapon.

Mana swirled, refracting the piercing radiance of Silver Bloom’s orb and lighting up the frozen flowers. Surprise colored the angel’s face.

“You really never know until you try,” I mused as the last of the spear vanished, absorbed into the rod. Silver Bloom had consumed its mana—hardly an efficient process. Considering the aches it had left me with, I couldn’t begin to call it a fair trade, nor did I feel quite up to a repeat performance. Nevertheless...

I activated the elementary spells I’d slipped into the first set of light mirrors the angel had broken. The fastest of all offensive magic, Divine Light Shot, hemmed the angel in on all sides, hampering her movements while avoiding direct hits. Meanwhile, Black Cat Promenade teleported me directly above her, where I drove Thunder Fang Spear into the shields not busy intercepting blasts of light.

No single advanced spell, not even one tailored for piercing, could put a dent in those defenses. My lightning rapidly dwindled, but it had done its job. I had seen far more of Radiant Shield than I cared to, albeit mere vestiges, and I wouldn’t let it stand in my way.

I insinuated myself into the spell formula, ever shifting as though with a life of its own, and forced my way through it. The shields of azure ice shattered, leaving a gash on my cheek. I ignored it. The girl’s black and white eyes widened in shock as I seized her right hand and shouted, “Stella!” at the top of my lungs.

Her left hand froze in the act of drawing back her staff to stab at me. The shields seemed to have stopped dead too, having blocked the last of my light spells. But the spell formula hadn’t stopped resisting my intrusion.

“Stella!” I yelled again. “Wake up!”

Her eyes were shifting back to a dazzling blue, a match for any woman alive. “Mr. Allen?” she murmured, evidently struggling to grasp the situation. “Wh— Why am I—? What in the world—?”

Stella gasped as a magical wind blew the sea-green griffin feather I'd once given her from her breast pocket. Her face contorted in despair. The next moment, to my consternation, the pressure from the spell formula skyrocketed, and her eyes turned black and white once more.

Icy boughs appeared from thin air, coiling around my right arm.

"Oh—"

My curse ended in a yelp as I found myself hurled bodily, thirteen shields hot on my heels. Time seemed to slow as I recalled a lecture from my late friend.

"Buddy, you don't know how to stop," he had said. "That's a hell of a talent. But you couldn't be less cut out for fighting battles. You're too nice for war. You can't save everyone. No one understands that better than you do, but I know you'd still offer anyone a helping hand without a second thought. You can't help it, even if it means sacrificing yourself. It's a virtue we can all admire, but don't think it can't be a vice too. You won't find too many out-and-out villains in this world of ours, and you're bound to hesitate when you've got someone dead to rights. So leave the rough stuff to Lady Burn-It-All, Princess Schemer, and yours truly."

I see your point, Zel. But as furious as Lydia and Cheryl might get with me, I'm still a man. I have to step up sometimes. Though when you get down to it, maybe I haven't grown at all since I last saw you.

I cracked a bitter grin as white, black, and azure light engulfed my world. My consciousness was fading before I could so much as try to fight back. I couldn't even open my eyes, yet strangely, I felt no pain. My rod slipped from my fingers.

While I fell amid the enveloping light, I sensed only a presence devoid of hostility, slowly approaching. A soft whisper, like someone talking to themselves, reached my ears just as the last of my consciousness fled.

"Key."



"Too slow!"

A beautiful blonde girl gave a start as a training sword cut through her dozen or more barriers, although she still had the presence of mind to leap back out of range. Her Royal Academy winter uniform billowed in the breeze.

The scarlet-haired girl standing in the center of the academy's training ground flashed a cocky grin. Lady Lydia Leinster wore the same uniform as her opponent and looked every bit as beautiful. I noticed that she'd grown her hair out since our first meeting during the entrance exam. She had also gotten far stronger, and not only because she had learned to use magic.

I couldn't help overhearing the other students who had gathered in the stands to watch the two go at it.

"She cut magical defenses with a *training* sword?!"

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"N-No one can pull that off. It's just not possible."

"Don't forget, we're talking about the Lady of the Sword here."

"Common sense doesn't apply to her."

"I don't see her wolf-clan lackey. What's his name, again? Allen? How did a wretch like him skip two years, anyway? It makes no sense!"

I beg your pardon. I'm no one's lackey, but I am, in fact, here. As for skipping years, kindly take your complaints to Lydia and Cheryl. And don't forget the headmaster—it was his decision.

I watched from the very back of the stands, screened by perception-blocking wards, as the scarlet-haired girl thrust her sword forward. A stealthily cast wind spell allowed me to make out every word she said.

"Pathetic. I tag along because you say you want to have a 'little chat,' and *this* is the best you can do? Did *Your Royal Highness* go soft from wasting all that time on ceremonies? Well, I haven't missed training in a week, except for yesterday, so I shouldn't be surprised I have the edge!"

Though momentarily incensed at her friend's choice of words, Princess Cheryl Wainwright elegantly dusted off her skirt and adjusted her school beret. Beside me, her usual companion, Chiffon, commenced a bout of tail wagging. The

white wolf's winter coat had come in exceptionally fluffy.

"Lydia, I seem to recall hearing that *you* were scheduled to take part in those ceremonies too," Cheryl was saying. "Tell me, just to be clear: with whom exactly have you been training? I know you wouldn't dare say, 'With Allen, just the two of us.' Would you?" Her gaze slowly shifted to the top of the stands. She hadn't spotted me—I thought—but I found myself looking away regardless. I *had* joined Lydia for morning and evening training all week, with the exception of the day before.

Lydia made a show of raising a dainty finger to her chin and cocking her head as though pondering. She could rival my little sister Caren for cuteness—at least until she opened her mouth. "I beg your pardon. I can't think why I'd tell the scheming sneak who put on an innocent face while she tried to spirit Allen out of the school grounds behind my back."

The training ground's sturdy barriers strained as more orbs of light than I could count whirled through the air, converging in Cheryl's hands.

Oh dear.

I stroked the white wolf's head to steady my nerves. I didn't know where I would have been without Chiffon.

The princess swept her right hand to her side, and I saw that it grasped a gleaming sword of light. "I see I won't need to go easy on you, Lady Shameless!"

"You must be confused—only the *better* fighter gets to offer handicaps. Today, we settle this!" Lydia shouted, hurling a massive fireball.

Cheryl cleaved it in two. Then the training ground shook as they shifted to close quarters. Blades and kicks, fireballs and beams of light collided in an ever-widening vortex of destruction. Color drained from the watching students' faces. Some even started to flee.

"What am I going to do with those two?" I sighed, gripping the railing to vault down into the arena.

"Whoa, whoa, Allen! Not so fast!" a breezy voice called from behind a stone column.

“Zel?”

I turned suspiciously to find my only male friend at the Royal Academy, my classmate Zelbert Régnier, standing behind me, evidently on his way home from the library. His dress matched mine down to his cloak, except that he wore narrow spectacles, and a pair of timeworn swords—one long, one short, and both magical—hung from his belt. At sixteen, he was two years older than Lydia, Cheryl, and me, but he didn’t stand particularly tall, with slender limbs and skin as white as snow. Appearances could be deceiving, however—he had beaten both Lydia and Cheryl in unofficial bouts.

“Really,” Zel said, toying with his dusty-brown ponytail and shutting his eyes of the same color, “don’t you think you’d be kind of a spoilsport if you stepped in to stop Their Highnesses like you always do?”

“Hmm.” I considered. “Would my lord baron care to explain his reasoning?”

Down on the arena floor, the destruction was proceeding apace. The stone walls shielding the stands were beginning to crack, and gaping craters littered the ground. I expected the headmaster to come pleading for help any moment now.



Zel wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Honestly?” he groaned, prodding my cheek. “Give it a rest. You know I’m allergic to my title. It’s just a name on paper, anyway—no rights or lands to go with it. What do you want to dredge up that musty old thing for? Well? I’m waiting.”

“Hey, what have I said but the truth?” I retorted. “Now, why should I stay out of their fight?”

Since arriving in the royal capital, I’d had enough unpleasant experiences with social standing to last a lifetime. Prejudice against beastfolk still ran deep, and my being a houseless adoptee only made it worse. If not for Lydia, Cheryl, and my good friend here—a rare transfer student from the commonwealth southeast of the kingdom—I might have turned tail and run back to the eastern capital.

Zel released me and wrapped his arms around Chiffon. “Hey, doggo. How’ve you been?” he asked, getting an energetic *woof* in reply before he deigned to answer my question.

“It’s simple: Lady Lydia Leinster, despite being violence made flesh, can’t stand to be alone. Princess Cheryl Wainwright is a ruthless schemer at heart, for all her pretense of high-minded morality. And here they are, catching up after nearly a week apart. I ask you: would it be right to cut their reunion short? No! A thousand times no!” Zel stood, a storm of fire and light raging behind him. Fists clenched, he wore that wicked look of his that never failed to get on Lydia’s nerves. “Some understandings can only be reached fist to fist! And I’m sure the Archmage will step in before they *completely* demolish the training ground.”

Lord Rodde, headmaster of the Royal Academy, was a great sorcerer. He had even marched in the War of the Dark Lord. Did it really make sense for a normal guy like me to stop these two while we had him around?

Lydia sent Cheryl flying.

“You may have a point,” I said, watching the princess weave fresh spells in midair. “Maybe not a *good* point, but a point nonetheless.”

“See?” Zel pressed. “What did I tell you?”

“So, what’s your real reason?”

Lydia leaned forward and charged, ignoring a hail of light spells. She looked like she was having the time of her life.

“I’d like to chat with one of my few friends over a good cup of coffee,” Zel admitted, unhanding Chiffon to spread his arms in a theatrical gesture. “Then I want to tease those two when they hear about it and nearly die of jealousy! What better reason could there be?”

“You’ll get yourself killed one of these days. And didn’t we talk just yesterday?” I said. We spent time together almost every weekday, owing partly to our shared passion for old tomes and spell books. Even our first meeting had been in the academy’s library.

“What’s life without something to laugh at, partner? And bosom buddies never run out of things to talk about. Even the ancients knew that! If the buddy in question pays for my meal, so much the better!”

A flash of light tore across the arena. Cheryl was playing for time. I sensed multiple mana sources in motion.

A stir ran through the onlookers.

“A-Aren’t those...?”

“M-Magical creatures. Wolves, it looks like.”

“How can she conjure so many at once?”

“Her control must be superhuman!”

“I can’t believe it.”

Lydia had cornered her opponent but failed to claim victory. She scowled and glared sharply in my direction. I couldn’t imagine why. She couldn’t know that I’d taught Cheryl this new spell—at least, not yet.

“Zel,” I sighed, petting Chiffon’s back for emotional support, “I know I’m not one to talk, but don’t tell me you bought *another* old spell book.”

The Régniers were a positively ancient baronial house. According to Lydia, they numbered among a group of families that had “immigrated to other

countries on royal orders way, way back.” The line was supposedly extinct except for Zel, and its influence had dwindled to practically nothing, but blue blood still had its perks. I didn’t know how to feel about Zel sponging off a far-from-affluent commoner like me.

“Allen, you of all people ought to understand.” He chuckled, adjusting his spectacles in an overdone attempt to look cool. “Stumbling upon a good book is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! I knew I wanted it, so I bought it on the spot! I have no regrets, although I can’t help noticing that my daily soup tastes a lot more watery than it used to.”

“Just try not to overdo it,” I said.

Down in the training ground, more than a hundred wolves attacked Lydia in shifts, supported by a merciless hailstorm of light magic. Cheryl brushed the dust off her skirt and beret.

“What’s this?” she said, elegantly screening her mouth with a hand. “Why, Lady Lydia Leinster, wherever did your fighting spirit go? Don’t cry, now. I know Allen isn’t watching, but that’s still no excuse.”

Lydia clicked her tongue, coming out of a roll with a horizontal slash that swept away the magical creatures. Back on her feet, she overwhelmed the barrage of light with a tidal wave of flame.

“You fight dirty!” she roared. “Whittling me down with magical creatures?! Counting on strength in numbers?! Have you no shame?! Well, Princess Schemer?!”

“What a shame!” Cheryl beamed, pressing her palms together. “Allen taught me those tactics, you know? I must tell him what you think of them when I see him next. Of course, I don’t doubt he’s in the stands now—with Chiffon, perhaps?”

I sank down, cradling my head in my hands.

I’ve been a fool! A brainless nincompoop! Of course she’d notice me standing right next to Chiffon!

I threw my arms around the white wolf, who responded with a bewildered look.

I know. You haven't done anything wrong.

While I retreated from reality, Lydia's voice rose an octave. "H-Humph! I-If you think you can rattle me with a trick like—"

"You're wide open!" the princess shouted, sword of light flashing as she joined her magical creatures in a charge. Caught off guard, her opponent started giving ground.

"All according to plan!" Zel crowed, letting out a sinister chuckle as he took a seat on the railing. "Anyone can see how the Lady of the Sword's skills decline after even a day away from you. I knew whispering how we spent yesterday in her ear before this bout would pay off. And if the princess wins, I won't have to worry about putting bread on the table this month."

I responded with a withering stare, although I kept my arms around Chiffon. My friend could be a bit—well, *quite* a bit—of a scoundrel. "You might want to give the gambling a rest," I warned him. "I won't help you if Lydia and Cheryl find out."

"Not to worry! I have the student body on my side—at least for the present!"

A shock ran through the entire structure. The damage to the training ground had finally ceased to be a laughing matter.

"You see, the whole school has its eyes on those two, even if most people give them a wide berth," Zel opined, looking very grown-up in profile with a hand on his chin. "The Lady of the Sword and the Lady of Light are the brightest lights of this generation."

"If I hadn't bumped into Lydia during the entrance exam, I'd be one of those people watching them from afar now," I mused, standing up and buttoning my cloak.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman was busy mowing down wolves with a "restrained" volley of fire spells. Just a few months earlier, she had struggled to use magic to do anything but amplify her own strength and reflexes. Lydia Leinster was a genuine prodigy. And considering her pedigree, the fact that I had a place anywhere near her seemed like nothing short of a miracle. Needless to say, I felt the same about Princess Cheryl.

I prodded Chiffon and set off down a corridor. Zel fell in beside me.

“Not a chance,” he scoffed. “Don’t you believe it. You’d just have met them in a different order, is all. That ridiculous girl genius would never let you get away. And now that she’s found you, she’d chase you down to the ends of the earth if that’s what it took. The Star Oath agrees with me.”

“You always exaggerate,” I said. “Anyway, what *is* that ‘Star Oath’ you mention sometimes?”

Lydia and Cheryl separated, putting considerable distance between them. They were gearing up to settle things.

My best friend ignored my question. “Me, exaggerate?” he said, cutting in front of me and planting his hands on his hips. “I can’t take that lying down, partner! You’ve been smack-dab in the middle of every disaster that’s hit the royal capital in the past few months. Get that through your head already, for both of our sakes! And for your information, ‘normal’ sorcerers don’t go around rewriting and dismantling the Archmage’s spells.”

“Well...”

Before I could come up with an answer, a thunderous crash rocked the training ground. A gust streaked with light and flame breached the barrier while the remaining students scrambled to erect defensive wards of their own. I held my beret in place and stilled the wind with a quick squeeze of my right hand, which brought a measure of calm back to my surroundings.

Thank goodness it’s finally o—

My eyes met the scarlet-haired noblewoman’s. Her missing beret and dusty uniform proved she was getting the worst of this clash. I saw her luscious lips form words:

“Cheer me on!”

My perception-blocking wards hadn’t gone anywhere. She shouldn’t have been able to see me, but oh well. As unfair as this seemed to Cheryl, I doubted the princess would hold it against me. A few words could hardly decide the contest. So I sent my reply with a wind spell:

“Go get her, Lydia!”

The girl shivered, then looked down. Fire began overrunning light at a ferocious pace.

The blonde princess faltered, her ascendancy suddenly seeming less certain. “What’s going on?” she demanded. “Lydia, what did you just do?!”

“Sorry, Cheryl, but I’m just getting warmed up!” Lydia roared, and the pair resumed roughhousing while the training ground fell to pieces around them. I started to worry that I’d given Lydia a little *too much* enthusiasm.

Zel took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes, muttering gravely under his breath while gouts of fire blew around us. I couldn’t make out his words, but he must have been working out ways to minimize the devastation next time. For all his outward frivolity, I knew I could count on my friend when it mattered.

(“Look how attached she’s gotten *already*. Who knows what she’ll do if she can’t marry Allen? But wait, could her overdependence *be* the threat to the world? If only the princess had half—no, a tenth—of her initiative. But no, Her Royal Highness acts like a naive wallflower. You’d think such an inveterate schemer would know better.”)

Chiffon gave me a look that said, “Can I go see my mistress now?” so I sent the white wolf off with a gentle pat on the head. Even caught between Lydia and Cheryl, Chiffon would have nothing to worry about.

“I’ve thought things over,” Zel announced, replacing his spectacles, “and I have every right to insist you buy me coffee! Come on, you magical monster! Do your elder a good turn!”

“How did you work *that* out?” I grinned ruefully, looking down at the arena. The white wolf had rushed to Cheryl’s side now that the tables had turned on the princess, and Lydia was griping about the intrusion. Maybe Zel was right: it *would* have been boorish to interrupt them.

“Let’s leave them to it,” I said, clapping him on the back. “They look like they’re enjoying themselves. Any objections to our usual café?”



“Ah, that’s the stuff. That sweetness coursing through my veins makes me glad to be alive. I’ve survived all this time just to savor this meal!” Zel gushed, leaning back in his seat in undisguised ecstasy.

We were sitting in a café with a sky-blue roof just off West Avenue, and my friend had barely taken his first bite of a honeyed fruit tart. For once, we were nearly the only customers. I assumed the chilly weather had played a hand in that. To my embarrassment, the owner had evidently overheard the outburst and gave us a slight bow from his station behind the counter.

“Must you play it up every time, Zel?” I asked, taking a sip of my tea. Tarts, cookies, and a cup of coffee loaded with milk and sugar sat alongside the pot on our table.

“It’s the simple truth. I mean every word!” my friend declared, gesticulating with his dessert fork so earnestly that I could practically hear an annoyed Lydia grumble that he had some nerve mocking other people’s obsessions all the time. “I guess you wouldn’t understand, growing up in the kingdom, but you can’t get a spread like this just anywhere, especially not if you want coffee to go with it. You ought to appreciate what you’ve got here. I’ve been all over the continent, and only the city of water even comes close in the food department. And even in the middle of winter, you can pop into any old place to warm up. I still can’t get over it.”

True enough, the café had heating. I’d read that northerners ran hot water through their buildings in metal pipes, but the royal capital relied on spellstones of fire—mostly imports from the south, or so I’d heard.

Zel sipped his coffee, muttered “A little on the bitter side,” and added more milk and sugar. “Objectively speaking,” he continued, “the Wainwright Kingdom has to be the best country in the west, unless you count the Dark Lord’s domain. The Yustinian Empire never gets tired of skirmishing with the Lalannoy Republic, and His Imperial Majesty the Platinum Hog isn’t getting any younger. The League of Principalities has wealth to spare, even after losing Etna and Zana, and it has talented people—the doge and his deputy, for a start. Still, they have trouble putting up a united front. The commonwealth has been too caught up in internal power struggles to bother with anything else for decades now. And while the free cities *claim* strict neutrality—”

“Let me get out a map.” Without putting down my teacup, I cast a light spell of my own invention. A map of the west of the continent appeared in the middle of the table, complete with glowing labels for each country. Zel had roamed far and wide on his way to the kingdom—“You’ve heard of stormy lives?” he liked to boast. “Well, mine’s a typhoon!”—and I loved listening to his tales of foreign parts.

“As for the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit and everything east of it,” my older classmate continued, “they’re still under the thumb of religious fanatics. Nothing but ‘For the Holy Spirit!’ day in and day out. In all seriousness, if the Dark Lord marched on the west again now, we wouldn’t stand a chance unless the elders of the long-lived races stepped in.” His brown eyes narrowed in a grim expression that made him seem much older than sixteen.

Cheryl insisted that “Régnier must be lying about his age.” I could understand her caution—who wouldn’t be wary of a walking encyclopedia who could rival Lydia as a sorcerer-swordsman, especially one with such an unusual past? Still, I couldn’t believe that the joy on his face as he wolfed down his tart was anything but genuine. And Zel had done so much for me—for all of us—in the time I’d known him. The mere memory of the black dragon made me flinch. I could never have survived a fight with it if not for the Hero and my good friend across the table. That said, I did wish he would form a more realistic opinion of my abilities.

“What do you expect me to say?” I complained, resting my chin in my hand and dismissing my map. “I’m just a normal student at the Royal Academy. This is all too grand for me. I do like hearing about different countries, though.”

Zel slowly set his cup down and nibbled on a cookie. Then he adjusted his spectacles and shook his head gravely. “I’d forgotten the kingdom’s biggest flaw.”

“Which is?” I asked, noting more and more Royal Academy students trudging through wintry winds on the street outside. One exchange student stood out for his pale-blue hair. Niche Nitti, I thought his name was. He’d been in the audience at the training ground, so I supposed Lydia and Cheryl must have had their fill of fun.

“I have this friend,” Zel said, disregarding manners and picking up a piece of tart. “Allen of the wolf clan. Give him another ten years, and he’ll give the continent’s best sorcerers a run for their money. Hell, if he works fast, he might do it in three. He’s a heaven-sent bundle of untapped potential. And what does this country do? Leave him to rot! Oh, the wretched waste! Oh, the rank stupidity! Just think of all the corrupt nobles they could sweep aside to make room for him! He ought to have a title by now—an earldom at the very least! Just create him a marquess or better, with a scarlet-haired bride, and the kingdom could safely forget most of its problems!”

My friend stuffed the tart into his mouth and washed it down with a disgruntled gulp of coffee. He was handsome enough to make even that look good.

“Forget the past. Future generations will come down hard on any ruler too afraid of bigots looking down on the beastfolk to make use of you now. ‘There!’ they’ll say. ‘That was where the kingdom’s history went wrong!’”

Prejudice against the beastfolk ran deep. Rooting it out would be no easy task, although I hoped to see at least some improvement before my sister joined me here. She had her sights set on the Royal Academy.

“I’d call that a tart’s worth of compliments,” I said, motioning to the café owner for fresh coffee and pastry.

“Don’t be an ass!” Zel snapped. “I’m serious. You know that, right?”

The bell attached to the front door rang, and several Leinster maids and female elven bodyguards entered, all wearing wool hats and cloaks. It looked like we could expect two more people at our table soon.

Having finished his coffee, Zel took off his spectacles and started wiping their lenses with a cloth. “If precedent is anything to go by, the Lady of Light will go abroad next year to continue her studies, probably in the city of water. Our own scarlet lady will skip straight to the university with you. I figure you’ll spend two or three years there.”

The owner came by to clear Zel’s empty plates and deposit his fresh coffee and tart, along with a sugarcoated confection we hadn’t ordered. “I’m still working on the recipe, but I hope that you’ll be so kind as to taste it,” he said

calmly in answer to my surprised stare. "Please, take your time."

I couldn't help admiring his poise as he departed.

Zel put his glasses back on and turned his handsome face to me. "If they award you some kind of official position in the meantime, so much the better. You can marry into the Ducal House of Leinster. And if not, you could always come abroad with me. How does Lalannoy sound? Beastfolk have to deal with less discrimination there, so you could make it big in no time! Mmm! This sugary thing hits the spot."

I refilled my teacup.

An "official position" or a marriage into the Ducal House of Leinster?

I could count the number of commoners who had been ennobled in the past two centuries on my fingers. The most prominent had only been created a viscount for his lifetime, and not even the beastfolk remembered his name anymore. Only his nickname, "the Silver Wolf," survived. And it took slaying a maddened dragon for a member of the wolf clan to win even that much. Zel's ideas seemed divorced from reality.

"You're getting ahead of yourself. Right now, I'm more worried about *this*," I said, drawing the formula for a lightning spell I'd spent the past few months working on.

"What's this?" Zel blinked, once again holding his tart in an affront to good table manners.

"My sister's birthday is coming up. I want to give her more than just *things*."

Unlike me, my sister Caren back in the eastern capital had mana in spades. At the moment, she was practicing a technique called "Lightning Apotheosis," which was supposed to armor her in electricity. I felt certain that she could learn to channel her mana into lightning blades too, if she only had a dagger or something similar to use as a conduit. The problem was...

"I based it on your Mana Blade," I hastened to explain. "You know how you gather magic around your swords to extend their reach? It's a lot like that. Would you...mind if I gave it to her? Oh, I'll just think up something different if so! But it's a great fit for her strongest element, so I really hope you'll approve."

My friend didn't answer. I looked over to find him with his hands covering his mouth, stifling laughter. He must have found my request awfully amusing, because I could see his shoulders quake, and they didn't look as though they'd stop anytime soon.

"Zel?" I said frostily, draining my teacup.

My friend finally recovered enough to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Sorry. I couldn't help it," he gasped, waving his left hand with an ear-to-ear grin. "You looked so serious, I braced for who-knows-what, and then you—"

Another fit of giggling cut him off in mid-sentence.

"Is it really *that* funny?" I asked. The question had seemed awfully serious to me. In fact, I'd spent a full month working up the courage to ask it.

"Why would I mind?" My handsome classmate winked. "I'm the only Régnier left. Sooner or later, the whole line will be history, but now your sister will keep our signature technique alive. I couldn't ask for better! Take all you like."

"Zel," I murmured, fighting back tears. A houseless wolf-clan orphan couldn't be further from the aristocracy. But despite that social gulf, I could at least count on Lydia, Cheryl, and Zel to have my back.

"Th-Thank you" was the best I could manage.

"Don't sweat it, partner. You're bringing glory to the House of Régnier, and to me! The history books will bear that out," Zel reassured me in his usual overblown style. I thought he gained a lot by talking this way and lost just as much, although I'd never voice the opinion.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked. "Tell me about the new book you found."

Zel let out a sinister chuckle. "I thought you'd never ask! Behold!" His spectacles gleamed eerily as he reached into his bag and produced a slim, timeworn volume. Its cloth cover bore several designs I didn't recognize.

What is that? A big bird and seven beasts?

"Quite a find, right? Even if it is missing a few bits," Zel crowed. "Ever heard of the Principality of Atlas? It's a little country to the south. Well, I have here a

copy of a report stolen from the archive of the marchese who rules it. The thief must have confused it for something valuable. It found its way onto the royal capital's black market, and I just so happened to buy it. It's five hundred years old, if you can believe it."

"Five hundred years old?" I repeated. "Now that *is* ancient. What does it say?"

A text from the age of strife? Not even the academy library goes that far back.

"I haven't managed to read it yet," Zel admitted, lacing his fingers. "The auction house called it *Dialogues on the Apocrypha of the Great Moon*. Oh, the 'Great Moon' is the deity an old cult worships. They still have a minor presence in the commonwealth and the free cities."

"Wow." I looked down at the booklet. I sensed no mana, meaning it probably wasn't dangerous. "Zel, can I borrow this once you're—?"

The bell rang a little roughly as two highborn women entered, one with her scarlet hair tied back and the other wearing her long blonde locks loose. Chiffon trotted at their feet, looking—and being—smaller than earlier. Behind the counter, the café owner started preparing fresh tea and tarts; Lydia and Cheryl nearly always ordered whatever I did.

Lydia reached our table first, just after Zel returned the booklet to his bag.

"Scooch over," she demanded sulkily, pushing me to the edge of my couch and sitting beside me without even bothering to take off her coat. Our shoulders touched. She was freezing.

"Well?" She glared at me while I warmed our corner with a spell. "What have you been up to?"

Zel and I exchanged a silent look. She seemed annoyed that we had gone ahead to the café without her.

I felt a slight bump as Cheryl sat next to Lydia. "I'd appreciate an explanation, Régnier," she said. "I assume we can blame you for tempting Allen away?"

I looked uneasily around the room. The Leinster maids and royal bodyguards had struck up a pleasant conversation, and Chiffon had curled up near them.

There lay peace.

“Calm down,” Zel pleaded, holding his hands in front of him. “Don’t do anything rash, Your Highnesses. There’s a perfectly straightforward explanation: I wanted to shoot the breeze with Allen. Surely you wouldn’t ‘forbid’ *that*, would you? Well, my lady of the scarlet hair very well might, but—”

“I...I would not!” the princess hastily protested.

“If you want a fight, you’ll get one, you four-eyed con man!” the noblewoman snapped, fixing our handsome classmate with a razor-sharp glare. Any normal student would have started quaking in his boots, but not Zelbert Régnier.

“Oh, I’m so scared. I know I spend the night at Allen’s place now and then, unlike either of you, but is that any excuse to take your anger out on me now?”

Silence fell. As much as my friend loved to tease, he should have known better than to broach that topic. Lydia had made no secret of her desire to sleep over at my lodgings in the workers’ quarter. It was currently the greatest point of contention between us. Sure enough, not only fire but light began to fill the air.

Zel really ought to know better.

I snapped my fingers, and the stray mana vanished.

“Hey,” Lydia grumbled.

“Don’t stop me, Allen!” Cheryl snapped.

I wagged my index finger. “No magic in the café.”

Two of the highest-born girls in the kingdom fumed, puffing up their cheeks like angry chipmunks.

“Your tarts and tea,” the owner interrupted with superb timing. “Please, stay as long as you like.” How could I not admire the man?

Zel stood up and donned his cloak and swords. “I have a quick stop to make about that booklet. Allen, we can finish our talk tonight. Thanks for treating me.”

“Yes, see you later.” I nodded while I poured Lydia’s and Cheryl’s tea. We’d

gotten the headmaster's permission to use the academy library that evening. "Oh, and I ordered you a snack for the road. Don't forget to take it with you."

"Oh! Thanks a million! Where would I be without my best friend?!" Zel beamed and waved as he strode off toward the counter.

His café bill and late-night snack seem like too small a price to pay for Caren's new spell. I really ought to treat him again soon. Yes, that sounds like a plan.

While I plotted my future, my companions started whispering.

"Did he say *tonight*?"

They stood up, deposited their hats and coats on pegs, and claimed new seats on the couch across from me.

"What are you waiting for? Explain." Lydia smiled.

"Don't worry, Allen," Cheryl added cheerfully. "We have all the time in the world."

A hollow laugh passed my lips as my gaze drifted to anything but them.

The bell rang again, and I glimpsed Zel on his way out. In profile, he looked just a little lonesome.



"Remind me, Allen. What did I tell you after your entrance exam and again at your entrance ceremony? 'Lady Lydia Leinster and Princess Cheryl Wainwright will doubtless cause trouble in this academy, and I trust you to deal with all of it.' Don't try to tell me you've forgotten."

My eyes roved over the rare and antique volumes scattered carelessly around the headmaster's office. The old elf who had called me there that evening sat amid them all in a luxurious chair, one ill-mannered elbow resting on his writing desk. Lord Rodde, the Archmage, wasn't even trying to hide his exhaustion and annoyance. To hear him tell it, he had just gotten back from repairing the training ground that Lydia and Cheryl's sparring match had wrecked. I did feel just a little guilty.

Maybe I should have dragged Zel out of the library with me. He did egg me on.

“Yes, Headmaster. I remember perfectly.” I nodded, looking out a window at an eerie crimson moon.

“Then why didn’t you step in when they butted heads today?! Do you realize how many times they’ve nearly demolished the training ground this year alone?! Have some compassion for your elders, I’m begging you,” the mighty sorcerer pleaded, massaging the corners of his eyes.

Let me see...

I bent my fingers as I tallied up each incident. “Don’t worry! I can still count them if I use both hands! And you’re always telling us how young you still are! Besides, Lydia and Cheryl have learned some restraint. Don’t you think so? They’ve rarely cast anything beyond elementary spells lately.”

“Have you never heard the phrase ‘a matter of degree’? They might be refraining from advanced and supreme magic, but those girls can still slice, punch, and kick holes in my barriers. And thanks to your guidance, their spells grow more potent and precise with each passing day.” The headmaster let out a pained sigh and waved his hands as if to say that he washed them of the matter.

“They only restrain themselves on your account,” he continued, tapping his desk. “If you weren’t here, who knows where the escalation would stop? Even Chiffon, of all creatures, has been showing signs of their bad influence lately. I insist—nay, *demand*—you take responsibility!”

Easier said than done.

“I’ll have a word with Chiffon,” I offered—a realistic compromise.

“I notice you don’t mention the two principal offenders,” the headmaster said, fixing me with a glare. He seemed to have formed an unreasonably high opinion of my abilities when Lydia and I had faced him in our entrance exam and to have maintained it ever since.

“A lecture from me won’t make much of an impression on the Lady of the Sword and the Lady of Light,” I demurred. “At most, they’ll sulk and lose their tempers. I really think this calls for words of wisdom from the Archmage himself!”

“It appears your understanding differs considerably from mine,” he replied after a brief pause. “Well, no matter. I expect you to caution both girls tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

I *would* pass on the reminder, although Lydia would only take offense. “Fine,” I could practically hear her say, “but you’d better let me stay over at your place! How dare you open your door to Zelbert Régnier and leave your mistress out in the cold?! Think about what you’ve done and repent! But if you try any f-funny stuff, I’ll slice you up and burn what’s left.”

I really ought to talk this over with Duchess Lisa Leinster next time I’m in the south.

While I pondered how to negotiate my relationship with the slightly older, slightly taller noblewoman who was fast becoming the albatross around my neck, the headmaster sighed and changed the subject.

“I don’t suppose Zelbert—*ahem*, Lord Régnier was with you, by any chance?” he asked, sounding oddly familiar with my friend. They’d seemed close ever since Zel had transferred in, and while their connection piqued my curiosity, I still couldn’t explain it. Perhaps some old comrade connected them.

“He was,” I replied. “Only he managed to make his getaway.”

“Tell him to call on me tomorrow morning. I insist on seeing him then,” the headmaster groaned.

I blinked in surprise. “Not this evening?” I had expected an order to fetch Zel at once.

“The hour is late. Tomorrow will do,” the headmaster replied matter-of-factly while his left hand resumed drumming on the desk. Behind him, the curtains closed by magic.

What finesse!

“You ought to hurry home yourself.” The venerable elf scowled. “Tonight is a crimson moon. You youngsters might not know this, but when I was young, our elders loved to scare us with a saying.”

Memories of childhood leapt vividly to mind. Before I knew what I was doing, I had begun to recite. “‘You mustn’t go out on the night of the crimson moon, or the big, bad witches and vampires will get you.’”

My words hung in the air for a moment. Then, “Where did you learn that old bit of folklore?” the headmaster demanded, staring hard at me. He seemed taken aback.

“My dad taught it to me when I was little,” I answered, smiling, although my hands clenched slightly. “But surely I have nothing to worry about at the academy? Not with the Great Tree and your wards, sir.”

“Don’t put too much faith in me. What have I done except live too long?”

I had never heard the headmaster sound so glum, and with only fourteen years of life behind me, I struggled even to imagine what the great sorcerer had experienced in his centuries. I hesitated, waiting for him to say more.

“I’m griping,” he said at last, holding a hand over his eyes. “Forget it. I’ll call you again before winter recess, to discuss your enrollment in the university. I ought to introduce you to the young one—the former head court sorcerer they call simply ‘Professor.’ As much as it pains me to admit it, he knows a thing or two. Lydia Leinster and Zelbert Régnier will join us, so see that you attend—the meeting will go nowhere without you.”

After leaving the headmaster’s office, I walked alone down the long hallway that led to the stairs. Moonlight and mana lamps picked the Great Tree out of the darkness. Though smaller than the eastern capital’s, it still made me think of home.

I had almost reached the staircase when my older best friend popped into view. “Hey!” he called, leather bag in hand. “Man, you look beat! He must’ve put you through the wringer.”

“Zel.” Immediately, I closed the distance between us, throwing out a palm strike I’d learned from Cheryl. He dodged, as I’d predicted, so I combined strengthening and wind magic to bring my leg sweeping down out of a half flip.

Zel reeled backward, dropping his bag with an undignified cry of surprise—

even he hadn't seen that one coming. I landed, quickly jabbing at his neck with my rigid fingers, but he managed to put more space between us.

"You *ran*," I spat with a smile. "You abandoned your friend and *ran*."

"Wh-Whoa there!" Zel straightened his beret, pushed up his spectacles, and dusted his coat. His swords jangled as he chuckled, then roared with laughter. "Me, run?! You wound me! *That*, Allen of the wolf clan, was a strategic withdrawal."

"That's nonsense, and you know it!"

"You were the right man for the job, my young friend! You ought to thank me for helping your talents shine, and you can show it by buying me dinner!"

I groaned, and Zel vanished—only to immediately pat me on the shoulder. He hadn't cast a teleportation spell, leaving me no room to counter this purely physical feat.

He's slow and fast all at once. No wonder Zelbert Régnier can rival Lydia and Cheryl in a sword fight.

"Come on, partner. Don't get so hot under the collar," he said. "Lord Rodde's taken quite a shine to you, even if he has a funny way of showing it. He'd never bother calling you to his office otherwise. And while he doesn't exactly give me the cold shoulder, he definitely considers me a troublemaker. You only got out of there so quick because I made myself scarce. Economical, wouldn't you say?"

"He wants to see you first thing tomorrow morning," I reported, still feeling surly.

Zel darted in front of me and planted his hands on my shoulders. "W-We're friends, aren't we, Allen?! The best of buddies?!" he pleaded, eyes desperate behind his spectacles. He must really have wanted to avoid that meeting.

"We *were*, until a little while ago."

"Have a heart! Does the wolf clan's future champion know no pity?!"

"What future champion?" I sighed as I levitated Zel's bag and pressed it into his hands. "You've got the wrong person. Oh, and the headmaster also said to go home early tonight, because of the crimson moon."

“Huh? Oh, right. Tonight is a crimson moon, isn’t it?” Zel murmured, looking up at the crescent staining the Great Tree red. Something in his profile seemed terribly lonely.

When I didn’t respond, he thumped me on the back. “Let’s get going. You wouldn’t want to waste the headmaster’s sage advice, would you? And it really doesn’t seem like a nice night for—”

“Zel? What’s the matter?”

The young man had faltered mid-sentence, staring intently at the foot of the Great Tree. I followed his gaze, but nothing stood out to me. I seemed to sense a few faint sources of mana, but I could just as easily have imagined them.

“I-Is that...?” Zel muttered. “Yes, it’s *him*! Damn it all!”

“W-Wait a—”

Zel flung his bag to the floor, not caring that his beret fell with it, and drew his swords. Before I could stop him, he had sliced through a windowpane and leapt out into the crimson moonlight.

Wh-What in the world...?

I had no idea what was going on, but I hadn’t been following Lydia’s lead for nothing. My body acted automatically, slipping through the window after my obviously disturbed friend. Landing with the help of a levitation spell, I broke into a run. Then I noticed something very wrong near the Great Tree.

The academy’s security could give the palace a run for its money! What’s a ward of secrecy doing here?!

I was still reeling from the shock when I caught up to my friend, standing poised for battle near the foot of the Great Tree. Two more figures stood even closer, both wearing hooded robes. Abruptly, one vanished. I could barely make out flower petals—evidently fragments of a spell formula—but I didn’t have nearly enough information to analyze let alone reconstruct it.

The second figure started to move toward—

“Wait!” Zel shouted with more rage than I had ever heard in his voice. He sprang forward, raining blows on the figure’s back without a moment’s

hesitation.

A crimson flash filled the air as an intricate barrier stopped both enchanted blades. The figure's mana far eclipsed ours—not quite a match for the black dragon's, but still beyond anything mortal.

“You left your eastern land behind you!” Zel shouted as the stranger turned in annoyance. “What are you doing here now?! Who was that man with you?! What are you plotting, damn it?!”

The barrier drove him back. I couldn't move.

A shaft of moonlight shone through a gap in the Great Tree's branches, revealing the face beneath the hood. Gray hair framed crimson eyes in a wrinkled old face. The stranger seemed no more than a human man at first glance, except that I couldn't fathom the limits of his mana.

“Ah, the Régnier whelp I failed to kill at Blood River and in Lalannoy,” said a cracked, icy voice. “How unseemly. To think you'd violate the Star Oath to live on when two hundred years have passed since the last war of consequence. Impressive, for a stunted, lowly mortal. Mad, but impressive.”

“Answer my question!” Zel screamed, redoubling his enhancement spells and charging low to the ground. The longsword in his right hand sliced the barrier, then he abruptly altered the mana shrouding the short blade in his left as he thrust it at the old man.

Fresh blood sprayed in the moonlit night.

“Always a nuisance,” the old man snarled, falling back with a stab wound in his left hand. “Must you spoil this wonderful moon? Did you escape with your life two hundred years ago and again one hundred years after that only to squander it now? I've grown old. No blood I drink will restore my former strength. However...”

Zel jerked back his sword to intercept a slender figure swooping from above. Blades clanged off each other, and both combatants backed away.

They met hundreds of years ago? And the old man drinks blood? Th-Then, he and Zel must be...

I lost all chance to intervene as a dark-eyed girl with long white hair landed protectively before the old man. A black dress covered her elegant figure, an old sword rested in her hand, and two inky wings spread behind her. I glimpsed sharp canines in her mouth, but she seemed devoid of life and feeling.

What is she? A devil or a vampire?

“Well, well. Not many can parry a blow from my retainer,” the old man said, healing the wound in his hand without magic. “I suppose you’ve gained *some* skill. But I still have no reason to stand and fight you here. Unfortunately, the bud is not yet ripe, and the Star Oath bars me from the vessel. More troublesome company will become too much for my old bones to handle.”

An eerie shadow swelled, and the old man began vanishing into it.

“Wait, Idris!” Zel screamed, charging toward him. “Release Chloé! Set my sister free!”

Zel’s sister?

No sooner had the old man faded into darkness than a chill ran up my spine.

“Allen!” Zel shouted as, to my shock, the black-clad girl shifted her attention to me and swung her timeworn sword. A blade of mana forked into countless deadly branches, all moving as though with a life of their own. They would reach me before—

“What have we here? Don’t you dare go around getting attacked by strange women behind my back!” a voice snapped as a Firebird engulfed the whole assault. The supreme spell incinerated everything it touched.

A moment later, a sword-wielding, scarlet-haired beauty landed in front of me. Lady Lydia Leinster still wore her uniform, although she should have been home in her mansion by this time. She must have staked out a position at the front gate, waiting to ambush me.

“Honestly! I ought to retrain you from scratch,” she continued over her shoulder. “I’m willing to tolerate a lot, but even I have my limits.”

“L-Lydia, calm down,” I pleaded.

“Humph.”

The black-winged girl glared down at us from the air, brushing the flames aside. Two new wings of blood sprouted from her back, giving her four in total.

“Zelbert Régnier! Don’t just stand there staring into space!” Lydia shouted. “I don’t know what your story is, and I don’t care, but save your tears for later!”

A short distance off, Zel raised his swords once more. “I know that,” he muttered, back in the fight. Then, grimacing, he revealed the cruel truth.

“Don’t let her looks fool you. We’re up against the only vampire devil the world has ever seen. Her name’s Chloé, and she’s my little sister as well as my fiancée. One wrong move and even you two won’t survive this. Try to hold out until Rodde gets here!”



My mind slowly returned to wakefulness.

What a dream. That really took me back.

I had relived the start of my parting from my best friend—a bitter memory I normally did my best to forget. The wound still hadn’t fully healed. With all I’d learned since, I might be able to decipher the spells and words that had baffled me then. And yet...

“Just get over me already! I know you have it in you, Allen of the wolf clan!” my friend berated me in my own mind.

I know, Zel. Really I do. I’ll have to face it someday, and maybe that day has come.

The spell that the mystery man had cast that night under the Great Tree remained seared into my memory. It bore a striking resemblance to the curse that had afflicted Marchesa Carnien in the city of water, the circle that had spread ten-day fever, and the summoning spell in the Sealed Archive. All the information I’d gathered pointed to one conclusion: the “Sage,” also known as the “Apostate of the Great Moon.”

Come to think of it, I didn’t see that booklet in Zel’s effects.

“Up and at ’em,” I told myself and sat up. I found Stella’s ribbon lying across me for some reason, so I wrapped it in a handkerchief. I felt no pain, but I’d lost

Silver Bloom, and I saw no sign of the angel who had bested me.

I need to save her and get back to the surface. But how?

I stood up and looked around. Words failed me.

A carpet of flowers spread out in every direction. Black and white snowflakes drifted amid ethereal emerald glows that flitted to and fro. In the center of it all stood a sapling that definitely hadn't been there earlier. The flowers' dominion grew with each flood of mana it released. Judging by the rows of Stellar Spears scattered about, it seemed to have swallowed the ruined mausoleum.

A whirl of petals rose with each step I took. The ground grew more sacred just as quickly.

"A Great Tree sapling?" I murmured. "And all this looks awfully familiar."

It reminded me of the ground where the water dragon had trod in the city of water. I had brought forth an identical carpet of flowers to cover the heart of that sanctuary on Lydia's birthday.

I waved my right arm to conjure fire flowers, but they vanished as swiftly as they appeared.

"The sanctification is progressing," I mused. "Did the spell Ellie's parents left us restore the Great Tree to its rightful strength?"

Nearly any curse would have lost its force if this much power had blanketed the royal capital. But the unrestrained divinity posed a problem. In the city of water, it had grown so intense that mortals found even entering the sanctuary next to impossible. How could I keep it under—?

Wait.

Had the "tree wardens" and "Great Tree wardens" worked to steward this power? If so, they formed a crucial piece of the puzzle. I could deal with "artificially inducing sacred ground" in a limited form, but I shuddered to think what would happen if the royal capital's Great Tree unleashed all the stored-up mana that had been channeled into it.

I pulled my watch from an inner pocket and flipped open its lid. The hands had stopped dead.

“Lydia will be furious,” I said to myself as I trudged on.

I thought back to the reason we had ventured down here in the first place: the inexplicable excess affinity for light that had troubled Stella for months and the flower dragon’s oracle promising a cure. “Question the daughter of the Star Shooter,” it had gone, “and in the City of the Shield, let the final key, the White Saint, and the youngest of the Great Tree wardens descend into the Record Keepers’ archive. In its depths will you face, unlooked for, the paltry obsessions of mortalkind.”

As things stood, our situation seemed dire. The Sage had booby-trapped the Sealed Archive. I’d been separated from Ellie, and Stella had fallen prey to the fascination of that blue-rose sword, allowing the black-and-white angel to take over her body. Nevertheless, I felt no doubts. Unlike mortals, dragons told no lies—they had no need to. Things hadn’t gone as planned, but Stella and I *had* reached the depths. I *would* find a way to cure her and—

A sudden gust blew up, so strong that I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I hastily raised my hands to shield them just as I sensed someone alight in front of me. I tensed.

The angel stood beside the sapling, staring at me with her profoundly black and white eyes. Stella’s once-torn white garments looked as good as new, although I couldn’t explain how or why. The blue-rose sword, stripped of its sinister aura, floated above her head with her staff and Silver Bloom.

Silently, she raised her hand, and a wooden bench assembled itself, rising from the ground. Her hair and four wings—both black and white, parted down the middle—fluttered as she gave me another look. I felt no animosity and detected no signs of a spell.

“Would...would you like me to sit?” I asked.

The expressionless angel nodded.

I steeled myself and took the proffered seat.

“Huh? I, um, beg your pardon?” I stammered as the angel sat beside me, took me by the hand, and lowered my head into her lap, where she started running her fingers through my hair. Every faint snatch of song that passed her lips sent

a stir through the flowers and kicked up a whirl of snowflakes imbued with light and darkness. Evidently, she meant to apologize for the abrupt battle we'd fought earlier.

I know better than to make a fuss at a time like this.

"Did you heal my wounds?" I asked, letting her have her way.

The angel brushed my cheek—and cast a healing spell on a scale that beggared belief.

Is it me, or are there bits of Radiant Shield in this formula?

"Th-Thank you," I said. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like you to let me out of here."

The angel's hand stopped in mid-stroke, then reached for my right wrist. I let out a cry as she slipped off my bracelet and hid it in one of her black wings.

"You don't need help from the daughter of a cadet branch or the Lady of the Sword," she said with evident displeasure. "We will keep you safe."

The first part I understand, but what does that last bit mean?

While I made a mental note, her hand snaked out again, this time toward my ring. "The same goes for the Etherheart witch. She's mean, and *I'm* stronger," she said, giving it a tug. A loud *pop* rang out, and her brows furrowed. Not even an angel, it seemed, could pry Linaria's ring loose.

"The person who put that on me certainly does have a mean streak," I said, giving her a rueful grin. "I'm afraid I can't get it off, as much as I'd like to."

Her four wings beat, scattering flowers. "How vexing," she muttered, sliding her fingertips over my bare left ring finger. The black and white depths of her eyes sparked with respect, longing, and a hint of envy. "The girl with the scarlet hair doesn't play fair. Neither does the one loved by Frigid Crane. But oh well."

Between taking my bracelet and the way she'd been speaking, I was beginning to wonder if she shared Stella's memories.

The angel bent down, bringing her lovely face close to mine. "You're a key," she said, laying her hand on my left cheek, "one who fulfills the oath of the star and restores order to the law."

Does she mean the “Star Oath” Zel used to talk about? He mentioned it more than once, but he passed away before I could get him to explain what he meant.

Tears dripped from the angel’s eyes. “But you lack the strength. Your vessel is too small to hold it all. I’m certain...certain you’ll lose your life along the way. Just like the Silver Wolf who fought to save me until the bitter end. No one could have been more courageous, or more kind.”

Did she say “Silver Wolf”? The beastfolk champion who won himself a peerage, although no one even remembers his name? Did he try to save this girl one hundred years ago?

I tried to sit up, but just then the sapling pulsed with light. The ground shook, and a protective shell of brambles writhed up around me.

“Th-The Great Tree?!” I exclaimed as the angel withdrew her hands and floated upward.

“So, stay here a while with this girl and me,” she continued, meeting my startled gaze with a fleeting smile. “Till the mortal realms crumble, the World Tree puts down roots, and this planet completes its rebirth.”

I tried to move, but black and white snowflakes surrounded me, holding me down.

“The seven great elementals have fallen prisoner to good people, poor things,” the angel sang while the field of flowers became a plain of ice. “The seven dragons can’t escape the causality of law. The tree wardens, great and lesser, gave all they could. But I don’t care for any of them, nor for the wish passed on in a ruined church so long ago, nor for the founding Wainwright’s obsession—deceiving the world and leaving angel-creating altars in so many lands, all to keep the Shield’s promise. The gods have gone. Mortals can become devils, but never angels. More than a thousand years of trying couldn’t change that. It ended with me.”

She sounded dreadfully beautiful and sad at the same time. Yet an overpowering regret swirled behind her impassive expression.

“But I can at least make this girl’s—Stella’s—wish come true.” The angel embraced my head. “Sleep a while. Learn to take care of yourself. Let us keep

you safe. Stay with me. Please. Please, please say yes. I know I'll be unbeatable if you do."

The young noblewoman's plea rang in my ears. Gentle snowflakes enveloped me. As my consciousness faded, I murmured, "Stella."

Last of all, I felt my fingers brush the girl's cheek, wet with tears.

Chapter 3

I groaned, sensing the faint light of a winter morning through the curtains even before I opened my eyes. Looking to my left, I saw Tina pressed up against me in her nightgown, her platinum hair a tangled mess of bed head. Atra lay curled up in girl form on my right. Farther into the room, another bed stood empty.

Where did she go? She was sleeping when we went to bed.

While I groggily fumbled for an answer, Tina giggled in her sleep and mumbled, “I beat you, Lynne. Come on, sir. Praise me.” Atra’s ears twitched. They must both have been dreaming.

“Oh, honestly.” I massaged my forehead as I slid out of bed, slipped a cape over my shoulders, and walked to the window.

Despite the early hour, knights, sorcerers, and soldiers thronged the street outside the Howard residence, where I’d spent the night. That seemed to confirm Roland Walker’s report from the night before. The Howard butler had informed us that the expedition into the Sealed Archive had “regrettably ended in failure.” My dear mother and sister, my aunt Fiane, and Caren had all escaped unharmed, but the Great Tree’s thorny vines had overrun the estate that housed the archive’s entrance. And although detection spells had proven useless before the operation, our forces had observed a jaw-dropping surge of mana beneath the palace for a few brief moments. The emergency remained ongoing, and we had no assurance of my dear brother and Stella’s safety.

I was running my fingers across the frigid glass panes when the heavy door swung silently open.

“Oh, g-good morning, Lady Lynne,” said a blonde girl wearing white hair ribbons and her uniform as Tina’s personal maid. Ellie Walker looked well, considering that she’d lain unconscious since her escape from the archive.

“Good morning, Ellie,” I replied, relieved. “Should you be up and about

already? You're not pushing yourself, are you?"

"N-No, my lady. I'm feeling rested and ready to go!" The maid's hair bobbed as she nodded and then pulled a vial from her breast pocket. It had once held water from the sanctuary in the city of water. "Besides, I had help from Mr. Allen."

I could still sense the water's mana even though none remained and despite layers of seals. I doubted anyone without Ellie's masterful command of magic could have handled it. My dear brother might not have trusted Tina or me with it, had we been in her place.

The sound of someone jumping out of bed snapped me out of my gloomy reflections.

"Ellie!"

The maid—a year older than us—squealed as her mistress caught her in a bear hug, then ran both hands over her cheeks, and finally beamed. Tina's hair still looked frightful.

"Good morning! Are you feeling better? You should have woken me up." Tina pouted. She still had so much growing up to do.

"Good morning, Lady Tina," our older best friend answered, with a cheery smile. "And, well, the two of you and Atra were sleeping so soundly that it seemed a shame to wake you."

"Then you should have woken me up and left the other two! I could have gotten a look at Lynne in her sleep!"

The nerve of her.

"I beg your pardon, Miss First Place? Do you expect me to let that remark pass?" I said, sitting back on the bed and gently stroking Atra's hair. Her vulpine ears twitched happily.

"Don't worry, Miss Second Place!" Tina chirped. "I won't pretend you're not a perfect beauty when you're sleeping—no matter how mean-spirited and sharp-tongued you are once you wake up!"

The sheer nerve of her!

“Bold words,” I murmured, neatening the blankets as I stood, “for someone who begs for my dear brother’s attention in her sleep.”

“H-H-How did you—? Ah!”

Tina’s cheeks reddened even faster than her eyes went wide. I spied my opening.

“What’s this? Do my ears deceive me or did you just *admit* to having that dream?” I pressed my advantage, striding up to my off-balance opponent. “I’ll be sure to tell my dear sister when next we meet.”

“Why, you... You tricked me! And after you held my hand when we went to sleep last—”

“O-Only because you held mine first!”

We glared at each other, blushing furiously and standing so close we threatened to butt heads.

Will Miss First Place never learn?!

“Y-You mustn’t fight first ming in the thorning! Oh.”

We both struggled not to laugh at our older friend’s intervention.

“L-Lady Tina, Lady Lynne! Th-That’s not very nice!” she protested in embarrassment while we burst into giggles looking at her. I felt the tension ebb from my mind.

We’ll get through this. We won’t stay little girls dependent on my dear brother’s protection forever. I know we can help him and Lady Stella.

“Ellie,” Tina and I called in unison, throwing our arms around our best friend.

Great minds think alike!

“My ladies?” Ellie stammered after a yelp of surprise.

First, we’d better get dressed and eat breakfast. Then we can join my dear sister and Caren to—

“Good morning,” droned a maid with a black ribbon in her long scarlet hair, slouching through the open doorway. Her usual vivacity had vanished. Even her floral hair clip seemed lifeless, and the bracelet on her left wrist had lost its

shine.

“L-Lily?!” I exclaimed.

“Wh-What happened to you?” Tina demanded.

“A-Are you not feeling well?” added Ellie.

My cousin—our bodyguard—flopped onto the bed without so much as a word in answer and started snuggling Atra, who had bent over to check on her. Lily didn’t even seem to mind what a mess she was making of her hair.

“Let me give you the latest,” she mumbled. “Last night, the mistress, Lady Lydia, and their companions fought what was left of the ice-winged Stone Serpent in the Sealed Archive and defeated it. But then the Great Tree’s defense mechanism triggered. They gave up on pressing deeper and chose to retreat. Roots and branches blocked the pit leading underground as well. We’ll never get in that way again. Meanwhile, the sanctification hasn’t stopped.”

With a limp flick of her wrist, Lily cast a levitation spell. A communication orb flew from a side table into my hands. Was she telling me to use it? Her look said yes.

I tried. No response.

Tina and Ellie covered their mouths.

“You mean...”

“Orbs stopped working?”

Lily flipped over, pulling Atra on top of her belly. “And not only around the Sealed Archive,” she continued. “The whole city’s communication network is paralyzed. A lot like what happened in the city of water, I guess. Princess Cheryl put together a network of message relays using magical birds, but they still take longer than orbs would. The head court sorcerer and his forces have entered the Royal Academy in case the Great Tree goes completely out of control. Under Felicia’s leadership, Allen & Co. has taken charge of logistics from the Leinster house. Up in the palace, it sounds like they’re meeting to debate solutions round the clock.”

How could my dear mother, sister, and aunt, along with Caren—four of the

kingdom's greatest fighters—have still failed to reach the depths?

Lily curled up, still hugging Atra. *She looks like a sulky child*, I thought as she resumed her report.

“Our forces have eliminated all of the Great Tree’s brambles that made it aboveground. They’ve stopped sprouting for now, but Lady Lydia thinks the tree is just concentrating its power in the depths—where Allen and Stella are.” Almost as an afterthought, she added, “Caren said she sensed them too. All units are staying on the alert in case the worst happens. The professor and the mistress are trying to work out a new way in.”

“*She agrees.*” Tina stood and held up the back of her right hand for us to see. The mark of the great elemental Frigid Crane pulsed, generating fleeting wisps of ice.

“I don’t think there can be any doubt,” Ellie chimed in to support her mistress. Her eyes harbored confidence, courage, and...did I spy a hint of something sweet?

My dear sister’s words leapt vividly to mind: “It looks like Ellie’s pulled ahead of you.”

It can’t be. Did she really link mana with my dear brother?

“You know, Ellie,” I said slowly, meeting my friend’s eyes with a smile, “there’s this question I’ve been simply dying to ask you.”

“U-Um... Why are you looking at me like that, Lady Lynne? You’re, er, scaring me,” Ellie whined, backing away in hopes of finding shelter behind Tina—only to meet with betrayal.

“Yes, Ellie. I’ve been wondering myself,” Tina said brightly. I could always count on her at moments like this.

Then my enervated cousin mumbled, “I could too.”

All three of us turned to stare, questioning.

Without warning, she released Atra and sat bolt upright, clutching her bracelet to her ample bosoms. It gave off a dull glow. “I could tell too, until yesterday,” she repeated. “Not all that clearly, but I could! I knew Allen was all

right! But then...I think his bracelet came off, and..."

Tina, Ellie, and I let out a collective "Ah" of understanding. So, Lily had been able to sense my dear brother's mana, however dimly, through their matching bracelets. And as soon as she'd lost the certainty, she had turned into a bundle of nerves.

When I put it like that, she doesn't sound so different from my dear sister. Only my dear sister has gotten so much calmer lately. I wonder why.



While I reflected on this new side of my cousin, Tina brandished her mark. “Don’t worry, Lily!” she proclaimed with confidence. “Look! She’s not nearly as jumpy as she was at first, and neither is Atra! Mr. Allen and Stella are safe and sound!”

“And the Great Tree’s power isn’t out of control. It’s just so...quiet,” Ellie added calmly. Encountering the spells that her parents and Duchess Rosa Howard had left in the archive seemed to have raised my friend to a new level.

Lily looked up and sprang to her feet. “Oh, Lady Tina! Miss Walker!” she cried, sweeping up the protesting pair in a hug and giggling as she nuzzled them cheek to cheek. “Thanks so much! You really put the spring back in my step! But I can’t help getting anxious at times like this. Once Allen gets back, I really should ask him to link mana with me so—”

“Never!” Tina burst out.

“Y-You can’t!” Ellie echoed.

“Really, Lily?” I sighed.

I won’t let her finish that sentence—not for anything. And besides, by any measure, it should be my turn next. It has to be!

“Aaw! How’s that fair?” My cousin made a show of pouting. “I mean...” She smiled, but behind her buffoonish expression lay envy. “Miss Walker linked mana with Mr. Allen. Didn’t you?”

Ellie yelped, white ribbons waving as she squirmed. Tina and I watched with interest. My dear brother had always gone too soft on her.

Our best friend blushed, fingers on her cheeks. White flowers drifted lazily around her. Even to me, she looked like a lovely little angel.

“W-Well, um, you see, i-it was an emergency. B-But I didn’t mind. It gave me so, so much courage, and...” Her excuses trailed off into giggles.

Lily and I fell into stony silence, having never experienced a mana link ourselves.

“When Mr. Allen gets back, I’m giving him a piece of my mind,” Tina fumed, folding her arms.

I couldn't agree more.

While my scarlet-haired cousin walked to the window, I clapped my hands for attention. “Tina, I suggest we get dressed,” I said. “With things such a mess, there’s a good chance we’ll be called to action. Ellie, would you lend us a hand?”

“You’re right,” my platinum-haired peer admitted, shifting focus.

“Y-Yes’m!” our friend responded.

Chill outside air brushed my cheek.

“Right in one, Lady Lynne!”

“Lily?” I asked. We all turned, puzzled, as the scarlet-haired maid closed the window and spun to face us. A little scarlet bird—a magical creature—perched on her finger.

“Message from Lady Lydia: ‘As soon as you’re ready, move to the spot I just sent you! We’re saving Allen and Stella,’” she chirped. “She means a hill on the east side of the city. I’ll whip up a quick snack. You can’t fight on an empty stomach!”



“So, an ‘angel’ might manifest using Stella Howard as its vessel, but unlike one hundred years ago, it most likely won’t become a devil immediately. Do I understand you correctly, Rodde?”

King Jasper Wainwright’s soft question hung in the air of the Lebufera council chamber. I saw fatigue in His Majesty’s handsome features and wrinkles in his formal attire. And no wonder—this session had dragged on through the night while we scrambled to keep pace with rapidly shifting circumstances. I, Liam Leinster, must have looked equally haggard, and I doubted that my military uniform was any less rumpled.

“Yes, although only for the moment.” Rodde nodded. The elven sorcerer had been projecting the latest developments onto a map of the city in the center of the round table. “The young one—*ahem*, the *professor* expressed the same opinion based on his observations while indirectly assisting the rescue party in

the Sealed Archive.”

Unspoken groans filled the chamber. My old friend, the former head court sorcerer, rarely erred where magic was concerned.

Only six of us sat at the table. Prince John had answered His Majesty’s call despite renouncing his place in the line of succession. Dukes Walter Howard and Leo Lebufera sat on either side of me, both in military dress. And who could miss the beautiful elf in a chair by the window, with her halo of jade-green hair? Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera—once the Comet, now the Emerald Gale—had originally vanquished the eight-winged devil by sealing it beneath the palace a century ago.

“Walter, Liam, Leo, are your troops in position?” His Majesty asked, massaging his eyes.

We three dukes had marched our elite forces into the royal capital, ready to defend it if the need arose. We had feared a change in Stella Howard after the flower dragon’s oracle had named her as a potential “White Saint,” but this disaster had caught us all off guard.

“All of them, sire,” Walter answered, anguish plain on his face. My friend had never lost a battle, but he also loved the daughters his late wife had left him with all his heart.

“The Leinster forces likewise,” I said as matter-of-factly as I could manage.

“We await only Your Majesty’s order,” Leo agreed in the same strained tone. We dukes had a duty to defend the realm, and we would uphold it.

“Doubtless Rodde has more or less the right of it,” Duchess Letty interjected, turning from the chilly cityscape outside the window and rising to her feet. The living legend had taught Walter and me what it meant to be a duke when we’d visited her in the western capital as children. Now she paced the room as she mused.

“One century past, a ‘White Saint,’ Princess Carina Wainwright, became first an angel, then an eight-winged devil. She fell immediately. No one knows what transpired then. Rodde and I merely rushed to the scene after disaster had struck. But were I to speculate...” She stopped in her tracks and swept her gaze

over us, profound sorrow in her jewel-bright eyes. “Touching the sacred Blue-Rose Sword, an heirloom of the royal family, triggered her transformation. Rumor had it that the blade caused miracles, you see. She chose to violate a taboo. We avoided calamity only because the then Hero sealed the sacred sword during our battle.”

One could scour the entire continent and still find virtually no one who knew the details of the incident a hundred years ago. To my shame, even I, a duke, knew only that a princess whose very name had been expunged from history had nearly demolished the royal capital and threatened to end the kingdom. The matter was so secret that official records available only to a select few still passed it off as a failure to control the great spell Radiant Shield.

“No one, save the first of the Wainwrights, could match her mastery of Radiant Shield,” the elven champion continued, crossing her arms and looking stern. “Even the magical creatures she conjured posed a grave threat. They inflicted staggering losses on the kingdom before the then Hero, Rodde, and I sealed her away. The greater part of the graves now honored in the catacombs belong to those stouthearted stalwarts who charged the devil holed up beneath the palace.”

Duchess Letty spun to glare at the map projected in the center of the round table. “Yesterday, however, we suffered hardly any casualties. Crom and Gardner’s claims that the archive showed no signs of intrusion and that none have entered it in more than five decades proved far from the truth, yet we may consider that a separate issue.”

Walter clenched his great fists in silence. The Walker family had aided his house for generations, and Ellie Walker had returned from the archive with a report of spell formulae left by her parents, officially victims of ten-day fever. Something was slithering in the darkness, and both we dukes and His Majesty had failed to detect it.

“Only one thing sets this case apart from a century ago.” Duchess Letty held up a slender index finger. All eyes turned to her. “Stella’s not alone. She has Allen with her. The mana we observed bore a close likeness to Carina’s. Stella might have fallen all the way to the ruined mausoleum, touched the sacred sword that forms the seal’s lynchpin, and emerged an angel, but she won’t fall.

The western chieftains and I didn't grant the title 'Shooting Star' on a whim."

After that firm appraisal, Duchess Letty turned to Walter and me with a fearless grin. "A champion shows his true worth in a pinch. Only those who refuse to give in, who ruthlessly turn the impossible on its head deserve to pass into legend. Can you appreciate that?"

Her words hung in the air for a moment. Then my friend and I broke the silence with a muted "Yes, ma'am."

Allen, the adopted son of Nathan and Ellyn of the eastern-capital wolf clan, had stolen my daughter Lydia's heart the moment they'd met and led her out of her gloomy isolation. He had genuinely saved her life. If anyone could make a difference now, he could. Walter must have felt the same, sitting beside me with his eyes shut tight. Allen had done much for his daughters as well.

"And the flower dragon has spoken," the elven beauty said, disturbing the city map with her fingers. "We sought a way to save Stella, and this is the result. If anyone errs now, it will be us."

A pall of silence descended on the council chamber for the umpteenth time.

So, Stella Howard's fate hangs on our decisions.

"Walter, Liam." Duchess Letty turned to my friend and me, regret clouding her lovely features. "Your daughters are more fortunate than you know. A century past, that girl—the kindest and strongest of the Wainwrights—had no one to hold her hand. She did, once, but illness placed him beyond her reach. The Silver Wolf, dragon slayer and self-made noble, perished. Now even his name has almost faded from memory, while hers has been blotted from the pages of history."

A heavy sigh came from His Majesty's side. Prince John seemed to know the story.

The Wainwright Kingdom was thriving. It had become the greatest power in the west of the continent. But it hadn't always walked in the light.

Duchess Letty raised a hand to cover her eyes. "*Damnatio memoriae* is a sentence worse than death," she continued in a trembling voice. "The House of Wainwright could never admit publicly that a princess of their blood nearly

toppled the kingdom. Doubtless, they found the choice heartrending, even then. Yet the fact remains that they decided to lay the blame on a dead girl rather than pursue the truth and propagated a false story of Radiant Shield run amok.”

“If you’ll excuse me.” Rodde broke the ensuing silence. “I believe a messenger bird has arrived.” Before the Archmage vanished, I caught the look of one begging forgiveness in his profile.

The elven champion surveyed His Majesty, Prince John, and us three dukes. “We all deserve blame for our failure to face this old tragedy and the countless other incidents we’re now forced to reexamine. We put them off for far too long. But we cannot allow our folly to kill Stella—a girl with a future. We must join forces with Allen as soon as may be and rescue the Howard girl by any means necessary! What other choice could we make?”

Walter, Leo, and I grunted our assent. The Four Great Ducal Houses existed to defend the realm, but what good were we if we couldn’t keep a single girl from harm?

His Majesty had listened in silence. Now he met the former duchess’s eyes. “Even if it leaves the city in ruins, Ms. Letty?” he asked in the same respectful tone he’d used when she’d been our teacher.

“Even if the royal capital crumbles to dust.” The elven beauty gestured toward us with a haughty smile. “And even if all of us here meet our ends. We shall keep the people and the children safe, no matter what it costs us! What more could one born to duty ask for? Nothing! So hold your heads high!”

I thumped my chest as I felt something hot kindle in it. Leo clenched his fists, cheeks flushing. His Majesty bowed low, then Walter’s broad shoulders began to tremble.

“I thank you for sharing your wisdom,” His Majesty replied hoarsely. If the worst happened, we might have slain Stella with our own hands.

Duchess Letty took a nearby seat and crossed her long legs. “Of course,” she said, turning to the young blond man, “we may make an exception for Your Royal Highness.”

“My Lady Comet, Cheryl is the only heir the House of Wainwright needs,” Prince John replied, making a point to invoke her old nickname. “I have no talent to speak of, and I don’t regret renouncing my claim to the throne.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Just between us, my sister and I have never been close. We do have different mothers.”

His Majesty’s eyebrows rose slightly. I’d heard that Princess Cheryl’s mother had been a maid.

“Nevertheless, I know her well enough to say that she’ll never abandon the city while the new Shooting Star and the Lady of the Sword stand their ground,” the former crown prince continued dispassionately, running his fingers over the cover of an old book. “She found something she values more than her own life. I envy her that. My sister will make a good queen, and if I want to enjoy my early retirement, I’d better make certain she lives long enough to become one.”

Did the murmur of approval come from me? From Walter? Leo, perhaps? I couldn’t tell, but I could see why that curmudgeon Gerhard Gardner followed this man.

The prince bowed to His Majesty. “Father, may I express an opinion?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. In that case...” The atmosphere shifted as the prince’s eyes turned cold and razor-sharp. “Dispatch troops to apprehend Lords Crom and Gardner at once. We must question them concerning the truth behind ten-day fever and the Walkers’ deaths. I fully appreciate the ancient privileges that both houses have enjoyed as Record Keepers, but needs must. I do feel bad for Gerhard, of course.” A pained look flashed across his face, but not for long.

Arrest the marquesses? Prince John is more daring than I gave him credit for.

“Next, given that the Sealed Archive has become impassable, we must secure an alternate entry route. The spiral staircase in the royal palace was lost long ago. If anyone is to reach the deepest levels, a hill on the east side of the city offers—”

“Allow me to take up the explanation,” Rodde interrupted. He had returned holding a piece of paper. “Sire, the catacombs constitute the only remaining

route to the palace's deepest vaults. Following the precedent set one hundred years ago, the professor requests permission to pass through them to rescue Allen and Stella Howard."

He wants to enter through the catacombs?!

Only royalty and those they granted special dispensation could tread on that forbidden ground. I'd heard that detection spells had no effect in the catacombs, and that to make matters worse, their passages wound like one of the labyrinths that had supposedly once dotted the continent.

"The expedition will be confined to those capable of tracking Allen's mana or influencing the Great Tree," the great elven sorcerer continued, ignoring our shock and looking down at his paper. "Lisa and Fiane Leinster will stand by with the professor in case reinforcements become necessary. I see no alternative to granting his proposal. Still, one grave—I may even say dire—cause for concern gives me pause." Rodde's uneasy gaze wandered the room.

What can he mean?

"As the professor and I previously informed Your Majesty, signs indicate that the Church of the Holy Spirit has infiltrated the catacombs. The intruders broke open a tomb and absconded with the remains of Baron Zelbert Régnier, the brave dhampir who saved our fair city."

We three dukes gave a start.

"Truly?"

"They stole a *corpse*?"

"I can't believe it."

The prince looked shaken but said nothing, while Duchess Letty softly echoed, "Régnier."

The baron had given his own life to save the royal capital from a grand summoning spell cast by a pure-blooded vampire. What could the church want with his corpse?

Rodde closed his eyes. "This incident is known only to those of us in this room, the professor, Gerhard Gardner, and Teto Tijerina, who will become the

youngest person ever to be awarded her own laboratory at the university next spring. The professor indicated his intent to inform Lisa, Fiane, and Lydia shortly.”

My daughter cared for Allen from the very depths of her soul. For his sake, she would cast aside everything else in a heartbeat. What would she think when she heard that Baron Régnier’s corpse had been defiled?

“The church deployed spell-soldiers with vampiric powers in the city of water. The professor and I strongly suspect that Zelbert Régnier’s remains formed the cornerstone of their development. Given that Io ‘Black Blossom’ Lockfield, the assassin of Robson Atlas, numbers among the church’s apostles, we can’t discount the possibility that they’ve turned Floral Heaven’s secret arts to their own ends. That most magically accomplished of demisprites devised a spell that transmutes mortals into vampires. Allen is upright to a fault. If he learns what’s been done to his best friend’s remains...” The old elf trailed off into silence.

The church’s “Saint” supposedly sought a world without death. Did she believe that end justified any means—even visiting indignities on the departed?

“I understand your concern,” His Majesty said, voice strained. We sat up straighter, awaiting orders. “But the present crisis demands our attention now. I hereby authorize an expedition into the catacombs in my name. Choose the very best of every company! Bring our full might to bear to rescue Allen and Stella...” The king drew his dagger partway and swiftly resheathed it. Lights danced, then went out. “And to lay gentle Carina, hailed as the second coming of our house’s founder, to rest at last. We mortals may be foolish, but this time, we’ll prove that we can learn from our mistakes!”

We answered as one:

“Yes, sire!”



“Caren!”

“Ms. Caren!”

“Watch out beloow!”

Girls' voices leapt to my ears while I waited for Lydia and the duchesses to return from the tent where they'd gone to confer with the professor about some tricky problem. A wind kicked up, and the knights of the Scarlet Order gave a start as two military griffins touched down in the makeshift camp on a hill east of the city.

"Tina, Ellie, Lynne, Lily, Atra!" I called, holding on to my beret.

The four girls and one child dismounted to join me. Tina was dressed as a sorceress in white, with her rod slung on her back. Lynne had dressed for sword fighting, and the dagger Allen had given her hung with the single-handed sword at her hip. Ellie wore her maid uniform. As usual, Lily stuck to her exotic ensemble.

"Caren!" Atra yipped, bundled in a wool hat and coat. She moved in for a hug, so I responded in kind.

The three younger girls' eyes widened.

"Caren."

"Your clothes."

"You match Lily."

Since the night before, I had changed out of my Royal Academy uniform and into a sort of foreign jacket patterned with interlocking arrows in shades of purple, a long skirt, and a pair of boots. I had determined to keep the outfit after Allen had complimented me on it in the city of water, but I'd never expected someone to bring it to me here.

The Leinster maids are definitely a little off-kilter, I thought, watching Sida Stinton—the trainee who had made the delivery—out of the corner of my eye. A demisprite sorceress who knew Allen from the university was pestering her for snacks.

I cleared my throat and attempted to justify myself to my own underclassmen. "My uniform got dirty when we fought our way out of the archive, so—"

"Miss Caren! You wore it again! Oh, thank you!" A giggling Lily threw her arms

around me, looking like she couldn't be happier. Atra started wagging her tail in sympathy.

Resigning myself to the older maid's clutches, I turned to the younger one. "Ellie, should you really be up and about already?" I asked. She was smiling, but you couldn't be too careful.

"I...I'm perfectly fine. Ah."

I grinned as Ellie hung her head, embarrassed by her slip of the tongue. "Don't push yourself too hard," I said, wriggling out of Lily's grasp and setting Atra down. "You know Allen wouldn't like that."

"I w-want to make myself useful, even if it upsets him," she replied, gaze firm despite her hesitant tone. I could see that her experience in the Sealed Archive had done wonders for her growth.

"In that case, welcome aboard."

"Y-Yes'm! Thank you!"

Ellie's enthusiasm proved infectious. Tina and Lynne hugged her from either side.

"You can count on me too!"

"Maybe she would if you learned to keep calm, Miss First Place."

"What?!"

"O-Oh, stop it, both of you!" Ellie wailed. "No fighting!"

Watching them launch into their usual antics, I thought of my own missing best friend. If only I could just rescue Stella, Felicia and I would—

"Oh, Lady Lydia!"

Lily's shout snapped me out of my brooding. Lydia Leinster had emerged from the tent holding her pocket watch and spotted us. She'd kept her long scarlet hair tied back and still wore the same sword-fighting outfit from our expedition—*she* hadn't even gotten scratched when we fought our way out. Duchess Lisa Leinster and Under-duchess Fiane Leinster followed after her, and so did the professor, with Anko riding on his shoulder. They must have finished their talk.

Lydia shut the lid of her watch and crossed her arms, clearly irritated and just a little intimidating. Tina and Ellie must have felt the same twinge of fear, because we shot Lynne a glance at almost the same moment. Lily brought a finger to her chin, seemingly lost in thought.

The red-haired young noblewoman plucked up her courage and ventured, “D- Dear sister, has anything happened to, um...” Her incomplete question dwindled to nothing. The chill coming off Lydia had cowed even her sister.

I stroked Atra’s head and signaled the Lady of the Sword with the slightest jolt of electricity I could manage.

“He’s fine,” she answered with a start. “I just have a...a bad feeling.”

“A bad feeling?” Tina and Lynne echoed, looking grave.

“Oh, Mr. Allen, Big Sis Stella,” Ellie murmured, clasping her hands as though praying.

An energetic clap shattered the gloom.

“It sounds like we’d better get started! Allen and Lady Stella are waiting for —”

“You’re not going anywhere, Lily dear,” the diminutive under-duchess interrupted, catching the maid in a hug from behind.

“M-Mother?! L-Let go! Let go of meee!”

“Nope!”

Lily struggled frantically to escape, but Fiane wouldn’t budge. Where in that tiny body did she hide all this brute strength?

Meanwhile, Duchess Lisa Leinster joined us, dressed in her scarlet military uniform. The professor seemed busy giving his students their marching orders. I saw him deep in conversation with Teto, the demisprite sorceress, a pair who looked like a twin brother and sister, and a human man.

“Lydia, Tina, Caren, and Ellie will form the rescue party,” Lisa announced. “Lynne and Lily will stand by with us.”

“What?” Tina and Ellie looked taken aback. Lynne gasped, speechless. Lily

froze with a strangled “Huh?!”

I could have seen all those reactions coming.

“Dear mother, why?!” Lynne demanded once she’d gotten over her shock. “Why not me?! I know I still have much to learn, but—”

“It’s not that, Lynne.” Lisa wrapped her daughter in a tender hug, gently stroking Lynne’s back. “Under normal circumstances, no one but royalty may set foot in the catacombs. Not even belonging to a ducal house guarantees passage. The ancient teleportation circle that serves as an entrance won’t activate for everyone. It wouldn’t let Fiane and me through. We left the choice to...”

Anko popped up, sitting at my feet. If the mysterious familiar had chosen the rescue party, we couldn’t argue. I knew Allen wouldn’t.

“All right,” Lynne reluctantly agreed, still snug in Lisa’s embrace.

“If only Allen still had his bracelet on,” Lily grumbled, still a prisoner of the under-duchess’s hug.

“The entrance isn’t the only part of the catacombs with an indecipherable old spell on it.” Lydia took up the explanation, stroking her left ring finger. “I’ve been inside twice before, but I had Allen with me then. The teleportation spell wouldn’t let me through on my own.”

“You mean Mr. Allen’s been inside?” Tina asked.

“What sort of old spells?” Ellie wanted to know.

“You went with my dear brother?” Lynne demanded.

Lydia shifted her gaze to the royal capital spread out below us. “Allen’s best friend died there, and he’s buried there too. He has an empty grave on this hill. His name was—”

“Zelbert Régnier, right?” I finished for her. My brother had always sent regular letters home from the Royal Academy, and I hadn’t forgotten them. He’d written about Lydia and Cheryl at first, but Régnier had shown up not long after.

“I couldn’t stand him,” the scarlet-haired noblewoman confirmed, tenderly

patting Atra's head. "He was glib and a bad influence on Allen. He used to spend a few nights a week at Allen's place, and he loved to rub it in my face, not to mention Cheryl's."

The younger girls and I could find nothing to say.

"Régnier?" Lily murmured, racking her brain while Fiane braided her hair. "Where have I heard that name before?"

Lydia withdrew her hand from the child's head and looked up at the sky. "But Régnier died making his dearest wish come true. His fiancée had become a devil, but he woke her from her never-ending dream, and he saved Allen's life and mine. He taught me a way around my problem too. I guess you could say I owe him a lot." She paused, then added, "I still don't like him, though."

Allen's letters had stopped just once, during his first winter in the royal capital. I had believed a note that he had "taken ill," but had he really? No one had ever mentioned a devil to me.

"Ask Allen to tell you the whole story some other time." Lydia gave her head a mournful shake. "I've told you all I can."

No one spoke. How could I ask Allen? I could never work up the courage. The mere thought that a careless question might drive him away from me made me wince and sent a shudder through my ears and tail. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne joined hands, seemingly touched by the same thought. Even Lily looked deadly serious.

Lisa had been listening quietly. Now she changed the subject, combing her fingers through Atra's hair. "Ellie, you used every drop of the sacred water Allen gave you. Is that right?"

"Y-Yes'm!" my underclassman answered, fishing the vial from a pocket of her maid uniform. It had a faint blue tint. "I used it as a catalyst to make magical creatures on my way out. They were awfully strong but, um, not the best listeners." Ellie dropped her gaze and repocketed the container.

So, she had trouble controlling them.

Fiane clasped Ellie's hands, having evidently styled her daughter's hair to her own satisfaction. "Power has its downsides. Do take care if you ever find yourself using that water again."

“Th-Thank you very much, Your Highness.”

“No ‘Highness’; just Fiane!”

“Yes, Your— F-Fiane.”

At last, a chuckle rippled through our group. I could see why Allen had such a soft spot for Ellie.

“Excuse me!” The newly braid-sporting Lily’s hand shot into the air. “As a maid, I have a duty to guard my ladies from—”

Her protest ended in a squawk of surprise as a little blue bird landed on her fingertip. She took the slip of paper tied to the magical creature’s neck, darted her eyes over it, and froze solid.

“I-It can’t be,” she groaned, staggering before slumping to the ground, where she started rubbing her bracelet. “Not a new assignment.”

We all rushed to read the paper ourselves. I recognized the handwriting of the Leinsters’ head maid, Anna.

“Time to change shifts! Come take command of the corps.”

“Lily, a good maid follows orders,” Fiane coaxed her daughter. She had been reading over our shoulders.

After a reluctant “Fine,” the maid stood up, brushed off her skirt, and fired herself up. “Okay! I’ve got this!”

I guess we won’t have to worry about her. But wait, if she’s taking over from Anna, where is Anna going?

“Caren!” a young voice yipped.

“Atra? No, you can’t come. Stay here and be a good girl, okay?” I said, bending down to reason with the child while she held out her little hands to me. Allen would have harsh words for me if I put her in harm’s way.

The child clung to me, beaming as her tail wagged. “Atra too!”

A burst of light dazzled me. I scrambled to shield the little girl. Then it hit me—I could hear the great elemental’s song inside me.

Wh-Why me?! Because she can’t reach Allen?!

I should have known better. It was all too easy to forget what incredible power Atra possessed in her own right. For all I knew, she saw any form she took as temporary.

A moment later, the younger girls realized where the child had gone and covered their mouths. “Can it be?” Lynne stammered while Tina and Ellie gasped in surprise.

“My,” Lisa murmured, matched by a muted “Goodness” from Fiane.

“What?” Lily grumbled. “Atra, don’t you know you could have picked *me*?”

Seeing my underclassmen’s shock helped me calm down some. Still, I couldn’t help feeling that the older trio could have acted a little more surprised.

Lydia thumped me on the shoulder. “You’re dealing with a great elemental. Don’t waste your time trying to make sense of her—that’s Allen’s job,” she said and started walking. “Now, let’s go.”

“Right.” I paused to glance at Tina and Ellie, then set off after the scarlet-haired noblewoman. I’d have plenty of time to think after we brought Allen and Stella back safe and sound.

The professor and his students gathered in one area and started casting powerful wards. The knights of the Scarlet Order formed a circle around them, bristling with spears. The whole thing seemed terribly imposing.

Lydia stopped amid a buffeting wind. “I can’t begin to guess what’s going on underground,” she warned us, gesturing to the professor’s group. An array of geometric patterns began to unfurl.

Is that the entrance?

Lydia looked back, scarlet hair fluttering as she held out her fist. We immediately raised our own to meet it. Lynne and Lily added their hands, and even Atra chimed in with her song.

“Let’s go!” Lydia shouted while Lisa and Fiane watched over us. “Tina, Ellie, Caren, stick close to me and don’t fall behind! Lynne, Lily, stay strong!”

“Right!” we all chorused together.



I saw nothing but white for a moment as we passed through the teleportation circle. We were on ground so hallowed it gave my ears and tail a chill. I looked around—and gaped in surprise.

The younger girls had the same reaction. Tina clutched her rod, and Ellie had multiple spells ready, but they each used a free hand to tug on my sleeve, nervously calling my name for reassurance.

The catacombs looked bigger than I'd expected—bigger than I could possibly have imagined. Rows of colossal, moss-covered stone pillars held up the ceiling. A neat succession of imposing structures and antique mana lamps lined both sides of the vast corridor we found ourselves in. A few seemed to have suffered heavy damage.

"The royal catacombs," I murmured. "I'd heard rumors, but I never dreamed..."

Who built this place and when? How could anyone make all this?

The girls finally relaxed a little and stared around, eyes wide and hands over their mouths.

"All this underground?" Tina murmured.

"W-Wow," Ellie said. "It's like a lot of little churches inside one giant cathedral."

Her comment gave me a sudden thought. Was this place like the eastern capital's Great Tree? The eerie similarity disoriented me. Then, without warning, flaming plumes filled the air around us and vanished just as quickly.

"Detection spells still don't work. That figures," Lydia muttered. Then she threw us a bone. "Generations of royalty are supposed to be enshrined here, along with anyone who managed to save the whole kingdom. According to Régnier, a single spellcaster built the oldest parts, and they did it in just one night."

"Only one?!" Tina exclaimed, her hair standing on end.

"Th-That sounds like the kind of thing magicians do in fairy tales," Ellie gasped, covering her mouth with both hands.

I recalled the tales an old otter had told Allen and me as children while we rode his gondola through the waterways that sprawled beneath the eastern capital. Maybe legends like that cropped up everywhere. Maybe.

“The whole place is full of identical mausoleums spaced at identical intervals, probably to make it hard to navigate by sight,” Lydia continued. “Allen told me there’s subtle magical interference running nonstop on top of that. Video and communication orbs don’t work in here, and if you stay down too long, you may never get out. Of course, that doesn’t apply when you have help from the great elementals and the Great Tree, or if you have mana to follow like I’m tracking Allen’s now.”

None of us spoke. Yes, Lydia *could* sense Allen’s mana, albeit faintly. She and Tina also hosted the great elementals Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane. As Allen’s sister, I’d spent enough years with him to know his mana anywhere. Ellie contributed her abilities as a “Great Tree warden,” which had come to light in the Sealed Archive. Anko had chosen the right team for the job.

The platinum-haired young noblewoman and I looked around, our hair ribbons swaying.

“U-Um...” Ellie spoke up. She had been trying her hand at detection with her eyes closed. Now she blushed in excitement. “I think I found the interference spell. Just barely, though.”

“Really? Not too shabby,” Lydia said.

“I’m impressed,” I added.

“Wow! Way to go, Ellie!” Tina grabbed her old friend’s hands and shook them up and down.

“Th-Thank you so much.” Ellie giggled.

I watched my underclassmen out of the corner of my eye while I quietly shared my concerns with the scarlet-haired noblewoman. “What about the Great Tree’s defense mechanisms? Won’t we trigger them?”

“We brought that up with the professor after our retreat from the archive,” Lydia replied. “He said we shouldn’t have to worry about it intercepting us in the catacombs. The Great Tree’s power is woven into this place, for one thing.

And anyway, what difference would it make to us? Wouldn't *you* do the same thing either way?"

"Well..." I faltered and touched my sheathed dagger. I would cut through anything that stood between me and saving Allen and Stella. Deep in my chest, Atra broke into a cheerful song.

"For now, focus on following Allen's magic straight to him! Full speed ahead!" Lydia shouted amid a whirl of fiery plumes. "And charge right on through any trouble along the way! That's how I've always done it, and I don't plan on changing now."

Her mana surged along with her passion, and the mark on her right hand pulsed with light. The eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster, rulers of the south—a true, blue-blooded aristocrat, a "Highness," not to mention the title she'd already earned as the Lady of the Sword—cared for my brother with all her heart. I couldn't help feeling a little overwhelmed. Still, I knew my feelings were every bit as strong. I wouldn't let anyone say otherwise.

"Don't assume we're all like *you*!" I snapped, drawing my dagger and weaving a lightning spell. "Ellie, get your magical creatures in formation!"

"Y-Yes'm!" The young maid's blonde hair and skirt fluttered as she conjured. A whole pride of magical lions materialized at once. I counted ten in all.

Tina went a few steps ahead and turned, ready at the ready. "Finally, a chance to show the fruits of my hard work!" she crowed, puffing out her nonexistent chest with a smug laugh. "Mr. Allen uses Divine Ice Mirrors all the time, and if I multi-cast it, I can make a defensive perimeter around— Huh?"

The mana lamps dimmed without warning. A staff jutted from the black flower that had just bloomed in midair, and a hail of inky ice spears followed.

"Tina!" I covered myself in lightning and sprang into action, scooping up the stunned young noblewoman and dashing clear of the assault.

"Lady Tina!" Ellie's lions pounced on our airborne assailant. But to her shock, a kick from a second figure, newly emerged from the magic circle, made short work of them.

I couldn't even see him move! How is anyone that skilled?!

I'd dodged every ice spear, but I still felt a chill as the men landed on the steps of a mausoleum. One, a sorcerer armed with a staff, wore a hooded white robe trimmed in azure. My skin broke out in gooseflesh—I couldn't grasp the scale of his mana. The tall, thin man who had wiped out Ellie's lions wore a similar hooded robe edged in dark green. An antique dagger hung from his belt.

I would recognize their outfits anywhere. We were looking at apostles of the Church of the Holy Spirit.

Tina, Ellie, and I froze, unable to keep up with the sudden development.

How did these guys get into the royal capital?!

Above us, the black flower crumbled, and flaming plumes filled the air—scattering from the supreme spell Firebird. The beautiful avian disaster engulfed both apostles, reducing a place of mourning to scorched earth.

“Don't just waltz in here,” Lydia snapped at the monsters in the inferno, her voice glacial as she drew her enchanted sword, Cresset Fox. “Let me guess: you hid a teleportation circle in the catacombs when you snuck in during the rebellion.”

They got into the catacombs?

That sounded important, but I set my curiosity aside and entered Lightning Apotheosis, drawing my dagger and conjuring a cross-headed spear of electricity. My lightning felt more potent than usual. Was Atra lending me a hand?

By the time the apostles reemerged, Tina and Ellie had gotten over their shock and joined us in weaving their most impressive spells. Both men had escaped with little more than singed robes.

“I...I don't believe it,” Ellie gasped, shaking. “Th-This can't be real.”

We could see their barriers with our naked eyes. Not even the Stinging Sea, the monster we'd needed an army to bring down in the eastern capital, could hold a candle to these two.

Lydia fixed the tall apostle with a gimlet stare. I couldn't make sense of his mana—vast but terribly cold. It reminded me of a doll. Or a corpse.

Flames engulfed Cresset Fox as its blade leveled at the staff-wielding apostle in the azure-trimmed robe. “I saw you in the city of water,” its wielder said. “You dropped an iceberg that was supposed to be Falling Star on us. Perfect timing. I need to ask you a few questions.”

I couldn’t make out most of the silent apostle’s face, but the way his lips curled at that gave me the creeps. I moved my fingers, signaling Tina and Ellie to get ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

“Fourteen years ago, you fought the previous Hero in the Yustinian capital,” the scarlet-haired noblewoman continued in glacial tones. “Eleven years ago, you spread ten-day fever in the royal capital and took a hand in the murder of Millie and Remire Walker. More recently, you cursed Carlotta Carnien when she started researching old legends of the city of water. And would you also be the one who broke open Zelbert Régnier’s tomb and made off with his corpse, Mr. ‘Sage’—although who knows how much right you have to *that* title?”

Tina and Ellie froze in shock.

“H-He broke open a *tomb*?”

“A-And stole a *corpse*?”

I grimaced. What would Allen do if he ever found out?

“The spell-soldiers Allen and Cindy fought in the Nitti archive were infused with vampiric power,” Lydia said while her fiery plumes roared, menacing the apostles. Her unbelievable mana shook the pillars and even the ground under our feet. She was well and truly furious. “You couldn’t have worked out how to do that so quickly on your own, not even with Alicia Coalfield feeding you hints. And knowing how potent vampirism can be, I doubt you managed to control it without taking unsavory shortcuts.”

Allen and Lydia had told me all about the vampire who called herself “Crescent Moon”—the lieutenant of Allen the Shooting Star, a wolf-clan champion who’d fallen at the Battle of Blood River as the War of the Dark Lord drew to its close. Alicia had seized control of the very weather, staining the city of water in the light of a crimson moon. No one could wrestle such monstrous power under control without a struggle.

“So, let me guess.” Blinding scarlet rays flashed from the mark on Lydia’s right hand. “You used the body of Zelbert Régnier, the man who *chose* to become a dhampir?”

The younger girls and I gave a start. What did she mean, Allen’s best friend had become a dhampir?

In lieu of an answer, the Sage sneered. A derisive chuckle escaped his lips as he floated off the ground and onto the roof of a mausoleum, from which he looked down at us. The tall apostle still hadn’t even drawn his weapon.

“Flaming hair, a witch’s sword, and Blazing Qilin,” the Sage mused. “You must be the Leinsters’ cursed child. And *you*...” The apostle’s gaze made Tina flinch. Despite his looks, I could hear long years of experience in his voice. Not even Io had been this hard to pin down. My instincts were screaming warnings at me.

“You’re the cursed child of the Howards and Etherhearts, with a god-slaying monster nestled inside you,” the Sage groaned, slowly shifting his antique staff. “Madness. Far more deranged than anything *we’ve* done. I thought so before, and a fresh look hasn’t changed my opinion. Still, I hadn’t planned on running into you here—certainly not before I retrieved the angel. Curse Io’s rotten luck.”

What could we say to that? He was talking to himself.

Frigid Crane killed a god? And what was that about an “angel”? Is he here to kidnap Stella?!

Lydia’s icy glare didn’t waver. She kept her sword pointed languidly at the apostle. My ears and tail bristled. Inside me, Atra was crying out in protest.

Horrible mana erupted from the apostle’s body, kicking up freezing gusts. “But the Saint made her wishes clear,” he said, azure eyes and hair peeking from beneath his hood. “Resign yourselves to death, and let our great work rise atop your corpses! I am Aster, the Sage, he who stands above all other apostles!!!”



An azure snowstorm started freezing mausoleums and pillars solid. I gritted my teeth and spurred my armor of lightning to life. Ellie muttered, “This is for mom and dad!” and cast as many ice-resistant barriers and strength-enhancing spells as she could physically manage.

We’re here to save Allen, and Stella too. We can’t afford to lose! Not even to the biggest monster out there.

“In your dreams, maybe!” Tina snapped, thrusting her rod up at the Sage.

“Your ‘great work’ doesn’t interest me.” Lydia scythed her sword lightly through the air. Tornadoes of blazing plumes pushed back the snowstorm, dominating the battlefield as they surrounded the apostles. I counted seven in all.

Wait. I’ve seen this before!

“N-No way,” Tina gasped.

“Th-That’s Mr. Allen’s,” Ellie murmured.

“His new fire spell!” I cried. Allen had crafted this spell in his duel with Tobias Evelyn to prevent Lily’s engagement, but Lydia hadn’t been there to see it.

Don’t tell me she recreated it from hearsay?!

“But if you’re going to stand between me and Allen,” Lydia shouted, “hurry up and drop dead!”

Her scarlet hair fanned out in the fiery breeze as she completed the new spell: Seven Burning Blade Blossoms. Seven tornadoes—of feathers, not flowers—bore down on the apostles and crashed into a jaw-dropping barrier. Bits of fiery plumes and dark-azure glows scattered burning destruction in all directions. Tina, Ellie, and I beat a hasty retreat and raised fire-resistant barriers of our own.

First one tornado, then two, then three ate into the apostles’ defenses, gaining ferocity each time a new pillar of fire joined the assault. Soon, all seven merged, hiding the Sage and his companion from view.

“Tina, Ellie!” I shouted. “Defend as hard as you can!”

“Right!” my underclassmen chorused as we all cast wards in rapid succession.

For just a moment, all sound ceased—then came roaring back with a vengeance. We braced ourselves as Seven Burning Blade Blossoms reached its final stage, slashing and incinerating everything in its reach. The spell had always impressed me, but I’d never dreamed it could do *this*.

The brilliant sorceress-swordswoman who had cast it stood amid the inferno ahead, sweeping her hair back with one hand and gripping her beautiful blade with the other. If I ever hoped to stand at Allen’s side rather than follow in his footsteps, I thought, I would need to surpass her.

It sounded like I wasn’t the only one feeling shaken—or staring at Lydia’s back.

“She won’t beat me,” Tina muttered, glaring ahead.

“Amazing,” Ellie added to herself. “But...but still!”

I hope you’re ready, Allen. I meant what I told you back in the eastern capital.

“Did you forget people are supposed to rest in peace here, Lydia?” I gibed. “Even ancient ruins deserve a little more respect.”

“Could you say the same thing to your brother?” the noblewoman asked in a somber tone. “The church took Zelbert Régnier’s body and we think they experimented on it, but we went easy on them because we hoped we could learn something’?”

“Well...” I faltered.

Allen was kind—the gentlest person I’d ever met—but that wouldn’t make him any less furious if he ever found out what had been done to Régnier’s remains. If anything, it would add fuel to the fire. Lydia—the mighty Lady of the Sword—gave a shudder, and I knew why. She’d just pictured how Allen would react if we showed mercy.

“I don’t have the guts,” she said. “I’ll put his feelings first, even if it doesn’t make the most tactical sense. I mean...”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence for me to know how it ended.

“I never want to lose his trust.”

I knew Allen would approve if we held back, hoping to gain information. But he would also feel hurt, and I couldn't bear that.

"Lydia—"

"Behind you!" Ellie screamed.

I grabbed Tina's hand and jumped left while Lydia jumped right. I hadn't sensed any mana whatsoever. How had they gotten around us without teleporting?

Ellie octuple-cast the advanced spell Imperial Earth Ramparts and reinforced her walls with botanical magic and ice-resistant barriers while taking evasive action of her own. She blocked Aster's volley of ice spears from behind us, but her defenses were crumbling fast. Ellie cried out in exertion, but the difference between the mana their spells contained was just too great.

"Oh-ho. Impressive," the Sage remarked, then theatrically snapped his fingers. "Next."

The tall apostle rushed Ellie regardless, and he moved fast.

"T-Take this!" Tina tried to intercept him with a barrage of the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances from his flank.

A bloodred flash drew gasps from Tina, Ellie, and me. The tall apostle pressed on, chopping through ice lances with his bare hands.

Lydia shot me a look. I instantly took her meaning and joined in her counterattack, darting forward faster than I had charged the gates of the Fortress of Seven Towers. A great leap sent me airborne.

"How do you like this?!" I shouted, slamming down my lightning spear with all my might.

To my shock, the tall apostle took the full force of the blow on his crimson barrier. My blood froze.

It's hopeless. I can't break through.

"Well now," Aster commented behind me, pausing in mid-spell. "A lightning wolf. How long has it been? Two hundred years? Not to mention that dagger. And the creature within must be—"

“Caren, get back!”

I cast the elementary spell Divine Wind Wave on myself just as Lydia shouted a warning. A deathly chill ran up my spine. I twisted, contorting myself to land on my feet. A few silver-gray hairs drifted to the ground. The tall apostle’s hand clutched his timeworn dagger.

Was that...

“An invisible blade?” I murmured.

But I didn’t sense any mana.

“His mana runs as silent as Mr. Allen’s!” Ellie warned me, picking herself up.

“As silent as Mr. Allen’s?” Tina gaped.

“Meaning we’ve got next to no chance of sensing it ahead of time,” Lydia spat with undisguised frustration. “Just what we needed.”

It sounded like a nightmare to fight against, but in principle, the technique wasn’t so different from my lightning spear. Something about that bothered me, but I couldn’t spare time to figure out what.

“Lydia,” I called, never taking my eyes off the apostle as he resheathed his dagger and calmly walked over to Aster.

“If you’re suggesting we retreat, the answer is no,” she replied without hesitation and planted herself in front of the younger girls, sword at the ready. Fiery plumes swarmed the Sage in sympathy with her conviction, only to vanish as they reached him.

Yes, ma’am.

“If everything had gone according to plan,” Lydia continued, advancing to join me, “I would have had dinner with Allen last night, then one thing would have led to another, and I’d have ended up spending the night at his place. I won’t put up with any more changes to my schedule!”

“What?!”

“Wh-What do you mean you’d ‘sp-spend the night’?”

Tina and Ellie must have picked up on the signal, but that didn’t stop them

from voicing genuine outrage.

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” I snapped, dusting off my skirt while I shot down Lydia’s delusion. “Little sisters protect their brothers. That’s the way of the world.”

“What?” Lydia lined up beside me, flaming plumes falling all around us as she cocked her head in mock puzzlement. “You mean you won’t stand up for your sister-in-law?”

“I don’t *have*...”

The tall apostle turned to look at us, his eyes red as blood.

“...a sister-in-law!” I howled at the top of my lungs and swung my spear for all I was worth. A flash of lightning tore up paving stones, then cracked the mausoleum’s pillars, walls, and steps as it went. Finally, it struck the barrier, scattering violet sparks as it began to penetrate—then stopped. Aster had waved that old staff of his.

“Not bad,” he opined. “Against a *lesser* apostle—”

“We’re not done yet!” Ellie shouted. The ground shook as roots and branches coiled around the apostles.

“The Great Tree’s power?!” the Sage exclaimed, blue eyes widening beneath his hood. “That hair. Those eyes. I see now. You must be that Great Tree warden and that Walker’s—”

“*Must* you run your mouth in the middle of a fight?” Lydia teleported right up to the apostles with Black Cat Promenade and cleaved their barriers apart with a flaming slash. A point-blank Firebird followed before she fell back, shouting, “Tina!”

“Ready!” the platinum-haired young noblewoman called back and brought the rod poised high above her head sweeping down.

A massive Blizzard Wolf took shape. The fire-and lightning-scarred paving stones suffered fresh devastation as the supreme ice spell opened its jaws and swallowed the Sage and his companion whole. At the same time, I clenched my right fist, multi-casting the advanced spell Imperial Lightning Dance. Ice storm,

thunderstorm, and inferno all converged on a single point—and blinked out of existence.

We drew in our collective breath as silence returned to the catacombs. Only the marks of destruction remained.

Was that even magic?

Tina and Ellie still had fight left in them, but I could see the confusion in their eyes. Even Lydia looked grim.

“Magnificent.” Aster applauded, making a show of courtesy. “I must congratulate you on reaching such heights in this age of magical decline. If you’d had the chance to reach your prime, you might even have given me real trouble. Now, have you quite finished flailing against the inevitable? If so...”

His mana skyrocketed. A burst of malice made my breath catch in my throat. I flinched in spite of myself, while Tina and Ellie yelped in fright. Try as I might, I couldn’t stop shivering. Only Lydia went on weaving spells as normal.

The Sage’s beautiful—and therefore all the more terrifying—azure gaze pierced us. “I think I’ll kill you now,” he finished. “But worry not: you will not die in vain. Your deaths will contribute to setting the laws of the Star Oath aright.”

“I think not. I have other ideas,” a familiar, nonchalant voice interrupted.

For the first time, the apostles took evasive action, leaping apart to either side. A little black cube appeared where they had been standing, then expanded, carving a new chunk out of the floor and stairs. I couldn’t even identify its element.

Who could cast a spell like this except...?

“P-Professor?!” the platinum-haired young noblewoman and her maid exclaimed, jumping in surprise and delight as a bespectacled man in an overcoat landed before us. I didn’t see Anko with him.

“Why, hello, Tina, Ellie,” he said, turning to give them a wink. “How nice to see you safe and sound. Lydia and Caren too, of course.”

I appreciated his help, and it certainly bolstered my confidence, but that didn’t stop Lydia and me from giving one of the mightiest sorcerers cold looks.

“Took you long enough,” she groused. “If you planned on tagging along, you could at least show up on time.”

“Professor, I’d like a few words later,” I added. He must have had good reasons for hiding what had happened to Lord Régnier’s body, but how would we ever explain it to Allen?

“What a friendly reception.” The professor cracked a sardonic smile, unfazed by our stares. “And young Tina and her friends will be just as bad before much longer. The mere thought brings a tear to my eye. Still, I see your point and accept your criticism. The situation seems far worse than I’d imagined.”

Aster and the tall apostle jumped again, trying to reclaim their position in front of the half-demolished mausoleum. But before they could land, black flashes danced and swayed. Countless lines traced themselves on barriers, pillars, statues, and stairs, and then it all came crashing down in pieces. The apostles stood atop the rubble, although I couldn’t guess how they had escaped.

“Dear me, you evaded my first strike? No one’s done that since Mr. Allen!” a petite maid exclaimed with a hint of annoyance. Her chestnut hair just barely covered her ears, and she landed at the professor’s side so lightly that she seemed to weigh nothing at all.

“A-Anna?!” Tina, Ellie, and I all blurted, half in shock and half in joy.

“Yes, my ladies!” The maid twirled a hundred and eighty degrees and pressed her hands together in a chipper greeting. “Anna, head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster, is here to see you safely through the night! My mistress and Lady Fiane were most insistent!”

I knew the professor was on hand, but I can’t believe they assigned Anna to support us too.

Beside me, Lydia leveled her sword at the Sage. “The tables have turned. I’ll see to it you tell us everything you know.”

The leader of the church’s apostles had no retort to that. The air turned tense and freezing cold. I couldn’t imagine this man giving in, no matter how badly we outnumbered him. Still, we had Lydia, the professor, and Anna on our side, and

I was no pushover myself. It would take more than two apostles to bring us down.

Aster let out his breath. “Kindly go on ahead and reclaim the angel,” he commanded his companion, although not uncivilly.

Without a word in answer, the tall apostle leaned forward and launched himself toward us, pulverizing paving stones beneath his feet.

“Not on my watch!” Lydia and Tina snapped, blocking his path with a hail of flaming and freezing spears.

“Like we’d let you waltz on through!” I added my own lightning spears to the bombardment.

Ellie multi-cast Imperial Storm Tornado—only for her advanced spells to bounce off an array of shadowy ice mirrors floating in midair.

He uses that spell just like Allen does!

“This could be a bit tricky,” Anna mused, shredding all of our rebounding magic with a wave of her right hand. Meanwhile, the ice mirrors shattered in rapid succession, transforming into a stinging storm of black ice.

It blinded us for a moment, but we pushed back with all we had and managed a swift recovery. By that time, though, the tall apostle had bounded over us and run off. He’d gotten away.

“You won’t be giving chase.” Aster chuckled from atop his heap of rubble. “I must insist you stay and enjoy a bit of sport with me. As long as we recover the angel, any sacrifice will be more than worth—”

The Sage crashed into the rubble, cut off by a kick he couldn’t see coming. From the ensuing dust cloud emerged a pristine butler’s suit and monocle, then an aging face stamped with grief and rage.

Is that really...?

“You made good time, Graham,” the professor said, levitating more little black cubes.

“I was in a hurry,” the Howards’ head butler replied curtly, straightening his lapels.

Tina and Ellie joined hands in shock.

“G-Graham.”

“G-Grandpa.”

Aster rose into the air, scattering debris, and landed on the tip of a broken stone pillar.

“We’ll see to things here,” said the professor. “Once you reach the depths, Anko will teleport you to the surface.”

“So hurry ahead to Mr. Allen and Lady Stella!” Anna chimed in.

“We’re going after him,” Lydia announced immediately.

“Tina! Ellie!” I shouted as the scarlet-haired noblewoman broke into a run.

“R-Right!” both girls responded while Ellie scooped up Tina and joined me in pursuit. As we left, mistress and servant turned back for one last shout.

“Graham!”

“Grandpa!”

Then, in unison, “Please be careful!”

The old butler raised his eyebrows a fraction, then nodded deeply.



“Really! What wonderful young ladies they are!” Anna laughed musically. A smile spread across her face as Lady Tina and my granddaughter vanished from sight. But she never left herself open or stopped deploying her “camouflaged strings.” She looked no different than she had decades ago, when we’d attempted to kill each other on a northern battlefield.

“But would it hurt them to spare some concern for *me*? I knew I should have foisted this job on the old one! Don’t you agree, Graham?” the professor lamented, although a smile in his eyes belied his tone. I recalled something Duke Walter had once said of the man: “I’d like to see anyone get the better of him in a battle of spells when he sets his mind to it.”

I exhaled, mind alert and ready to enter combat at any moment. Before me stood a man in a hooded white robe trimmed with azure, an antique staff in his

hand: the man who might have killed my daughter and my son-in-law.

“What do you think, my good self-styled ‘Sage’?” The professor winked. “Or should I call you Prime Apostle Aster?”

The Church’s “Saint,” about whom we still knew so little, had taken up residence in the inner sanctum of the pontifical palace several years previously. Espionage revealed that she had personally selected the monsters known as “apostles” and that they numbered seven in all. Their order had played crucial roles in every recent upheaval in the west of the continent. A Lalannoyan champion had slain one of their number, and their leader, a sorcerer, went by the name of “Aster.”

“The kingdom’s most devious, most dangerous sorcerer; the imperial Angel of Death, born of mortal delusion; and the Abyss,” the man murmured, raising a hand to his brow and giving his head an ostentatious shake. “Io’s bad luck truly beggars belief. I must seriously consider cleansing him of curses after this.”

“Assuming you get the chance.” The professor snapped his fingers. Spell formulae appeared on the faces of seven black cubes drifting around him and began to move. Dark winds sprang up. The look in the eyes behind his spectacles belonged to the kingdom’s most dangerous sorcerer. “I suspect I may be repeating Lydia, but Graham and I have a whole heap of questions for you. You seem quite a bit older than you look, but you don’t strike me as one of the seven dragons, so I assume you can die. The Angel of Death and the Abyss can convince anyone to talk—at least anyone who can feel pain. Now, you owe us some answers.”

Chapter 4

“What, you’re still awake, Allen? You can’t push yourself like that!”

My best friend’s voice brought back so many memories. Everywhere I looked, I saw flowers in full bloom, even though it was the middle of winter. A moon so cold it seemed almost sinister hung in the sky. I would recognize the Leinster mansion in the royal capital anywhere, and yet...

I clenched my fist a fraction.

Of course. I’m dreaming. I’ve never forgotten the night we fought that pure-blooded vampire, Idris. I could never forget the night we made that promise.

“You’re one to talk, Zel,” I said. “I know you’ve barely slept in days.”

Standing in the light of the mana lamp, my friend took off his thin spectacles and rubbed his eyes. From the sorcerer’s robe he wore and the pair of swords on his belt, I gathered that he had no plans to sleep tonight either.

“To put an end to Idris and stop my sister Chloé,” he had confessed to Lydia and me after our battle with the devil before the Great Tree, “I gave up my humanity and became a dhampir two hundred years ago. Oh, but the blood-drinking thing is just a myth, okay? Sorry I lied to you.”

Back in the dream, Zel replaced his spectacles, looking sheepish. “You’ve got me there. Sorry,” he admitted. “Where’s Lady Scarlet? Didn’t she go to bed with you?”

“You *do* realize we’re on Leinster property?” I reminded him.

On the surface, the academy had remained peaceful after Idris’s infiltration had come to light, but it had stepped up security in secret. Zel and I hadn’t been allowed to return to our lodgings since the battle. We were up against a vampire and a devil, threats to rival the dragons. The headmaster had told us that the powers that be were debating sending in the kingdom’s greatest champions and even the Four Great Dukes. Unfortunately, troubling movements in neighboring countries kept Dukes Howard, Leinster, and Algren

pinned down, while the western Duke Lebufera had the demonfolk beyond Blood River to occupy him.

“It pains me to admit it,” the professor had said, “but we’re forced to leave the matter in your hands. I’ll provide all the support I can.”

I’d heard real pain in the voice of the man rumored to be the kingdom’s most dangerous sorcerer.

“Nonsense.” Zel chuckled and gave his head an exaggerated shake. “Would Lady Lydia Leinster object? No! Not on your life! Although you’d have it even easier if the Lady of Light were around.”

True, Lydia had clutched my sleeve and murmured, “Please, don’t go away and leave me” when she’d gotten into bed. I felt sure Cheryl’s absence had played a big part in that—the princess was standing by in the palace on His Majesty’s orders, and Lydia was more timid than she let on.

“But wouldn’t it still cost me my ticket to the university?” I asked, humoring my friend.

“Just move south, then,” he quipped. “‘Allen Leinster’ has a nice ring to it.”

I fell silent. The class divide between Lydia and me couldn’t be wider. I might be able to stay with her through university, but after that?

“What, you don’t like the southern capital?” Zel rested a hand on his sword hilt. “Then go to the city of water—no, make that the Lalannoy Republic, like I told you before! Prejudice against beastfolk doesn’t run so strong there, and the two of you would have no trouble making a go of it. You could even get some bigwigs to write you recommendations—you’ve got the connections for it.”

I sighed. “Just don’t give Lydia any funny ideas.”

“Zelbert Régnier never misses a trick!” my friend chuckled with the air of a man who had done his job and done it well. “Of course I’ve already told her! She even took notes and said thank you for a change!”

“Zel?” I said slowly, shooting him a reproving look. Lydia cared deeply for her family, but she also tended to fly off the rails.

My friend took a few steps without turning to face me. “For a life with you, Lady Scarlet would give up her country without a second thought,” he said, wind ruffling his brown ponytail. “Maybe the whole world, come to think of it.”

I recalled how Lydia had put it: “I’ll be your sword, Allen! That’s good enough for me!”

“I plan to repay my debts,” I said, bending down to touch a flower at my feet. “Now, stop beating around the bush.”

“I really think you’d have it easier if you just stopped worrying and got engaged, but suit yourself.” The sorcerer-swordsman who had spent the past two centuries chasing Idris and Chloé started pacing. “Vampires are serious business. Bottomless mana gives them a whole arsenal of offensive magic, and as far as I know, Idris has a few centuries—maybe close to a thousand years—of experience under his belt. He’s got the deck stacked against us, and he’s not even trying to hide it.”

After the clash at the Great Tree, we had fought the vampire near the cathedral on a hill in the city’s western quarter, and he’d proven formidable. We’d managed to catch him off guard and take his right arm, but I shuddered to think what would have happened if we hadn’t experienced the wrath of the black dragon.

“And don’t forget Chloé,” he continued. “My sister-slash-fiancée has a hell of a talent for spell-casting and swordplay. Add the powers of a devil and a vampire to that, and she’s probably a bigger threat than Idris now. I can’t take them both at once.”

My friend said no more. A cold breeze scattered flower petals.

I caught up to him and put an arm around his shoulders. “Don’t worry. Lydia and I will keep Idris busy. You focus on your real goal: waking your sister from her never-ending dream.”

Chloé Régnier had died two hundred years ago. Her baronial house had scrambled to save the brilliant girl from her deathbed. Idris had taken advantage, reducing her to first a vampire, then a devil, and finally a murderous doll devoid of feeling.

Zel covered his eyes, tears trickling down his pale cheeks. “Sorry. Really, I...I’m sorry.” He let out a hollow laugh. “I can’t think of anything else to say. Pretty pathetic for a guy who’s lived two centuries, huh?”

“It’s fine. I’ve stuck with you too long to back out now.” I never forgot my debts, just like my dad had taught me.

Zel dried his eyes and resumed his keen analysis. “Idris is declining. He may descend from a legend who lived through the age of gods, but he can’t keep himself invincible forever. He came to the royal capital looking for a way to extend his life. That hooded guy we ran into at first must have tipped him off. Those who lurk in the shadows have their own webs of connections.”

The aging vampire had made a point to tell us where he wanted to go. He wanted to kill Zel at any cost—payback for his right arm.

“And whatever he’s after is in the catacombs?” I asked, naming the site of the next day’s fight to the death.

“Probably, although I don’t know what it could be. Tomorrow’s a crimson moon. Not even a strategic barrier can keep him out.”

Numberless petals danced in the nighttime lights. Standing among them, my friend seemed just as fleeting.

“Listen, partner—unlike Lady Scarlet, the Lady of Light, *and you*, I’m hopelessly average. I can’t make the leaps you do. But I’ve toughed it out all this time to save Chloé and to get back at Idris. That’s all I’ve lived for!” Zelbert Régnier struck his sheathed swords, eyes ablaze with determination. “I can’t get everything I wish for. The world doesn’t make things that easy. But that’s no reason to throw in the towel. This time, I’ll lay my sister’s soul to rest and end the eternal night of a legend who strayed from the straight and narrow!”

His resolve was unshakable—which only made it all the more dangerous.

“Let’s get some sleep,” I urged. “We’ve got one last meeting with the professor and the headmaster in the morning.”

“Good point!”

We went back inside together. Lydia’s mana hadn’t moved. She seemed to be

sleeping soundly, but I thought I'd better return to my room next to hers before much longer.

"You know, Allen..." Zel called from a shadow beneath a mana lamp. His eyes had turned crimson. "Two hundred years ago, Idris wiped out my whole house, then abducted Chlo   from her deathbed to add insult to injury. Revenge was all I could think about. I begged a friend and broke the Star Oath of my own free will to give up my humanity. The power I gained has kept me safe, but it's too much for me." My friend dropped his gaze and seemed to struggle to find words. "If...*if* it consumes me once I accomplish what I set out to do—if I break the Star Oath and lose my way again..." Mana created a flicker of light, revealing Zel's face on the verge of tears. "Please, I'm begging you, stop me! I can't ask anyone else."

I couldn't take any more. "Zel!" I cried, running to my late best friend. "You didn't lose your way! You saved your sister's soul! And that's not all! Idris's summoning magic would have overwhelmed Lydia and me if you hadn't—"



"Zel!"

I opened my eyes, screaming my friend's name. Wiping the tears from my cheeks, I sat up amid the flickering emerald mana lights. Countless black and white petals drifted through the air, and the Great Tree sapling gave off a dim glow of its own.

This place really does remind me of the sanctuary in the city of water.

My hands touched something soft, and I realized what I'd been lying on.

"A literal bed of flowers?" I wondered aloud. Had the angel made it for me?

I made to get out of it, but restraining fingers closed on my left sleeve.

"Allen, no."

I turned to find the black-and-white angel sitting on her heels amid the flowers, eyes narrowed in annoyance while her four wings flapped slowly.

She knows my name?!

I looked around, striving not to let my surprise show. The blue-rose sword,

Stella's staff, and Silver Bloom were floating above the bed. The spell formula had nothing in common with existing magic. I couldn't decipher it. A barrier of thorns also enclosed the whole area. I could still barely sense Lydia's mana, but it felt fainter than before. Thorns had covered the ruined mausoleum as well. I couldn't even see the Stellar Spears anymore. The sanctification must have kept spreading while I slept. Unless I got out soon—

The angel reached out and poked my cheek with her index finger. "You need to sleep. Stella and I want to keep watching you."

"Huh?" I blinked in surprise. She knew Stella too?

A gasp escaped the angel, and her black-and-white gaze wavered slightly. A few snowflakes fluttered down. Abruptly, she stood and flapped her wings, flying to one of the remaining stone columns and hiding behind it. Her long black-and-white hair swayed.

I rose and scratched my head. "Did I do something to offend?"

"She's just being bashful. She'll come down soon enough," a new voice interjected from behind me.

I failed to suppress a startled yelp. A little girl in white with long crimson hair had taken up a seat on the edge of the bed, kicking her legs idly. She looked a lot like Atra and Lia, but neither of them ever wore such a malicious expression. If anything, she reminded me more of the pictures of a young Lydia that Anna and the other maids had secretly shown me in the southern capital, although Lydia had forced an awkward smile for the video orb.

Once I was done avoiding reality, I checked the ring on my right hand. As expected, it was blazing with red light.

Oh dear.

"Um..."

"Don't bother asking," the girl said. "I'm Linaria. Linaria Etherheart, the one and only Twin Heavens. Did you forget what the greatest knight *and* mage in history looks like? I seem to recall giving you valuable hints more than once."

Silence.

“What? Do you have a problem with this form? And I don’t look like your lady—*she* looks like *me*!”

“I...I wish you wouldn’t read my mind,” I managed.

“Humph. You’re no fun.” The child slid off the bed and started walking through the flowers. Black and white petals, azure snowflakes—her fiery plumes overwhelmed them all.

I couldn’t let appearances mislead me; I was looking at the undisputed pinnacle of mortal achievement. Five hundred years ago, this witch had taken on the world alone and nearly won.

Linaria touched the Great Tree sapling. “I shouldn’t have to spell it out for you, but this place is already sacred ground. Life and death waver here. My turning up still poses a whole host of problems, though.”

I felt warmth on my shoulders. The angel had taken shelter behind my back. Was she wary of Linaria?

The child shot us a glance, then stood proud and declared, “Of course, I *am* a genius. I can bend a law or two without breaking a sweat. So, I thought I’d grace a little boy locked up by a makeshift angel with a few words of wisdom. Show some gratitude!”

I looked at the annoyed angel behind my back. She could solve all of my problems just by letting me go, but the array of binding spells she was secretly deploying told me that wasn’t in the cards. I obediently turned back to the great sorceress.

“I have so many questions I’m dying to ask you,” I said, “but for now, would you tell me what will become of Stella?”

The angel drew away from me with a start, then returned, moaning under her breath, and clutched my shirt. Before I could get a look at her face, Linaria heaved an exaggerated sigh.

“After all this, you’re still more worried about your saint than yourself? You’ll get yourself stabbed one of these days.”

“That doesn’t sound pleasant, but I can’t help how I am,” I replied.

The girl suddenly vanished, then resumed her seat on the bed. Her teleportation spells beggared belief.

“Boooring!” Linaria whined while I stood in awe of the gulf between us. “You *must* have other questions. What was the Sealed Archive, anyway? Why cast that unsightly curse—ten-day fever, was it? What is this place for? Something like that. Give me *something* to sink my teeth into! You have a duty to entertain me!”

“No, I do not. And we don’t have the time for that, do we? I can more or less guess those answers. Now, what will become of her?”

“You really are no fun.” Linaria pursed her lips and swept her crimson hair aside. Her piercing gaze transfixed the black-and-white angel. “The other girl will vanish soon, once the Wainwrights’ sacred sword runs out of mana. She must have spent a hundred years sealed away. Even after becoming an eight-winged devil, she held it back almost completely through sheer force of will, and she still has the power to act through a borrowed body. She must have had awfully strong feelings she wanted to share with someone. The angelic spell formulae will linger, so your saint should have no trouble using ice magic once she’s freed. Oh, and the briars are protecting this place because the kindhearted World Tree sapling wants them to. It must have taken pity on her.”

“The World Tree—the Great Tree—willed it?” I echoed, meeting the angel’s gaze over my shoulder. Her bemused smile showed no hint of grief or sorrow.

“Strong feelings,” huh?

Linaria glared at the blue-rose sword floating overhead. I couldn’t begin to fathom the depths of her mana. “The founder of the Wainwright dynasty did what no mortal should and broke the Star Oath, trying to cobble together makeshift angels to fulfill her own ambitions. She built altars for the ritual all over the world in utmost secrecy. I heard the occasional rumor about them back when I was alive, although the stories were so fantastical that no one gave them any credence.”

Blazing feathers burned off the flowers and brambles covering the ruined mausoleum. The power she commanded took my breath away.

The angel pouted and shot me a look that said, “Talk back to her!”

To a witch, as high-handed as she is mighty? I think not.

“But now I’ve seen that girl and this place—a ritual altar from the age of gods—I have no choice but to believe it,” the great sorceress pronounced coldly, ignoring our exchange. “Tree wardens must have built the system that siphons and stores power from the World Tree sapling.”

I recalled part of the testament from Ellie’s father, Remire Walker. “The Sealed Archive died a hundred years ago,” he had written. The archive had secretly served as a spigot. Which made this place...

Linaria incinerated the whirling flower petals, making no effort to hide her loathing. “Someone spent a long—an unbelievably long—time gathering enough mana here to influence the world itself. The sacred sword doubles as both a vessel and a control mechanism. They wanted to create an artificial angel. I don’t know about my house, but someone from the main line—an Etherfield—might have taken a hand in it. I hear some of them went frantic over that kind of research. Of course,” she added, almost to herself, “none of them were up to doing much in my day.”

“Please tell me, Linaria,” I said, making mental notes of her every word, “who are the tree wardens and the Great Tree wardens?”

Alice had called Ellie a “scion of the tree wardens,” while Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe had called her a “Great Tree warden.” I lacked the knowledge to make sense of either.

“The former descended from World Tree worshippers,” the great sorceress answered breezily, flapping her hand. “The latter guarded the World Tree’s saplings all over the world after it fell. They were both practically extinct five hundred years ago. If they have any living descendants in *your* day, it’s an honest-to-god miracle.”

“Hm...”

Could Ellie possibly have inherited blood from both of—?

While I brooded, the angel with Stella’s face darted in front of me, black-and-white hair swaying, and approached on all fours.

“Allen.”

“Huh? Ah!” I yelped as her wings enveloped me and our foreheads touched. The next thing I knew, light filled my vision.



First, a familiar room flowed into me. It looked like part of the eastern capital’s Great Tree. Before me, I saw a finely dressed man I took for a Wainwright king along with beastfolk chieftains.

A wolf-clan boy moved a game piece. His silver-gray hair shone beautifully.

“Your turn, Your Royal Highness,” he said.

“I...I know that!” a girl snapped, miffed but evidently glad of his attention.

She looked up—and the Royal Academy’s Great Tree leapt at me, towering amid a brand-new campus. I passed through front gates bare of ivy and glimpsed long blonde hair at the edges of my vision. A wolf-clan youth sat waiting, reading a book. I felt my heart leap. He gave a little wave, and the girl walked toward him with a spring in her step.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

“These are your memories?” I asked.

The angel gave a short nod and closed her eyes again. Was there something she wanted me to know?

A field of flowers filled my view next. The girl seemed to be sitting at her ease on a picnic blanket. Below us stood the old Cathedral of the Holy Spirit from which I’d looked out at the nighttime cityscape with Stella. We were in the hills west of the royal capital.

“Your Royal Highness, thank you for waiting,” a young wolf-clan man called, panting for breath.

“I wasn’t waiting. And don’t call me ‘Highness’!” Carina Wainwright replied, turning her face away. Even so, her words conveyed unbridled joy.

The young man, now dressed as a sorcerer, waved as he walked up. Silver-gray hair and beast ears peeked out from under his beret. A bushy tail trailed behind him.

D-Don't tell me a Wainwright princess was dating a wolf-clan man?!

Carina broke into a run toward the young man, not caring when her own beret tumbled off...and the scene faded to black.

Dark, freezing rain pelted down, although there was no sky. Before a mausoleum spiderwebbed with cracks, amid a profusion of flowers, the young man stood armored in lightning with a crackling spear in each hand. He faced an azure-haired and -eyed young sorcerer holding a tall staff.

It's the altar under the palace—the same place we are now.

Fresh blood trickled from the young man's lips. His skin looked pale, and he seemed emaciated.

“———! Run!” Carina screamed through the icy gale winds, despite the chains of ice binding her arms, legs, and four wings. Through her eyes, I saw the blue-rose sword sticking up at an angle.

The young man glanced at her, and his lips moved. “Don't worry. I'll save you.”

His lightning gained even greater force as he leaned forward.

“You live up to your reputation, ‘Silver Wolf.’” Despite his appearance, the sorcerer's laughter sounded cracked and hoarse. “No one else realized my primary objective: transforming the princess into an angel when she turned to the sword's miracles to save you. But unfortunately for you, my ailing champion...” He floated off the ground. Amid a growing ice storm, his azure eyes flashed cold disdain. **“I have no business with an incomplete angel! I came for your life! Die, champion! Die for my ambition!”**

The only beastfolk in history to win the rank of viscount launched into a furious battle with the enigmatic sorcerer. He fell, watering the flowers with his blood as he took an icy blade aimed at Carina. An emaciated, bloodstained hand stretched toward the princess but failed to reach. An earsplitting scream burst from the young woman.

Darkness shrouded all as the chained wings turned inky black. I could hear nothing but the sorcerer's derisive cackle and the girl's wailing.

At length, a platinum-blond Hero and a spear-wielding Duchess Letty, unable to hide her grief, trod the jet-black flowers. The barrier enclosing us looked like Lord Rodde's handiwork. The eight-winged devil left off her prayers to draw the bloodied sacred sword thrust in the ground before her. Then...



I quietly opened my eyes and wiped the angel's tears with a finger.

So, that's what happened. I see now.

"Even racked by disease, he—Silver Wolf—fought to save you to the bitter end, didn't he, Carina?"

The girl nodded over and over again, hiding her face.

Love between a princess and a wolf-clan champion, and the intrigue and tragedy in its shadow. No wonder the picture books leave out the end of their story.

Suddenly, I recalled a page of history. A century ago, after quelling a disturbance in the royal capital, the Emerald Gale and the Shooting Star Brigade had marched on the southern isles. That made one more question to ask Duchess Letty.

"I wanted to take my time reading you the riot act." Linaria clicked her tongue. "Look alive!"

Her shout pulled me back to the present. The black-and-white angel spread her four wings and took flight, seizing the blue-rose sword and Stella's staff as she conjured more Radiant Shields than I could count. Silver Bloom remained airborne.

No sooner had I scrambled out of bed than the child latched on to my back and pointed to the thorny barrier. "Be careful," she said. "Mana reserves don't guarantee anything on the battlefield."

"I know what you mean, but— What?"

The wall of thorns that had proven so indomitable before rustled and, to my shock, began to withdraw of its own accord. While I gaped, a tall man appeared in the newly opened gap. He wore a hooded white robe edged in dark green: a

church apostle.

*He must have come for Carina! But how did he break the Great Tree's barrier?
No, more importantly—*

Before I could finish casting a spell, the man swayed and put on a burst of speed. The shields overhead abruptly changed course and dove toward the man as he charged low to the ground. Carina crossed her sword and staff and started focusing a jaw-dropping quantity of mana.

She'll collapse the whole cavern if I let her activate that!

I deployed botanical spells even as I panicked, hoping to halt the apostle's advance. Then our eyes met. Dark-green streaks shot through his white hair. Thin spectacles—a gift from his sister—covered crimson eyes. I knew this man.

“What?” I gasped, taken completely aback.

“You fool!” Linaria snapped as the apostle ignored me, taking a massive leap to swipe at the angel with his right hand. I glimpsed an old dagger on his belt.

A crimson blade of blood scythed through Radiant Shields and collided with the blue-rose sword. The resulting shock wave sliced through the ceiling. Branches and brambles fell to the ground along with white and black feathers and a shower of blood.

Carina's profoundly white and black eyes narrowed, and she cast the unidentifiable ice spells she'd been preparing on her staff all at once. Spiraling frozen blades hurtled toward the apostle as he braced his legs on the ceiling.

A mighty crash and a blast of glacial air followed. I dodged a rain of stones and plant debris while I tried to figure out what had happened. Cloudy sky peeked through a massive diagonal hole.

“Sh-She bored all the way through to the surface?!” I exclaimed.

The combatants locked blades in midair, unleashing a frenzy of destruction. That couldn't last long. Carina shot me a silent glance for just a moment before flying into the hole. The apostle unfurled wings of blood and followed.

Vampiric power?!

“Stella!” I shouted, preparing a spell.

“Above you!” Linaria snapped a warning as a boulder larger than most buildings plummeted toward me.

If that hits me, I’m done for.

Fiery plumes and violet sparks danced through the air. An enchanted blade cleaved stone like butter while a lightning spear bored through it.

“Ellie!” a girlish voice shouted.

“Yes, Lady Tina!” Branches caught the remaining fragments, and the advanced spell Imperial Ice Blizzard froze them solid.

A group of girls landed in front of me, all shouting angrily.

“Don’t go getting yourself in danger while I’m not around! Do you *want* me to slice you up?!”

“Allen, once this matter is settled, we’re going to have words.”

“I...I’m here too, Allen, sir!”

“Lydia, Caren, Ellie!” I exclaimed. “I can’t believe you got here so—”

A grip seized my left hand.

“Sir! We’re here to save you!” Lady Tina Howard took the words out of my mouth. Girls really did grow up so fast.



“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate it. But Stella is—”

“We know, Allen,” Caren interjected, putting her beret back on.

“Big Sis Stella,” Ellie murmured, anxiously clasping her hands.

Lydia shot me a look that said, “Allen, are you okay?” while she went on burning rocks and branches. I supposed I couldn’t hide how shaken I was from my partner.

I made a mistake. I must have. He died. My best friend died. They probably defiled the great people entombed in the catacombs to—

“Sir! Let’s go after Stella!” Tina urged, gripping her rod tight. “By the way, who’s that girl on your ba—?”

“Teleport us, Anko! This place won’t hold much longer!” Lydia interrupted.

The mew of a magnificent black cat sounded from afar, and an intricate circular array appeared, pulsing with dark light.

If—if—that apostle is him, I’ll—

A sudden blast of air struck my forehead.

“That hurt, Linaria,” I grumbled.

To my companions’ surprise, the girl was fading. That massive hole must have weakened the sanctuary, I supposed.

“As usual, you worry too much and spend too much time in your own head!” she snapped. Then a little hand came to rest on my head.

Tina, Ellie, and Caren gasped in shock.

“Well, now,” Lydia murmured slowly as a frightening smile spread across her face.

“I only had Atra when I died,” the great sorceress continued unperturbed. “The final key who called himself ‘Shooting Star’ died heroically as well. The Wainwright princess had only a single ally, and watching her savior, the brave wolf she loved, die sent her over the edge, until she nearly became an eight-winged devil with the power to destroy the world. Isolation can easily drag even the strongest people into darkness.”

The pulse of the magic circle sped up, and flames began to engulf Linaria's body.

"But *you're* not alone. Never forget that. I'm one of the greatest geniuses to ever live, even including the age of the gods. Maybe not one of the top five, but I at least make the top ten. So when I give you advice, sit up and pay attention. Now go clobber those clods with no respect for the dead!"

The dead? Of course. I knew it.

I bowed low. "I can't thank you enough."

"Receptive. I like that." Linaria giggled, then broke into a singsong amid her flames. "Calm, stagnation, and then collapse. How the next age will turn out is still up in the air." Looking at Lydia holding one of my arms and Tina, the other, the great Twin Heavens swept back her crimson hair and gave me one last wink. "But relax—*your* choices will only sway the fate of mortal civilization, at the most. Give my best to Atra and her friends. Till we meet again, Allen of the wolf clan."



"Hm? Oh dear."

Anko's magic had teleported us to the Royal Academy—directly above the Great Tree. Tina and Ellie clutched each other and screamed their lungs out. I cast a levitation spell on them with a wave of my left hand.

Lydia and Caren propelled themselves with wind magic, alighting on an orange roof ahead of us and taking up guard positions. I felt glad to have a lady—and a sister—I could count on.

"My sincerest thanks, Anko," I murmured and got a meow in response. The fabulous feline, it seemed, had gone to assist Cheryl.

The palace alarm bells were ringing out across the whole city. Multiple military strategic barriers surrounded the Great Tree, while court sorcerers stood by in case of a massive rampage. They seemed to have finished evacuating the students.

The angel and apostle were locked in fierce aerial combat, moving ever

westward. Their every clash shook the air, scattering waves of mana, and the Great Tree's branches and vines writhed in sympathy. Its sanctifying power had made magical tracking difficult in the extreme, but I thought battles were already breaking out in places.

We'd better get moving.

"Tina, Ellie, get ready to hurl spells at a moment's notice," I instructed as we landed on the roof. "The capital is already a battlefield."

"Yes, sir!" My students nodded emphatically, eyes ablaze with fighting spirit.

I was just reflecting happily on their growth when a strong wind blew off Caren's beret. I reached out and caught it, wrapping a steadying arm around my sister's waist as she threatened to fall.

"Whoa there, Caren! Are you all right? And is that Atra with you?"

"Yes," she answered bashfully, hiding her mouth with her beret as her ears and tail swished.

My pupils' hands shot up.

"Objection!"

"M-Ms. Caren would have been fine on her own."

My sister handed me back her beret, eyes silently appealing to me to put it on her head while she brushed the dust from her skirt. Why was she wearing a duplicate of Lily's outfit, albeit in a different color?

"You overestimate me," she said. "And I beg your pardon, but I'm exercising my legitimate sisterly rights."

I set the beret on Caren's head while the younger girls fumed. Her tail wagged happily.

Lydia, who had been watching events on the ground, approached. "An interrogation is in order," she cut in, "but all that can wait. Commit it to memory."

"We will!" Tina and Ellie chorused.

"Yes, ma'am," Caren responded.

Once this battle is over, I'd better run like my life depends on it.

"Are communication orbs still useless?" I asked my partner, leaving Caren to take charge of the younger girls. I wouldn't mention the apostle I'd encountered.

"Yes. We're making do conjuring messenger birds," Lydia replied. She didn't press the issue.

"Where's Cheryl?" I said, thanking her with my eyes. As awkward as she could be, I'd never met a kinder girl.

"Over there." Lydia pointed a slender finger at a spot near the palace: the Sealed Archive. A moment later, a clump of torn-up brambles sailed high into the air. Our old classmate seemed to be letting loose with a will.

"Ellie, use botanical magic to conjure birds and send them all across the city, as quickly as you can," I said, raising my hand slightly and projecting a spell formula. "I'll supply the formula. I made it as close to the Great Tree as I could, so you shouldn't run into any interference."

"Y-Yessir!" The young maid traced my formula with her fingers, muttering, "Mr. Allen's magic." Then she spread her arms and cast two spells.

Tina's eyes widened.

"Well now," Lydia murmured.

"Not half bad," Caren added as part of the roof transformed into a flock of birds and launched into swift flight. Ellie had compounded stunningly silent botanical magic with a wind spell.

"Well done," I said, moved by the fruits of her steady effort. "You'll surpass me any day now."

"N-No! I c-couldn't possibly— Ah."

"Whoa there!" I cried as I caught Ellie. She had clenched her hands and shaken her head with such force that she'd nearly fallen.

It's been quite a while, hasn't it?

"Be careful. It's easy to lose your footing here." I smiled at the shrinking

young maid.

“Th-Thank you, sir.” Ellie let out a musical giggle.

Lydia roughly thrust her sword into the roof and crossed her arms. “Tiny.”

“My suspicions just deepened,” Tina answered sullenly.

“We’d better remember to put them on the docket,” Caren concurred.

Exasperated by all three of them, I whispered to Ellie Walker, “I swear I’ll get to the bottom of what happened to your parents. Please don’t worry on that account.”

In my arms, Ellie lowered her eyes and wiped at the beginnings of tears. “Yes,” she whispered back. “Yessir.”

I gave her head a tender pat and moved to the edge of the roof. The fighting in the city below had grown even fiercer. I reflected that I’d better get in touch with Cheryl soon as I glimpsed a group of moving figures out of the corner of my eye.

“So, Stella and her opponent head for the western hills just as the Great Tree’s rampage spreads,” I murmured, as if to myself.

“Without communication orbs, the damage could get out of control. And—” Lydia casually pulled her sword free. “We have company.”

A moment later, white-robed spellcasters surrounded us, gripping swords, spears, and staves. They ran the gamut of age and sex, but they all had piercing stares, and none of them tried to hide their animosity toward me.

“Wh-Who are you?!” Tina demanded while Ellie babbled, although they both took combat stances.

“Are you after Allen?” Caren added, equally on edge.

Lydia didn’t bother shifting her posture, but she already had multiple Firebirds ready to strike. The scarlet-haired noblewoman had no patience for anything that meant me harm.

One after another, the court sorcerers raised their own weapons and started weaving spells. This didn’t look good. I moved to stop the girls before—

“Wait.”

Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner beat me to it, rising to the roof on a wind spell a little behind his subordinates.

“All of you, return to your posts and concentrate on maintaining the barriers around the Great Tree,” the old sorcerer commanded, carrying a timeworn spell-spear and wearing light armor over his white robe. “These people are our allies.”

The court sorcerers withdrew with a reluctant chorus of “Yes, sir.” Gerhard spared them a glance before fixing me with a glare. Then he turned his back.

“I thought we were finally rid of you this time,” he spat without feeling, “but I see you survived.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” I quipped, dispelling the fire, ice, lightning, and wind that the silent girls were giving off.

“Ever since I became a sorcerer, I’ve longed for one thing: a realm without champions,” the old man said.

Here stood the ringleader of the conservative aristocrats at court, the defender of the former Crown Prince John and the disinherited Gerard. He had maintained his political power despite the Algren rebellion. And he had once barred my path to a court sorcerer appointment. What would he tell me?

Gerhard removed his monocle. “Shooting Star, the Emerald Gale, the Silver Wolf—all the legends who have left their mark on our kingdom’s history. Their feats of arms never lose their luster. The likes of me could never hope to hold a candle to them, even if I strove my whole life long. They saved the realm—perhaps even the world. But even legends die eventually. We can’t count on their protection forever.”

This unsparing self-judgment, coming from the head court sorcerer—assuredly one of the kingdom’s finest—gave us pause. Adamant resolve flickered in Gerhard’s eyes.

“How can those of us born to nobility justify our own existence if we cannot safeguard those we are sworn to when the time comes? Shooting Star and the Silver Wolf might have been beastfolk, but they were still youths we had a duty

to protect. Would you have me endure more such humiliations? I may lack genius, but I like to think I'm not fool enough to have forgotten shame, and I don't intend to change that. Failing to impart that understanding to Gerard remains the greatest stain on my career."

A crash resounded through the city below us. The apostle's sinister blades of blood cleaved a rift in the clouds.

Gerhard replaced his monocle and glared daggers at me. "Much as it pains me to admit it—and I assure you, it pains me *much*—we appear to require your assistance once again. Restraining the Great Tree here will tax our powers to the limit."

"You may depend on me. Lady Stella Howard is my student," I replied, making a point to reveal the angel's identity. I might never reach an understanding with this old man, but I could trust in his aristocratic pride.

"Altars of angel creation aren't confined to the royal capital," the old sorcerer said calmly. "According to oral tradition, there were seven in all. Those in this city, the southern capital, the city of water, and the heart of the southern isles have perished. Of the remainder, I know only one's location: the Lalannoy Republic."

Our jaws dropped. No wonder that place had reminded me of the sanctuary in the city of water.

Well now. The Lalannoy Republic.

Gerhard strode to the edge of the roof and stopped. "I have questions for Lords Crom and Gardner as well," he said coldly with his back turned. "I have no intention of extending you an invitation when I do, but I will draw up a report in due time." Without waiting for a response, he cast a wind spell and leapt down.

Lydia rested her sword on her shoulder, looking cross. "He certainly hasn't gotten any more pleasant."

"But he's not our enemy," I replied. "That's good enough."

Noblesse oblige, huh?

Shaking off the thought, I turned back to the girls seething on my behalf.

“Let’s make sure we’re all on the same page while we wait for those birds to get in position.”

“Let’s!” Tina, Ellie, and Caren answered.

While alarm bells clanged, I projected a detailed map of the royal capital. “The black-and-white angel you just saw is controlling Stella’s body through the medium of the sacred sword,” I said, adding dots of light and arrows to indicate movement. “Her name is Carina Wainwright. A hundred years ago, she succumbed and became an eight-winged devil. The then Hero and Duchess Letty sealed her beneath the palace. As for the tall man swinging blades of blood...” I hesitated. Squeezing the watch in my pocket helped to calm my nerves. “He must be a church apostle. Lydia, is the professor taking action?”

“He’s in the catacombs with Anna and Graham, fighting a sorcerer named Aster who calls himself the ‘prime apostle,’” she replied. “Remember the man who cast Falling Star at us in the city of water? That’s him.”

Caren stiffened. She had fought the second-ranked apostle, Io Lockfield, on two occasions, and she knew how great a threat he represented. It wasn’t hard to imagine his superior being a match for an army single-handedly. At the same time, something seemed off.

“That’s a significant fighting force. Still—”

“It’s half measures,” Tina finished for me. “No matter how formidable those apostles are with spells and swordplay, this is still the royal capital. They need more forces if they want to be sure of accomplishing their goals here. That doesn’t seem like thorough planning to me. Could we be dealing with an impulsive decision?”

Caren and Ellie looked impressed.

“Well, that was an easy one,” Lydia muttered.

“I concur,” I said, touching the girl genius’s rod. “I bet you’ll surpass me before long yourself. Would you allow me to stay on as your tutor?”

“I wouldn’t let you quit if you begged me to, sir!” Tina blushed, hands over her heart as she prepared for a declaration. “I’ll never leave your si—”

“A-Allen, sir, the birds are in position!” Ellie shouted, pointing at the sky.

“Ellieeee?”

“Oh, L-Lady Tina, you’re sc-scaring meee!”

I chuckled at the mistress and maid’s antics.

If only Lynne were here too.

“The Great Tree is currently pseudo-sanctifying the city.” I resumed my explanation, raising my right hand high. “We can’t use orbs of any kind. The apostles might have risked infiltrating because they foresaw this turn of events. Our forces can’t bring their concerted might to bear if they lack information. However...” I silently cast an unnamed octo-elemental spell. A faint glow covered the birds soaring high above and began spreading outward. Tina’s, Ellie’s, and Caren’s eyes widened, while Lydia scowled. “That doesn’t apply to magic masked as the Great Tree’s.”

Taking out a communication orb, I called to a former classmate who could turn the tide of battle. “How’s the reception, Cheryl?”

A few beats of silence. Then...

“Allen! Are you all right?! You’re not hurt, are you?!”

Princess Cheryl Wainwright’s voice hit my ears alongside the roar of destruction. The sound could have been clearer, but her unadulterated relief came through loud and clear. Judging by the background noise, she seemed to have joined the royal guard to fight back the rampaging Great Tree.

“I’m fine, thanks to your help,” I replied. “Sorry I worried you. Now—”

“‘Sorry’ isn’t good enough! Not by a long shot! Once this is over, I insist you clear a full week of your schedule for—”

“Oh, be quiet, Princess Schemer. Allen was in the middle of talking,” Lydia cut in, making a point to use my orb. Our shoulders touched, sharing body heat.

“L-Lydia, trade places with me this instant!” Cheryl shouted. “Did you forget you’re supposed to be my bodyguard?!”

“A princess who can tear up the Great Tree’s vines with her bare hands

doesn't *need* bodyguards. Not in the royal capital, anyway."

Cheryl ground her teeth in frustration. Their banter hadn't changed since our student days. I wasn't alone.

"Your Royal Highness," I said, "I wish to offer an opinion as your personal investigator."

Tina, Ellie, and Caren gasped. I could hear Cheryl's surprise over the orb. Lydia must have picked up on something, because she started walking.

"You may speak, Allen of the wolf clan," the princess answered softly, backed by the noise of battle.

Lydia stopped at the edge of the roof and squinted. She seemed to be looking at the central square.

"Two apostles from the Church of the Holy Spirit have infiltrated the royal capital," I said. "They aim to seize the angel that manifested in Lady Stella Howard's body. The Great Tree's brambles and guardian beasts are wreaking havoc all over the city. The situation appears chaotic at first glance, but with a smooth exchange of information between commanders, it will prove more than manageable. If Your Royal Highness were to coordinate communication through the birds we've deployed using light ma—"

"Will this do, Allen?"

Not only the audio quality but my ability to sense mana suddenly skyrocketed. Cheryl must have come up with formulae of her own and deployed them before I could share those I'd devised for the purpose. She had paired the scale required to cover the palace and everything around it with the precision necessary to allow others' magic through—a nearly superhuman feat.

"You never cease to amaze, Cheryl," I told my former pupil, half in exasperation.

"If I amaze you, you amaze me even more! You taught me the fundamentals of magic back at the Royal Academy, remember?!"

Cheryl's companion, the white wolf Chiffon, added a *woof* of agreement. Hopefully, this would settle—

“A summoning spell’s about to activate,” Lydia murmured, first to catch on.

A potent burst of mana radiated from the central square as a black flower blossomed in the sky. I recognized the design from the Sealed Archive—and from the *Apocrypha of the Great Moon*. Armored figures large as hills emerged from its petals, armed with greatswords, pikes, and massive battle-axes. Their landing set off shock waves.

Tina and Ellie reinforced their barriers.

“Sir!”

“We’ll protect you!”

“It can’t be...” Caren gaped. Unless I missed my guess, we were looking at...

“Colossal spell-soldiers like the one Lydia defeated at Avasiek,” I said. “Eight in all.”

“Not a problem,” Lydia replied. “Look.”

A scarlet flash ran past a spell-soldier that had landed in the east, and an inferno engulfed the colossus. Another pike wielder returned to ash with a gaping hole in its gut. The Bloodstained Lady, Duchess Lisa Leinster, and the Smiling Lady, Under-duchess Fiane Leinster, had laid two spell-soldiers low in the blink of an eye.

The royal guard’s valiant cries burst from my communication orb.

“Hands off, you lot! I claim this prey!”

“Then, so do I.”

“Owain! Not you too, Richard!”

“Don’t let the officers show you up!”

“Once I make a name for myself, I can finally marry my childhood sweethea—”

“Shut that fool’s mouth!”

None of them sounded the least bit daunted.

In the meantime, a barrage of black spears and supreme spells of fire, ice, and

wind demolished two sword-wielding spell-soldiers that had touched down near the palace. Duchess Letty and the three dukes' handiwork, no doubt.

Seeing four of the eight go down in next to no time, Tina and Ellie jumped for joy.

"Wow!"

"B-But they were so *big*."

"See to the wounded. Let no one die!" Cheryl commanded her bodyguards with dignity. To me, she said, "You're going after Stella, aren't you? I'll take care of things here! I learned this magic from you—I can control communications in a city this size without breaking a sweat. But first..."

I had a sinking feeling. While, via the birds, I probed the mana of the massive spell-soldiers facing us across the central square, the princess made a demand every bit as challenging as I'd feared:

"Say a few words to everyone! In my name, of course."

I knew it.

"Er, I'm not really cut out for it, and in terms of status—"

"Sir!" Tina interrupted my fumble for excuses.

"I think you ought to accept," Ellie added.

"Allen, we're running out of time!" Caren pressed.

I turned to Lydia, the only one of the group who might have vetoed the proposal, but she mercilessly shook her head. "Get it over with already. And remember to introduce yourself as 'Lydia Leinster's servant' when—"

"Now!" Tina, Ellie, and Caren stood on tiptoe to clamp Lydia's mouth shut.

I let out a long sigh, then raised the orb and began to speak.



My dear mother, Duchess Lisa Leinster, bisected a colossal spell-soldier with an offhanded slash before it could even touch the ground and incinerated it before Resurrection could take effect. Ash scattered, dancing on the breeze.

“Amazing,” I gasped, gripping my sword tight as I stood dumbfounded in the center of a street whose residents had already evacuated. Although another spell-soldier dropped toward me...

“Watch closely, Linnie dear.”

My petite Aunt Fia stopped watching from the sidelines and sprang nimbly forward, weaving around the greatsword sweeping down at her.

“There!”

She raised her flame-shrouded rapier and shot skyward, piercing layers of magical defenses and the gargantuan suit of armor with ease before landing on the roof of a nearby building. My dear mother’s Firebird activated after a slight delay, scoring a direct hit on the second spell-soldier and instantly incinerating the colossus.

With a sigh of relief, I gazed up at the massive black flower in the sky—the same teleportation circle that the church had employed at the Fortress of Seven Towers and in the city of water. The spread of sanctifying power was still rendering our communication orbs useless, so I only had a vague grasp of the situation. Hurrying down from the eastern hills when I’d spotted two beings flying over the city had proven to be the right call, but what on earth had I run into the middle of?

“Up.” My dear mother pointed to the tallest building nearby, then climbed it with a single kick off the wall. I followed in a hurry.

The royal capital had become a battlefield. The Great Tree’s thorny creepers broke through roadways and buildings, while guardian beasts resembling sea-green griffins flocked above. Flashes from spells of every element and the faint din of battle told me that combat had begun. And ranged around the central square, six more enormous spell-soldiers—

I let out a cry. A greatsword wielder near the palace had just fallen still, impaled on a dusky-emerald spear. The second went down in a barrage of fire, ice, and wind. The air—and the building—trembled as it fell.

“Duchess Letty and the three dukes,” Aunt Fia piped up from her landing spot behind me.

Meanwhile, battle seemed to have broken out near the Sealed Archive. I had no worries for Princess Cheryl—Her Royal Highness could hold her own against my dear sister—but I hoped my dear brother Richard, Lily, and the maids would be safe.

“Lynne, Fia and I will see to things here,” my dear mother, resplendent in her scarlet war garb, declared while I fretted, gesturing to the nearby buildings with her left hand. “The children will help.”

There stood Teto Tijerina, unmistakable with her black witch hat and wooden staff, along with several more young men and women: my dear brother and sister’s former classmates from the professor’s laboratory. I saw humans, elves, demisprites, and dragonfolk. But whatever their race, each wore a sorcerer’s robe much like my dear brother’s, and each carried a weapon.

“We all talked it over and agreed to match—with Lydia’s permission, of course!” a bashful Teto had explained one night in the southern capital. “Please don’t tell Allen.”

“Run ahead to the central fountain,” my dear mother commanded. “The professor’s force is locked in combat. Their opponent seems skilled, but the Dagger of Fiery Serpents could give them an ace in the hole.”

Permission to take independent action!

“Yes, ma’am!” I nodded vigorously as a tingle of joy ran up my spine. “Please take care too, dear mother, Aunt Fi— Ah!”

“We will,” my dear mother said while Aunt Fia caught me in a hug.

“You’re simply too precious, Lynnie!” she crowed as I found my head buried in her ample bosom and subject to all manner of caresses.

D-Doesn’t she realize the professor’s students are watching?!

I managed to slip free, not without effort, and saluted them both. “I’ll be up ahead. Till we meet again!”

“Yes.”

“Take care.”

I crossed to the neighboring roof with a combination of strength

enhancement and wind magic. Leaping again, I looked back over my shoulder in midair and saw the pair deep in somber conversation.

I pressed on toward the square, moving from rooftop to rooftop. The Great Tree's brambles and beasts had done less to impede my progress than I'd anticipated. I could afford to pick up my pace without—

"All of you listening to your communication orbs while you fight," a calm voice burst from my orb, "this is Allen of the wolf clan, Her Royal Highness Princess Cheryl Wainwright's personal investigator."

"Dear brother?!" I landed on a yellow roof with a yelp of surprise. Relief flooded my heart, but I resumed moving. Much as I would have loved to talk to him, I couldn't risk confusing communications.

For now, I need to hurry!

"Her Royal Highness's and Miss Ellie Walker's magic has restored communication and video orbs. Please use them to obtain any information you need."

I slipped a video orb out of my breast pocket to check. Blue and red dots blinked on a detailed map of the royal capital.

"D-Do these mark friendly and enemy positions?!" I gaped as I hurtled through the air, slicing through a branch that burst through a building to get at me. "And I recognize this spell formula!"

It seemed one of my best friends had followed in Lily's footsteps and become the second person to use my dear brother's formulae without modification. Admiration and envy coiled together in my chest, a tangled mix of emotions.

Glancing at the map, I saw three blue dots in the central square and one red one. Was that the professor's group and their opponent?

"The court sorcerers are restraining the Great Tree itself. Keep calm and act accordingly. The spell-soldiers are a ploy to harass our forces and buy time. So long as we can exchange information, we have the upper hand."

My dear brother's dispassionate voice explained the state of the battle.

Nothing in his speech seemed calculated to rouse our spirits, yet for some reason I couldn't explain, I felt unbeatable. My cousin must have felt the same, because I heard her humming merrily over my communication orb—earning a sharp “Lily! We're in combat!” from Romy.

What are we going to do with that maid?

I dashed up the wall of an old tower. The square lay just ahead!

“Blame for driving the Great Tree berserk and summoning the massive spell-soldiers seems to lie with two apostles. We have no time to go into details now, but let me add just one.”

“What?” I gasped. My skin broke out in gooseflesh. I couldn't suppress a shudder. Was my dear brother truly furious? His words chilled me far more than even Tina's Blizzard Wolf could.

“We believe the apostles broke into the royal catacombs and dishonored the dead who repose there.”

Through my orb, I caught stunned silences from fighters all across the city.

“The likes of them deserve no quarter. I know what my teacher would say under these circumstances.” My dear brother drew in his breath and declared, **“Don't let them leave the city alive!”**

The orb itself shook. My dear brother's words had stoked us all to fury—and to overpowering sadness. I felt my chest tighten.

“I ask you to pay close attention to any word from Her Royal Highness going forward. And please, be safe. This concludes my message.”

I closed my eyes, gave the wall a mighty kick, and bounded over the old tower.

Landing in the wreckage of the square, I found two men and one woman facing down a delicately built, azure-haired young sorcerer holding an antique staff—one of the church's apostles, no doubt.

The petite, chestnut-haired woman standing atop an overturned flagstone to my right—my house's head maid, Anna—glanced my way and signaled that I

couldn't be too careful. I spotted dirt stains on her uniform.

What a formidable foe!

"What do you say we end this game of cat and mouse, Prime Apostle Aster?" the professor spat. He stood in the center of the square, seven black cubes hovering about him.

The slender man perched on the remains of a fountain made no reply.

The leader of the apostles!

The aging gentleman with perfect posture to my left—the Howards' head butler, Graham Walker—adjusted his white gloves.

Aster struck the former fountain with the butt of his staff, and a hard *crack* rang out. Spell formulae crawled across the entire square—until the black cubes shot out in seven different directions, dispelling mana, and the spell blinked out of existence. I couldn't begin to comprehend it.

"I won't tolerate any more summoning to buy time, and I won't let you escape," the professor said in glacial tones while I gaped. "My students give me nightmares. I shudder to think what they'll do if I let someone who hurt Allen slip through my fingers. Now, you can start by telling me your house name."

Aster's lips curled in a way that made my skin crawl. He waved his staff, conjuring countless ice mirrors—only for rays of light so thin I almost missed them to shatter every last one. While the ice shards let off a last, fleeting gleam, Anna raised an index finger to her lips.

"I've already seen that escape trick," she chirped. At first glance, she seemed her usual self, except her smile didn't extend to her eyes.

"No land on the continent can boast many ice sorcerers," Ellie's grandfather, Graham "the Abyss" Walker, said softly. "Yet this one favors summoning spells, and he responds to our attacks like a knight with long years of experience fighting in the vanguard."

The elderly gentleman in spotless livery vanished. He hadn't moved too quickly for the eye to follow, nor had he teleported. He had simply, truly disappeared. I was still trying to make sense of what had happened when Aster

suddenly let out a grunt and went flying, his magical defenses in tatters. Then I saw Graham, who had just delivered a kick shrouded in flickering black mana to his side.

“A moment too slow,” the butler murmured.

What did he just do?

Despite the enigmatic attack, the prime apostle steadied himself in midair and spun. Eight tiny flowers started blooming rapidly around him.

A teleportation spell!

I hurried to loose the spell I’d been weaving. But just then...

“You won’t be going anywhere.”

A furious tornado hammered the apostle, forcibly dismantling his magic. An elven sorcerer armed with a tall staff descended from the sky and landed elegantly beside the professor.

“You’re late, old one!” the latter snapped.

Lord Rodde, the Archmage and headmaster of the Royal Academy, scowled. “Pipe down, young one. I just came from arguing His Majesty down and packing him into the palace. He’d gotten it into his royal head to take command of Letty and the dukes and charge into the fray himself. Show some sympathy.”

A wind began to whirl, gathering around the headmaster’s staff. Its color: an ominous dusky crimson. His eyes had an icy look I’d never seen in them before. “So, this is one of those ‘apostles’?” he asked the professor. “He certainly picked a musty old title to trot out.”

Anna sent me a signal with her fingers: “We’ll finish this.”

Understood!

I shifted my grip on my sword and went on weaving spells. I would only get one chance.

“The ‘Blood-Wind,’ I presume,” the prime apostle said curtly.

“I discarded that name,” the headmaster retorted as his staff scythed through the air.

The apostle thrust his own staff forward at the same moment. Crimson cyclones crashed against an azure barrier.

“A spell of this caliber will never pierce my def—”

“I don’t aim to pierce anything.” The cyclones’ force kept growing. With the air of a laborer at his trade, the headmaster murmured, “I aim to grind you to nothing.”

The apostle gave up on sustaining his barrier and fell back a considerable distance. He raised a succession of defensive ice walls, but they crumbled one by one as the wind bored neat holes through them. I knew the headmaster was on our side, but the onslaught still sent chills down my spine.

“I hear you cast the great spell Falling Star in the city of water. Still...” The headmaster rubbed his eyes and conjured a second timeworn staff in his right hand. The number of cyclones doubled. Their destruction knew no bounds. “Your might can hardly exceed the Dark Lord’s. We’ve nothing to fear.”

“Pardon the intrusion!” Anna’s “strings” sliced through the barrage of ice spears cast to intercept the cyclones.

The azure-haired apostle swiftly drew a dagger from his belt and conjured a little shield of gray light which halted both cyclones and strings.

I know that dagger! It has remnants of Radiant Shield in it!

At once, the professor’s cubes spun at dizzying speeds, slamming a blinding flash into the shield. Shock showed on Aster’s face as the gray shield began to crumble.

W-Was that my dear brother’s magical interference?!

The professor—the man foreigners feared as “the kingdom’s most dangerous sorcerer”—let out a derisive chuckle. “It doesn’t pay to underestimate our Allen. Analysis is where he truly shines, and he doesn’t hesitate to share his discoveries. Did you imagine his mentor wouldn’t have read his reports?”

“Truly a man to be feared. I would never trust him with my granddaughter otherwise,” Graham agreed, driving his fist into the apostle’s face and launching the sorcerer high into the air.

I couldn't ask for a better opening!

I drew my dagger in one smooth motion, activating my dear brother's handcrafted control spell. Flames raced through the air.

"See what you make of this!" I roared as my fire serpent bore down on the defenseless Aster in midair. Yet even as its jaws tore off his left arm, he still wrenched himself upright and twisted clear before landing on the ground.

For a moment, I was speechless. Then a murmured "What?" escaped my lips, confusion overpowering the joy of landing the blow. The severed arm I'd glimpsed in my serpent's jaws was made of ice.

"Old one," said the professor.

"Indeed," the headmaster responded.

"A facsimile, I believe," Graham added, sharing their recognition.

Anna remained silent.

Aster shook his sleeveless left arm, and even his torn robe was good as new. "Good grief," he muttered in annoyance as we eyed him warily. "The Angel of Death and the Blood-Wind really are too much. I can see how you survived a clash with the Dark Lord and managed to slay a dark general in that grisly war. And I gave the rumors of the kingdom's most dangerous sorcerer too little credence. As for the Abyss... What are you? Are you really human?"

His last question sounded genuine. The Abyss's reputation had reached the south, but now that I saw him in action, I couldn't begin to understand how he moved either.

The prime apostle turned his emotionless azure gaze on me. "You're improving too, Leinster girl. Even accounting for the Dagger of the Fire Wyrms, I must say I'm impressed. Ages pass, yet your house always finds a way to make itself a nuisance."

Aster banished his staff and swept his azure hair back out of his eyes. Shards of ice began to swirl around the whole square. "Add to you the Bloodstained Lady, the Smiling Lady, the three dukes, and the unfaltering loyalty of the Leinster maids, not to mention the other warriors who will flock to the scene.

This me doesn't stand a chance."

Did he plan to surrender? But not even would-be apostles had made things that easy. Every one we'd fought had thrown away his life without hesitation, screaming "For the Saint and the Holy Spirit!" all the while. Which meant...

The prime apostle looked up, his handsome face crawling with hideous spell formulae. "I've more than accomplished my goal," he boomed. "To thank you for the entertainment, allow me to introduce myself. I am Aster *Etherfield*, the Sage! This repulsive mortal world will end at my hand!"

The words had barely left his mouth before his whole body shone dark azure, swelled...and burst. Flakes of ice obscured my view, although I could sense the professor's cubes and the headmaster enclosing us in a potent barrier.

"Did he blow himself up?!" I cried, defending with my sword and dagger.

"No!" Anna shouted.

Strangely, the icy gusts turned back on themselves, gathering into a single point.

C-Could it be?

My vision soon recovered as a grotesque monstrosity emerged before us. Eight serpentine heads stretched from a gargantuan, tortoise-like trunk. A forest of icy spines lined its back. We were faced with the millennium-old monster we had slain alongside my dear brother in the eastern capital—the Stinging Sea. Only it didn't loom as large as it had then, and dark-azure ice composed its bulk.

"Don't tell me he worked a summoning spell into his own body?!" I exclaimed, recalling the would-be apostles at Avasiek, who had sacrificed themselves to become one with a massive spell-soldier. What was the church's "Saint" thinking?

The professor surveyed the monsters and grimaced. "He got away. Or maybe he meant to stall us? Old one, may I leave this in your hands?"

"Young one, courtesy would suggest you volunteer yourself," the headmaster quipped back despite the pressing danger.

Graham appeared totally unmoved, while Anna kept up her usual cheer. The information on my video orb updated. My dear brother's group had chased the angel and apostle to the cathedral in the western hills.

"I take it we can't join my dear brother until this thing goes down?" I said, crossing my blades as an eerie light shone from the Stinging Sea's back. "Then I won't show mercy! He's going to link mana with *me* next! I'll make sure of it!"

"I thought *I* was next," my cousin piped up over the communication orb.

"Allow me to accompany you!" the head maid chimed in.

I, meanwhile, charged at full tilt.



"Sir! There they are!" Tina shouted, pointing ahead from her seat in Ellie's arms.

Pursuing the angel and apostle, still locked in fierce combat, had brought us to the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit that towered atop the high ground on the capital's western outskirts. Slashes and spells marred the beautiful spires and walls of the oldest monumental structure in the city except for the palace—supposedly at least five centuries old. I didn't see any pilgrims. Perhaps they'd evacuated. And that wasn't all.

"Th-The cathedral," Ellie gasped, setting her mistress down.

"Are the plants *swallowing* it?" Tina murmured.

Caren, our vanguard, added to her armor of lightning and took a defensive stance.

"Above us! Scatter!" Lydia shouted, and we lunged in all directions before anyone had time to speculate.

Wind spears rained down from above, riddling the ground we'd just been standing on with holes. I had jumped back. Now I looked at what had just emerged and groaned. I would know those long necks, beaks, and talons anywhere, likewise the vast wings and incomparable mana. Only these were made of brambles. A flock of creatures modeled on sea-green griffins glared down at us with undisguised animosity.

“The Great Tree’s own guardians.”

“Yes,” Lydia agreed, readying her sword. “And to make matters worse—”

“No like!” Atra shouted from within Caren. She sounded awfully upset.

The Great Tree’s boughs burst through the stained glass of the cathedral, then stopped, turning jet black.

“I’d say the apostle’s taken control of them,” Lydia finished, drawing a stunned gasp from the younger girls.

How can this apostle control the Great Tree? That barrier of thorns underground didn’t give him any trouble either. Don’t tell me...

A Firebird took shape without warning and barreled into the swarm, incinerating the great part of it. “I’ll stop them here,” Lydia said. “Go ahead without me!”

Tina reeled. “D-Did Lydia just *choose* to separate from Mr. Allen?!”

“Y-Yes’m!” Ellie bowed.

“Be careful,” Caren added, materializing her cross-tipped lightning spear as she dashed ahead of us into the cathedral.

Amid a shower of blazing feathers, I gazed at the young woman I’d been watching since our Royal Academy entrance exam in profile. “Lydia,” I called to her, holding in a tangled mess of emotions, “about the apostle inside the cathedral—”

“I can’t be sure,” the noblewoman answered before I could finish my question, leaning her head against my chest. “He’s taller, and he seems different. But you’ll be fine. You will.” She moved my hand to her right ring finger as her words took on the quality of prayer. “You have me, and I have you. Whatever happens, never forget that.”

I guess I can’t get cold feet now, not after I made a girl tell me something like that. It still scares me, but I need to press forward.

Among the flames, I gave her a light squeeze and gently stroked her head. “I won’t,” I promised. “See you soon. Let’s pick out your new ribbon once this is over.”

“I’ll wait, but I won’t hold my breath. Ribbons are what I’ll slice you into—then burn—if you cheat on me.”

We shared a smile, then separated. With a wind spell on top of the magic enhancing my body, I caught up to my sister in a flash.

“Caren, take the lead,” I said.

“On it!”

A flash of lightning took off. The heads of four long-necked guardians poised to pounce on us went flying, and a second strike cleared the writhing brambles between us and the cathedral. The closed and barred doors stood exposed. I cast a spell to make us an opening, but it evaporated.

“Botanical magic doesn’t work?” I murmured slowly.

“Allen, sir, allow me!” Ellie sprang forward, planting her hands on the paving stones as soon as she landed. The ground shook and spouted untainted mana as branches flooded toward the cathedral, pulverizing the inky brambles as they tried to regrow and smashing the metal doors off their hinges.

“I...I did it!” Ellie clenched her fists and flushed with excitement, turning to me with eyes like some adorable woodland critter.

So, this is what a Great Tree warden and a scion of the tree wardens can do. I’d better get serious, or she really will surpass me. Not that I’d mind too terribly if she did.

“Well done,” I said. “Caren, I’ll take the lead from—”

“I’ll go in first. Ellie, make us a path of plants. Tina, support us as needed!” my sister barked and immediately strode off.

“Yes, ma’am!” Ellie and Tina chorused, following her lead.

They’re fighting on the upper levels, if mana and noise are anything to go by. We’d better hurry.

I struggled to find any vestige of the face the cathedral had presented when I’d visited it with Stella. The massive sacred insignia on the back wall lay broken and twisted. Every majestic stained glass window had shattered. Even the

skylights depicting the eight great spells had been blasted out, and not one of the hundreds of wooden pews remained unscathed. The lack of stragglers trapped inside seemed the only silver lining.

“There!” Caren thrust her spear upward, having already cleared the dark brambles from our vicinity. Her armor of lightning grew ever more intense as her eyes turned a deeper violet.

She was pointing to a faux tree trunk formed from intertwined branches and vines. It probably served as a foothold for—

A violent crash and a piercing scream filled the cathedral. I spotted the apostle and the black-and-white angel crossing blades in its uppermost reaches. Carina’s mana had waned considerably. The four wings she’d boasted underground had dwindled to two, and the black and white of her hair seemed to be giving way to its original bluish platinum.

So, Linaria was right.

She launched desperate lances of light from the floating Silver Bloom, but slashes made short work of every one. Although the apostle was a swordsman, a frontline fighter, he possessed potent magical defenses as well.

Carina finally succumbed to his onslaught. The blue-rose sword and Stella’s staff flew from her hands and embedded themselves in a wall. She still tried to resist, but multiple magic circles appeared in midair, spilling thorny black vines. They slammed her into a wall as well, holding her fast.

The platinum-haired girl let out a cry. Then her eyes closed, and she went limp. Had she returned to Stella? Fresh blood dripped as power left Silver Bloom as well, and it plummeted earthward.

“Stella!” Caren screamed, running up branches with desperate abandon.

“Oh no you don’t!” Tina swung her rod in a wide arc, launching the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances at the apostle. I silently cast a spell of my own.

The tall apostle turned from the follow-up blow he’d been poised to deliver, dodging the incoming spears of ice. Still, some clipped his sleeve, grazing him and driving him back. I had placed perception-blocking wards on a select few.

I snatched the falling Silver Bloom out of the air and gave it a twirl. “Ellie!”

“Yessir!” The young maid activated a massive botanical spell. The Great Tree’s branches glowed emerald green and regained their sacred aura, lifting us straight to the upper reaches of the cathedral.

“You won’t lay another finger on her!” Caren screamed, racing ahead of us in a rage. Her lightning took on the shape of a howling wolf as she held out her spear and charged the apostle.

The crimson eyes beneath his hood regarded her coldly. Then he raised his left hand. My sister gasped as her frantic thrust crashed against a dully gleaming flower of water. Its disturbingly viscous liquid swiftly dissipated the raging lightning, leaving Caren standing statue still. The apostle raised his bloody blade to strike.

“Caren!” I shouted, hastily casting Divine Light Shot—nearly the fastest of all spells—from his blind spot. Tina and Ellie joined in, firing a rapid volley of Divine Ice Spears and Divine Wind Shots. The apostle blocked every spell not with his blade but with the flower, as if he’d seen them coming, and fell back.

He noticed the restraining ice vines I mixed in on first sight?

I upgraded my assessment of this threat to the highest possible level while Caren retreated to join us. “Thanks,” she mumbled, frustrated, never taking her eyes off the apostle. My sister had battered down the front gate of the “impregnable” Fortress of Seven Towers, and the water-flower shield had stopped her full power. I recognized this spell. I’d seen it at the Nitti archive in the city of water, embedded in a one-armed old steward who had betrayed us to the church for revenge.

“A shield of...water?” Tina shivered, clutching her staff.

“Wh-What a spell.” Ellie shuddered with her, fists clenching.

“Scraps of Radiant Shield blended with Watery Grave, the great spell they stole from the city of water,” I said. “Under the circumstances, I’d venture a guess that they threw in Resurrection for good measure—although it seems there’s more to the trick than that.”

Blackened branches still writhed occasionally, despite Ellie suppressing them.

The faint traces of mana leaking from the apostle's heart belonged to the Great Tree.

Behind us, Stella still hung pale-faced, limp, and unconscious, trickles of blood from both wrists staining her torn white dress. She needed help soon.

Ellie multi-cast Imperial Storm Tornado. "Allen, sir, Lady Tina!" she shouted as sudden gusts whipped through the cathedral. "Ms. Caren and I will hold him off! Please go rescue Big Sis Stella! Please!"

"Ellie?!" Tina cried.

"But—"

"Allen, don't waste your student's resolve," Caren interrupted me. Silver-gray hair blowing in the wind, she conjured a fresh lightning spear and gave me an impish wink as she sank into a runner's crouch. "Sisters protect brothers. That's the way of the world. Now, take good care of my best friend."

The apostle's blade of blood cleaved through a tornado. Caren was on him in a flash, sweeping down with her cross-tipped spear, then immediately lashing out with a short lightning spear in her left hand.

Atra and Tina shouted at almost the same moment.

"Allen, leave it to us!"

"Sir!"

I gritted my teeth and made my choice.

"Ellie, take this!" I shouted, tossing the young maid a vial from my pocket. She caught it in her left hand, and her eyes went wide. "That's the second one. You have what it takes to master it now."

"Yessir!" Ellie swiftly undid the stopper and sprinkled sacred sanctuary water on the branches at her feet.

The whole cathedral shook. The apostle had shown himself more nimble than Caren, even with her armor of lightning. Now he plastered himself against the ceiling, light gleaming off the slim spectacles beneath his hood.

A pride of lions born of the Great Tree pounced, and Ellie herself coated her

fists in emerald light. Water from the sanctuary massively amplified its user's mana. Of course, making any "use" of it demanded exceptional magical control, and that wasn't even counting the dangers of touching sacred ground. But Ellie Walker was now up to the task.

"Let's go, Tina," I said, twirling my rod and touching it to the platinum-haired noblewoman's.

"Yes, sir!"

I returned her nod, and we sprinted along the branches to Stella's rescue.

Shudder.

A terrible chill ran up my spine. Stella's limp body twitched, and eight hazy wings began to take shape behind her. The black of them, reminiscent of a starless night, seemed to reject all light. I recalled the incident a hundred years before. Despair had turned an angel into a devil. And now that Carina had lost her power, there was no one to stand in the way.

Dark, thorny vines sprouted from all sides, steadily blocking Stella from view. If we hoped to break through—

"I'll pry them open!" Tina stopped in her tracks and thrust out her rod. Freezing winds whipped into a snowstorm, and the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf materialized. With a mighty roar, it charged, freezing and shattering the influx of dark briars as it went.

Silver-snow!

I cast the strongest ice-resistant barrier I could muster, raising Silver Bloom as a shield while I forged on through the blizzard.

"Stella!" I roared the sleeping noblewoman's name at the top of my lungs. Blood ran down my cheek and froze there.

"Wake up, Stella!" I shouted again, bearing up against the tremendous pressure of the mana she radiated.



The briars under my feet turned from dark to icy. Stella's long platinum hair and eight wings began shifting to black and white. Slowly, she opened her eyes, and her gaze met mine.

"M-Mr. Allen?" Tears ran down Stella's cheeks.

Suddenly, a pitch-black gale kicked up, catching me off guard. The white in her hair and wings started losing ground as darkness seeped into the very air around us.

"I...I was supposed to protect you," I heard her sob like a little child. "But I couldn't. You never raised a hand against me, but I struck at you with my sword, with my spells, and I...I...!"

She didn't lack for brains. As the future Duchess Howard, as president of the Royal Academy student council, as a friend to Caren and Felicia and an elder sister to Tina and Ellie, she possessed unshakable good sense. And unless I chose my next words carefully, she might succumb to devilhood.

"Allen, there come times in life when you have to make a big choice," my best friend had told me on the field of his final battle. "There's no getting out of it. I messed up mine—messed it up about as bad as anyone can. That's how I lost Chloé. But you'll do all right, buddy. You're my one and only partner! If you find someone crying, lend 'em a helping hand for me."

Zel, I don't know why you thought I'd "do all right." Still, I can't believe I ended up being there to help the younger sister in the eastern capital, and now the older sister here. What are the odds?

I drew two vials from my pocket: water and flowers from the sanctuary, my last of both. I opened them without hesitation, and the dark drew back as their sacred aura surged. I beheld a fraction of the flower dragon's and the World Tree's power. I doubted I could maintain it for long. Still, I had a girl sobbing for help right in front of me. Not reaching out to help her would mean betraying the devotion Zel had shown when he'd risked his life to save Lydia and me from Idris's grand summoning. I'd save her if it was the last thing I did!

Despite the excruciating pain, I cast a healing spell on the girl sobbing into her hands. Curing the wounds that had shed so much of her blood, I smiled and

called simply:

“Give me your hand!”

Stella shivered and looked up. Tears streaming down her face, she pressed her right hand to her heart and held out her left to me. I could hardly bear to look at her bloodstained sleeves, but I took her hand and pulled her close.

A world of white sprawled out around us.

In my arms, all darkness vanished from Stella’s hair and wings. I couldn’t see them, but Atra, Lia, and Frigid Crane were singing. With every note, the air grew more sacred, and white flowers began to sprout at my feet. The blue-rose sword and a faintly glowing staff stood crossed, half buried in the blossoming field.

Stella stepped away from me for a moment, red-eyed from weeping, but soon wrapped herself around my left arm. “M-Mr. Allen,” she ventured, “excuse me, but wh-where are we?”

I wiped her tears with my handkerchief—until blonde hair adorned with blue flowers swept past the corner of my eye.

“Give us a little space, would you?”

A startled yelp escaped me as I found myself yanked away from an equally surprised Stella. I turned, leaning on Silver Bloom for balance, and found a young woman in white hugging Stella and stroking her head. Her expression was kindness itself. There, with a floral clip in the gleaming golden locks that fell to her waist, stood the angel and devil of a century past: Carina Wainwright.

“It’s all right. Remember, you’re not alone,” she was saying. “Thank you for lending me your body. I’m truly sorry for causing you such anxiety. I couldn’t suppress my malice.” Her voice sank, and she whispered something into Stella’s ear. (“I know you must have hated turning your sword on your love.”)

Stella’s cheeks blushed bright apple red. “N-No, that is, I— Oooh!” She curled up, hiding herself with her eight white wings. What on earth had Carina said to her?

Carina brought her hands behind her back and practically danced a few steps

forward. She laid a hand on the staff in the ground, and the white flowers started gathering into the orb atop it.

“Tell me, Mr. Softie the Wolf and Key,” she said, voice trembling for all her lighthearted tone, “would you mind doing me just one favor?”

“No, of course not.”

“Thank you. You see...” An unsullied wind drowned out the princess’s words as she handed me her hair ornament.

At last, Stella unfurled her wings and stood, clutching a sea-green griffin feather to her chest. She seemed to have calmed down.

“I swear by my parents, the Great Tree, and my own name,” I replied, tucking the hair clip away for safekeeping.

The flowers began shedding their petals. The blue-rose sword and the staff, the orb atop which had taken the form of a flower, floated up and then to Stella’s side.

“It looks like time’s up.” The young woman smiled, holding down her blonde locks as a wistful look entered her eyes. “Do you think he’ll find me? Even after I became an angel and a devil?”

Neither Stella nor I could find any answer to the plaintive question, directed mostly at Carina herself.

Oaths are meant to be kept—oaths to the dead most of all.

While the world of white crumbled, Carina clasped the platinum-haired noblewoman by the hand. “You’re ever so kind, Ms. Saint, and just a little too earnest. May the moon and stars bless the path you walk. I’ll give you a helping hand, so don’t let a little thing like fate keep you down!”

The world of white collapsed.

“Sir! Stella!” Tina shouted to us, hands clenched on her rod.

“It’s no use! I can’t hold it back!” Ellie wailed. Caren only grunted, but they were both grimacing in pain.

An ice storm, violet lightning, and fierce winds all battered against a massive

orb of crimson water, but they were losing ground. The thing gave me chills.

“Mr. Allen, leave this to me.” Stella stepped away from me and floated lightly off the ground, blue-rose sword and staff in hand. Light gleamed off her platinum hair and spotless white wings. Her eyes flashed as she invoked strange angelic magic.

The tall apostle’s spell had been on the verge of overwhelming Tina, Ellie, and Caren, but now it gave way, smashing directly into the ceiling. The cathedral’s collapse proceeded apace, and debris rained down on the web of branches that formed our footholds.

“Don’t worry, Tina, Ellie, Caren.” Stella smiled at her little sisters and her best friend. “I’m fine now! Thank you!”

“Great!”

“Oh, thank goodness!”

“Felicia and I are going to have some choice words for you when we get back!”

Even as the girls talked, the apostle poised to resume his attack—then swiveled his skeletal wings of blood to intercept a slash from Lydia as she dropped through a hole in the ceiling. Fire and blood collided, spreading devastation in every direction.

“Well now.” The Lady of the Sword flashed her canines in a hungry-wolf grin, then slammed a mass of fiery plumes into the apostle, knocking him to a lower branch. Tina, Ellie, and Caren, who had found themselves outmatched three-to-one, bit their lips in frustration.

Lydia paid them no mind, swiveling as sharply as if she’d kicked off thin air, and landed at my side. While I wasn’t looking, Anko had taken up a perch on Caren’s shoulder.

The Lady of the Sword glanced at Stella and flashed her a tender smile before delivering a terse report: “I took care of everything outside.”

“Understood,” I replied, feeling the girls’ eyes on me as I looked down at the tall apostle in the torn robe.

“I have one question,” I said, voice and body trembling. “Who are you?”

I got no answer. The apostle, his white hair streaked with green, hefted his sanguine blade in both hands and slashed at empty space. To the younger girls’ shock, it spawned one viscous bubble of dark water after another. Countless blood-blades materialized alongside them, and all launched themselves at us. I doubted any ordinary magic could fend off this assault.

Pale-azure light filled the space, purifying it.

“Leave defense to me!” Stella shouted, eight wings flapping as she arrayed her Azure Shields, blocking out the whole barrage.

“We’re up, Caren!” Lydia called, launching herself off the branch with a mighty kick.

“I don’t need you to remind me!” Caren snapped—once she got over her surprise.

The tall apostle had let them get close. Now, fiery plumes and violet sparks shredded his hooded outer robe while he weathered the onslaught with jaw-dropping swordplay and sprinted up a wall. No sooner had he leapt than he kicked off the ceiling, hurtling downward. He had his sights set on...me!

“You won’t get past me!” Stella’s Azure Shields became fearsome blades of ice in the apostle’s path.

“Not on our watch! Lady Tina!” Ellie shouted.

Tina let out a war cry as the maid’s Imperial Storm Tornado amplified her Blizzard Wolf. The spells caught the man in midair, and then...

All three girls gasped as his bloody blade suddenly branched and forked, cleaving through every one of their spells. Then the apostle landed on my branch. The cathedral swayed, straining under its own weight—that last attack must have dealt a mortal blow to one of its pillars. Part of the man’s robe had torn away. An upper section.

“I don’t believe it,” I murmured. “That was one of *his* techniques.” I couldn’t stop myself from shaking. The spells I’d been weaving unraveled.

Tina, Ellie, and Caren gave me puzzled looks.

“Sir?”

“Allen, sir?”

“Allen?”

Lydia and Stella kept a worried silence.

He was taller. His face looked older too—the features of a twenty-something, not a sixteen-year-old. His hair hadn’t been this color, and he’d never looked at me with such cold eyes. The unmistakable auras of Watery Grave and of the Great Tree spewed from where this man’s heart should be, and formulae for Radiant Shield and Resurrection crawled along his cheeks.

This isn’t even magic anymore. It’s a curse, making a dead man walk.

I braced myself and called my dear, departed best friend’s name.

“Zel?”

His silence cut me to the quick. I nearly crumpled, unable to support my own weight. Then scarlet hair flitted past my eyes, and its owner caught me on her chest.

“Stella, Caren, Ellie!” Lydia barked. “Keep that brainless dolt busy! We won’t need long!”

“Very well.”

“Fine.”

“Yes’m!”

All three girls moved to confront Zel, buying time for my sake. That left only me, Lydia, and Tina, fingers tightening nervously on her rod. On the back of her right hand, the mark of Frigid Crane flashed bright and fast.

The scarlet-haired beauty stuck her sword in a branch and pressed both of my hands over her heart. “Link us!” she shouted. “I know Atra must be saying the same thing.”

I knew that. Really, I did. Zelbert Régnier was a dhampir as well as a peerless sorcerer-swordsman. We couldn’t hope to best him unless we gave our all and more. And yet...

Tears trickled down my cheeks. “Lydia, keeping...keeping my promise to him means more to me than...”

Lydia sighed. “Some ‘magician.’ You really are a handful.”

Tina let out a loud gasp.

Lydia had pulled me into her tight embrace. “Remember what I told you? You’ll be fine. I’m here. I won’t leave you to bear the burden alone, and I won’t let you take it all on yourself either. Never forget: I’m *your* sword and no one else’s. Your failings are mine too. For you, I’d turn the whole world against me without a second thought.”

My partner knew how to motivate me better than anyone else on earth, and she had no scruples about pressing her advantage.

“I wouldn’t dare put that to the test,” I teased the smiling beauty. “Still, you’re acting awfully nice today.”

“I beg your pardon? When have I ever been anything less than sweetness itself?”

We shared a chuckle, bumped foreheads...and forged a deep mana link. Eight wings of pale fire sprouted from Lydia’s back. She looked reluctant as I drew my forehead away. Then she pulled her sword free before ostentatiously pointing her right index finger at her forehead. Blazing Qilin’s mark shone clearer and more vividly than before.

“I kept you back because Lia warned me we might need you,” she taunted Tina, whose lips flapped wordlessly. “But it looks like I worried for nothing, so stop standing there and go back up the other three. Go on. Shoo.”

“What?! O-Of all the mean—”

“Tina, give me your hand,” I interrupted.

“Y-Yes, sir.” The young noblewoman’s expression did an about-face from fury to diffidence as she reached out to me.

Our mana linked.

Two pale-azure wings appeared on the girl’s back, and flowers of ice enhanced her rod. Frigid Crane seemed furious, although I didn’t know why.

Tina raised her hand to her own chest and giggled bashfully while that lock of her hair swayed from side to side.

We exchanged nods and swiftly prepared for combat.

“I assume you know what to do, Tiny?!” Lydia called.

“My name is Tina!” the young noblewoman snapped, undoing the ribbon in her platinum hair and tying it on her rod before touching her weapon to Lydia’s enchanted blade. Fiery plumes and ice blossoms intermingled while I prepared a secret weapon of my own.

I watched as Zel tore through black lions with his bare hands, closing in on Ellie. Caren and Stella covered her retreat with javelins of lightning, ice, and light. The cathedral’s demolition proceeded apace. Total collapse couldn’t be far off.

Zel sprang back and unfurled those bloody wings he’d so loathed, assuming a forward-leaning stance in midair. His hand gripped the dagger at his belt. His crimson eyes saw only me. Then, at last, he spoke.

“I’ve come for you, defective key!”

Crimson mana to rival Alicia’s gathered in his dagger. He drew it in a flash, and the short blade swelled to massive proportions, slicing through everything in its reach.

Ellie and Caren had retreated behind the rest of us, their clothes stained with blood and dirt. Now they cried out in alarm.

“A *giant* blood blade?!”

“Allen!”

Flapping her eight white wings, blue-rose sword and staff in hand, Stella barred the way.

“I *will* keep Mr. Allen safe!” she roared as her Azure Shields came together, building something like a flower in the path of the sanguine sword stroke. The collision scattered icy shards to freeze ceiling, walls, and branches alike. Spattered blood spawned curses only for purification to overtake them.

“Ellie!” my sister shouted.

“Yes’m!” the young maid responded, and the pair raised walls of lightning and wind to support Stella.

“Don’t count us out!” Lydia yelled.

“Because here we come!” Tina chimed in as they raised their crossed sword and rod high, then swung them down. The biggest Firebird and Blizzard Wolf I’d yet seen from either of them tore into the blood blade from both sides.

Amid the whirling torrents of mana, four girls turned their heads and called my name.

“Sir!”

“Allen!”

“Allen, sir!”

“Allen!”

I rose into the air to match Zel’s height. “At least...” I yelled as I brought Silver Bloom crashing down, charged with all the mana I could control. **“At least I’ll use the skills you taught me!”**

The blade on the enchanted rod’s tip grew to colossal size. A white flash shot through the cathedral from top to bottom. Just before it engulfed him, my best friend moved his lips slightly.

“Not bad, partner.”

A massive jolt. A great blast of wind. Debris robbed me of sight as I cast a levitation spell and dropped back onto a battered branch. Stella gasped for breath nearby. The others seemed safe as well.

“So, storming the Wainwrights’ capital and leaving with an angel proved too much to hope for. Some *do* speak of this city in the same breath as the Dark Lord’s stronghold at Dracul.” A dispassionate voice floated down to us. “Four wings, and impure, at that? I suppose we can’t hope for much from a dead altar.”

We all gave a start, myself included. A wind spell from Ellie cleared our view, and I looked up to see a slender man in a hooded robe trimmed with azure, an antique staff in hand. I’d heard his name via orb: Prime Apostle Aster Etherfield,

the Sage. He had Zel bound in icy chains, and the azure eyes under his hood fixed on me.

“My masterpiece here might surpass Alicia,” he said. “I didn’t expect you to fend him off, even if he does still need tuning. No wonder the Saint takes such an interest in you. Well done, new-minted Shooting Star. I look forward to seeing you again at the next altar. Show me how far your flailing can take you.”

A magic circle modeled on an eight-petaled flower took shape.

“Not so—”

At almost the same moment, Stella staggered, the blue-rose sword slipped from her fingers, and her wings vanished. She fell, plummeting toward the floor. My levitation spells refused to activate—interference from the flower, I presumed.

If I don’t go after Zel now, I’ll never get him back.

I wrestled with myself for a moment. Then I leapt and caught the unconscious Stella in midair. My eyes met Zel’s.

“Yes!” he yelled. “That’s the spirit! I wouldn’t have my partner any other way!”

My old friend’s praise sent a shiver down my spine. Having fallen clear of the circle’s influence, I cast levitation.

The girls were slinging a furious barrage of spells at our retreating foes, but the Sage’s barrier stopped every one. As my best friend sank into inky darkness, I glimpsed profound regret in the eyes behind his slim spectacles.

“Don’t follow in my footsteps!” he called. “I broke the Star Oath when I should have kept it, and I still failed to keep my love safe! I was a fool! Don’t make the same mistake! Don’t lose sight of what you ought to protect!”

Words failed me. What could I possibly say?

The pair vanished. The flower began to crumble.

“I’ll be waiting in Lalannoy,” a voice whispered in my ear. Wind magic. “Next time, please—*please*—keep the promise you made that night. Sorry I’m always making you trouble, Allen.”

“Zeel!” I screamed, reaching out my left hand, but the circle above me had vanished completely. I stood frozen, right arm wrapped around Stella.

The girls abandoned their assault and leapt down after us. We all needed to get clear of the cathedral before it came crashing down on top of us. Tina, Ellie, and Caren gave me worried looks.

“Sir.”

“Allen, sir.”

“Allen.”

“Mr. Allen.” A newly conscious Stella touched my cheek, adding her groggy voice to the chorus.

Lydia had kept piling on attacks until the bitter end, but soon she approached me too, starting to say something. The stained glass, already full of holes, shattered inward with a resounding crash.

“E-Enemy reinforcements?!” Tina, Ellie, and Caren cried, rushing to intercept. Then their jaws dropped as Princess Cheryl Wainwright emerged from the wreckage in spotless white sorceress’s garb, light gleaming off her golden tresses. Anko rode atop a decidedly apologetic-looking Chiffon.

“Here I am, Allen!” she proclaimed, puffing out her ample chest. “Now, point me at the enemy!”

Lydia gave Cheryl’s head a shove while her flames dispatched the ongoing shower of debris. “Read the room, Princess Bonehead.” She glared, thrusting a reproachful finger at our erstwhile classmate. “I swear, ever since the Royal Academy, you’ve been—”

Gurgle.

All eyes turned to Stella, who whimpered as her cheeks reddened. A lock of her hair shot to attention, and she buried her face in my chest, shaking her head in dismay.

“Don’t lose sight of what you ought to protect.” Good advice, Zel.

I surveyed the girls. Atra launched into an uplifting song.

“Let’s go home,” I said. “I feel as famished as Stella.”

Epilogue

“So, you still have your memories from when you were an angel?” I asked, handing a cup of hot tea to the girl on the enormous sofa. “Here you go, Stella.”

“Yes, although not clearly,” she replied. “Thank you very much, Mr. Allen.”

Stella had let her hair down and wore a cape over a pale-azure nightgown. She seemed at ease—being in her own room at the Howard mansion doubtless helped. A slender silver bracelet floated above a side table, wreathed in a sacred aura.

Three days had passed since the apostles’ raid on the city. I had been impressed into drawing up so many reports and attending so many meetings about the incident that I had only now found time for a real talk with Stella. An absurdly overprotective Duke Walter had played no part in the delay. Perish the thought.

Outside the window, knights of the Scarlet Order assembled in the bright sunshine, invoking earth magic to repair scarred and pitted streets. Similar scenes were no doubt unfolding throughout the royal capital.

Two children in white dresses and a black cat—Atra, Lia, and Anko—lay dozing on the hearth rug with Chiffon for a pillow. Cheryl had left the white wolf “for your protection!” In any case, they made an adorable grouping.

Stella set her teacup on the table and leaned her right shoulder against my left. “She—Carina—never stopped crying. ‘It was up to me to save the man I loved, and I let him die.’ Things like that. It seems like her sweetheart, the Silver Wolf, fell gravely ill, and she used the sacred sword because a strange sorcerer whispered in her ear that it could save him. But she’d also been holding back that vile mana all this time.”

A Wainwright princess and a wolf-clan champion. They had each done their best to protect their beloved. As a result, the champion had lost his life, and the kind girl had turned from angel to devil.

Still, an altar for creating angels. It had taken a thousand years or more to produce eight wings. This time, a mere century or so had yielded four. Could the ten-day-fever outbreak eleven years ago have been a scheme to flood it with fresh mana? Mana taken from...

I shook off the horrible thought and looked Stella in the eye. "I swear I'll keep my last promise to Carina," I said. "She asked me to lay her to rest 'at his side.' And we mustn't forget the cathedral—no one can get in now that it's become another sanctuary, centered on the blue-rose sword. I hope you'll give me the benefit of your advice about both. But for now, you need rest! Especially since your ice-magic difficulties have cleared up."

"N-No! I couldn't possibly lie back and let you do all the work!" Stella waved her hands in protest, and glittering snowflakes filled the air. The strange light-elemental ailment that had troubled her for months was well and truly cured. The force of the first ice spell she'd tried had taken even her breath away, or so I'd heard—something about a glacier overrunning a corner of the duke's estate. Dragons told no lies.

"Everyone got together and banned me from taking an active role for the time being," I admitted sheepishly. "Can you believe they even trotted out an order with His Majesty's signature? Not a public document, but still. Lynne and Lily put me through the wringer too. 'Dear brother, surely it must be my turn next!' 'Allen, would you please explain *why* you took your bracelet off?' I've had quite a time of it."

While I couldn't be happier to see my students and sister improve, I wished I could shield them from Cheryl's and Lydia's bad influence. And I didn't see how the bracelet had been my fault.

"I spoke to my father," Stella murmured, plucking at my sleeve and looking inexplicably pleased with herself. "I asked him to give you a rest."

"What?!"

Chiffon's bushy tail jerked.

"I would have expected this kind of treachery from Felicia, but never *you*," I groaned, putting on a show for the wicked noblewoman.

“I’ll gladly turn to evil if it means I can give you some time off. And Felicia shares your guilt. I heard Howard staff complaining about how much ‘the president and the head clerk overwork themselves.’”

I couldn’t see myself beating these charges, so I pulled out my pocket watch and checked the time. “It’s later than I thought. I need to step out for a bit. But first, this is for you,” I said, handing Stella her azure ribbon wrapped in a handkerchief. I’d missed my chance to return it earlier.

“Why, this is my...”

“I’ll do your hair with it later, if you’ll let me.”

The noblewoman clutched the ribbon to her chest and pursed her lips. Charming white wings flapped behind her. She didn’t seem to have noticed them appear.

“You have a mean streak, Mr. Allen,” she said, “and you’re underhanded too.”

“So I’m told, although I can’t imagine why.”

The girl groaned and threw herself onto a cushion, arms, legs, and wings fidgeting in embarrassment.

I took the bracelet from the side table and slipped it on my right wrist. From the doorway, I called, “Stella.”

Our platinum-haired saint looked up, curious.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” I smiled at her. “I’m looking forward to many more lessons together.”

Stella blushed bright red in record time and hid her mouth with a cushion. “Like I said, underhanded.”

Walking down a broad corridor, I found someone waiting between me and the council chamber I was making for: a skinny girl with sickly pale skin and long chestnut hair. She wore spectacles, and her bangs hid one eye.

“You’re late, Allen!” said Felicia Fosse, Stella and Caren’s other best friend, her arms crossed in indignation. I couldn’t fathom why she had donned a maid uniform, although I assumed the actual maids had put her up to it.

Should I warn her that that pose tends to draw attention to her chest?

“I’m right on time,” I said. “Now, what are we waiting for?”

The bespectacled girl groaned and fell in behind me, oblivious to my inner turmoil. We were on our way to a meeting of the joint business venture that the Ducal Houses of Howard and Leinster had established, of which Felicia and I had stumbled into serving as head clerk and president, respectively.

The architects of the Howard mansion had taken great care to keep out the cold—a sign of its owners’ northern power base. But while I felt no chill, I cast a spell to warm the air around Felicia, just in case. She was hardly the picture of health.

“I heard of your exploits,” I said. “You kept every house’s troops fully supplied despite the short notice. Perhaps I should consider retire—”

“Out of the question,” Felicia snapped from a half pace behind me. “I won’t hear of it. Don’t waste my time with such nonsense.”

“Oh, where did pure, innocent Felicia learn such language?” I lamented theatrically. “I suppose all good things really do come to an end.”

“I blame that on a certain ‘Brain of the Lady of the Sword,’ who performed some impressive exploits of his own in our recent emergency. But perhaps you’d know him better as ‘Shooting Star’ or ‘Emissary of the Water Dragon’?”

Trotting out nicknames and titles? She must be in a foul mood.

“He sounds dreadful,” I replied, giving Felicia a light tap on the forehead. She reeled back at the slightest touch. “If I see him, I’ll tell him that his time would be better spent exhorting Ms. Felicia Fosse to take better care of herself.”

It felt good, sinking back into our old routine. As much as I loved researching magic and ancient secrets, I couldn’t deny that business had its charms. But that only made me more hesitant. Could I really justify getting this fuming girl mixed up in my problems?

“Felicia,” I began after a moment’s indecision, “I’d like to ask a favor of you. The matter is purely personal and concerns my own—”

“Sure,” she answered before I could finish. I faltered as the scrawny girl glared

a challenge up at me. “A message from a western lord, Margrave Solnhofen, arrived last night. He wants to arrange a meeting about the expansion into western markets you were so dead set against the other day. I’m guessing that about-face has something to do with it?”

Felicia Fosse, Allen & Co.’s able head clerk, had demonstrated her brilliance as inspector general of logistics on the southern front during the recent war. She was no battlefield sorceress, but her wizardry with pen and paper crushed her foes nonetheless.

I raised my hands slightly, then took a note from an inner pocket and passed it to her. “If the business expands westward, you’ll need to investigate western markets. I’d like you to collect legends and folklore at the same time, and in utmost secrecy. I’ve jotted down what I’m looking for.”

“I’ll see it gets done.” Felicia neatly folded my note and stowed it carefully in a pocket without stopping to read it.

The elders of the long-lived races—elves, dwarves, dragonfolk, giants, and demisprites—preserved forbidden knowledge lost to the rest of us. If I hoped to compete with the church that had defiled Zel, I’d need to learn it—to see into the darkness of history. I’d made up my mind to do whatever it took. If need be, I would even accept that meeting with the Dark Lord that Duchess Letty had privately alerted me to.

Zel’s parting words pointed to Lalannoy. The republic’s political situation sounded less than stable, but Gardner’s information did place a “living” altar there. Trap or not, I would pay the place a visit before much longer. Still...

“Don’t you want an explanation?” I asked Felicia earnestly. “I could get you mixed up in serious trouble. I haven’t even located Mr. Fosse yet.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I trust you.” The bespectacled girl stuck out her ample chest. Her lacy headband wobbled. “A good head clerk supports her company president. This is the first selfish thing you’ve asked me for. Now brace yourself, because I’ll go all out to make it happen, Mr. Kindhearted Magician with a Mean Streak who hates fighting almost as much as he loves magic and holds himself to an even higher standard than he does the rest of us.”

I stared, taken aback. Then I chuckled. I wasn't alone. I had people I could count on.

"I'll keep that in mind, Ms. Clumsy Head Clerk Maid," I said.

"Wh-Wh-What?! *N-Now* you bring up my outfit?!" Felicia exclaimed, shifting through an array of funny faces worthy of Tina. "And here was poor little me, wondering, 'W-Wait, why isn't he saying anything? Maybe it looks bad on me?'"

"It suits you to a T," I confessed. "Most charming."

The bespectacled girl froze. "Ch-Ch-Charmi—"

"Whoa there!"

She swooned forward with a squeak, and I hurriedly caught her mid-fall. The maids assigned to Allen & Co. peeked out from around the corner where they'd been hiding, all smiles. One moved her lips.

"Absolutely perfect."

I must have been dancing to their tune, I reflected, scooping Felicia up in my arms. As I carried her the rest of the way to the meeting room, I glanced out a window.

I hope the girls really are helping with the reconstruction.



"All done! Victory is mine!" Tina shouted. "Isn't that right, Lynne?"

"Weren't you listening, Miss First Place? The battle isn't over until we fix *that* big hole over there," her peer replied.

"What?!"

"Oh, p-please don't fight!" Ellie pleaded.

"Victory is *mine*!" Her Royal Highness declared, with a smug laugh. "Teto, I don't see your hands moving."

"Princess Cheryl?!" all three young ladies wailed.

Despite my discomfort, my four companions seemed to be having a ball repairing the damage that the ice sculpture of the Stinging Sea had done to the

square.

How did a normal girl like me get stuck working with them? I asked myself as I touched the brim of my witch hat and worked a spell with the butt of my staff. I was still mending nearby walls when a wolf-clan girl cut down a broken mana lamp with her lightning spear and shouted:

“Take this seriously, you three! Or would you rather I tell my brother how you’re acting? And that goes for you too, Your Royal Highness!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” the offenders chorused, snapping to attention.

Caren nodded to me and went to join their work. I couldn’t help noticing how dashing she looked in her Royal Academy uniform and beret. That was Allen’s sister for you.

“It looks like you’ll finish all the major repairs today, the way things are going.”

My former upperclassman’s voice made me jump, although I’d heard it often enough at the university. Yes, the professor had sworn me to silence, but I’d still kept him in the dark about the church stealing Baron Zelbert Régnier’s body, with consequences more disastrous than I’d thought possible. Who could have dreamed that the church would resurrect a fallen champion in the flesh and send him into battle? I had made my tearful apologies to Allen, but still.

Heart pounding, I looked to my fellow students working on repairs nearby for help, but reality proved cruel. I got no response.

Heartless traitors!

Finally, I worked up the courage to speak to the woman with long scarlet hair standing next to me, dressed for a sword fight.

“E-Excuse me, Lydia—”

“Tell me something, Teto,” she casually interrupted me. The Lady of the Sword was angrier than I’d thought possible. “What do you think they wanted to get out of this mess?”

Her voice sounded unnaturally soft. I felt ready to keel over in fright.

“Carrying off an angel?” I ventured, thinking that I deserved a commendation

for managing to answer at all. As for everyone who had run at the first whiff of trouble and now watched us from the roof of a nearby building, I'd never let them live this down. I'd even stop living with Yen, if that was what it took to teach them a lesson.

Lydia watched the young ladies, who had joined some Leinster maids and started another round of competitive repairs, as she passed me a sheet of paper.

I-It can't be.

"Lords Crom and Gardner found dead on the capital's western outskirts," I read. "You don't mean...?"

"The raid on the capital was a diversion," Lydia confirmed. "A separate force assassinated the marquesses and cut off our access to what they knew. The palace thinks that was their real goal. Based on the methods used, the second-ranked apostle, Io Lockfield, probably carried out the attack. The palace is in chaos. They've practically given up on dealing with the new sanctuary that's taken over the cathedral along with the brambles and flowers or the blue-rose sword we've got no way of getting back. And practically speaking, we've lost knowledge that should have been ours."

I recalled the fearsome demisprite sorcerer I'd crossed spells with in the city of water. Only Allen, Lydia, and Anko had stopped my talismans with such ease before.

Lily came into view, dressed in her foreign fashion and deep in conversation with Caren. Maybe Allen's sister shared his knack for making connections.

"Still, we had all our best troops in the city in case something like a hundred years ago happened again. The Sage must have known no two apostles stood much chance of success, but he wanted an angel anyway. The Saint, however..." A gust set Lydia's scarlet hair fluttering. "She's different."

Her certainty rattled me.

Hidden goals. Differences. What separates the Saint from the Sage? What am I missing?

I glimpsed a purgatory in Lydia's eyes so icy cold it made me shiver.

“That woman had the royal capital attacked to rub the defiled Zelbert Régnier in Allen’s face and leave a lasting impression on him. ‘See? Look at me.’ That was her whole reason. Now he’s hurting. He’ll go to Lalannoy soon, even if he knows it’s a trap.”

Words failed me. Lady Lydia Leinster’s face in profile betrayed intense frustration. The mark of the great elemental Blazing Qilin appeared on her right hand.

“Round up the professor’s students and choose bodyguards from among yourselves. I can’t leave for Lalannoy on short notice. My position won’t allow it.” She paused before adding, “Maybe I should have left the country with him after all.”





“So you see, the House of Lockheart is in disarray. I fear we cannot spare the time or manpower to delve into our ancient history, even to please the Emerald Gale. I am truly sorry, Lord Solos Solnhofen.”

The young human woman bowed deeply to me. She wore the uniform of the royal guard with a single-handed sword at her waist, a contrast to my pale-green formal wear.

I savored the warm, gentle breeze blowing in through the windows of my house in the western capital. We enjoyed milder winters here than did the north of the kingdom.

“I understand your situation,” I said calmly without leaving my chair. “Even we elves find history difficult to keep in order. I will report to my former superior in the royal capital myself. You have my gratitude, ‘Lucky’ Valery Lockheart.”

“Th-Thank you, my lord.” The young knight looked bashful, although she had acquitted herself well defending the Great Tree during the battle for the eastern capital. Despite throwing herself into the thick of the fighting throughout, it was said, she had never suffered so much as a scratch.

If her House of Lockheart—supposedly a cadet branch of the Lockfields—couldn’t furnish me with new information, I supposed I would need to consult the demisprite Glenbysidhes and the los of the dragonfolk. Relations between the people of the west had been far from cordial before the War of the Dark Lord, and I couldn’t pretend they had improved since. Heated arguments seemed inevitable. If all else failed... I looked down at the papers I’d received from my erstwhile superior officer.

“Re: business dealings with Allen & Co.”

If all else failed, I would need to call on the new Shooting Star. Duchess Letty and the former chieftains of the Shooting Star Brigade all thought the world of that young man—as did the Dark Lord, who had requested a meeting with him.

“Still,” I said, “I never dreamed the Lockhearts were sheltering a Harclay. I don’t believe His Majesty ever considered punishing the rebels’ children, you

know?”

“I’ll tell my father you said so,” she replied. “I’m glad to see him getting along so well with my little sis— Oh?”

“Dame Valery?”

The young knight ignored my question and pointed out the window into my gardens, which bloomed with flowers even in winter.

“A little girl?” Valery murmured.

Sure enough, there stood a child in midnight-purple foreign garb, carrying a paper parasol—a rarity from eastern lands. She was reaching out her little hand to pluck a flower. I couldn’t see her face, but her flowing platinum hair and snow-white skin lent an air of beauty to her dainty figure.

Who have I seen dressed like that be—? Platinum hair with exotic clothes and a foreign parasol?

“N-No!”

“My lord?”

I burst out into the garden, ignoring the young knight’s cry of surprise. My retainers and Valery’s comrades emerged from the house as well, poised to reprimand the girl.

“**Wait!**” I shouted, throwing myself between them with my arms spread.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Valery asked, coming up behind me.

“All of you, do nothing without my express permission!” I told her and the baffled members of my household. “We stand before one beyond any of us! Remember the old adage: ‘Let he who draws a sword prepare to die by one.’”

“You know some old sayings. I’ve not heard that one in a long while.” The girl turned, chuckling. Her garment was tied with a sash, into which she had slid a single-edged dagger. I still couldn’t see her face, but her unfathomable mana left no room for doubt. Under the parasol, her dainty little left hand shifted slightly.

“Oh, forgive me,” she said. “I thought calling at your front door would cause a

fuss. I left a shadow in the demon capital, so I needn't fear exposure for the moment. *She* caught on, of course."

We all gave a start. A white cat sat on a nearby bench, although I hadn't noticed it arrive.

"The moon and stars have shifted. The dozing age shall end," the girl recited, practically singing. I had seen them before, those golden eyes that saw through everything—seen them two hundred years ago, in Dracul, the Dark Lord's stronghold. "A new age approaches, not far off now. I wish to take a look at the one Shooting Star spoke of before it comes. Would you escort me, as a favor to one you warred with two centuries gone? I abandoned the mortal world long ago, and I know little of its ways. My dear old comrades in arms have taken the longest journey and left me behind."

Her last words took on a terrible sadness and vanished with the breeze.

I dropped to one knee and lowered my head.

"As you wish, Your Dark Majesty."

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been five months. No, not four—five. I broke the schedule I've been keeping since volume five, and I'm so, so sorry.

I really struggled with this volume. There were just so many scenes I wanted to write, and Her Royal Highness kept pushing for more time in the spotlight—although Chiffon, Atra, and Lia ended up stealing most of it. I'll do my level best to get the next volume out at the usual pace.

Now, on to the story. I've been dropping hints about him for a while now, but Zel, the friend who taught Allen so many less-than-scrupulous tricks, finally makes his appearance. He acts like he hasn't got a care in the world, but deep down he carries the weight of a tragic past. I love characters like that.

Then there's the false Saint, one of my few allies as an author. She's the easiest character in the whole cast to get a handle on, but that's what makes her the scariest. She'll do anything to get what she wants, and she doesn't care if she makes the world a worse place along the way.

Allen's made encouraging the girls his priority all this time, but he won't get to keep resting on his laurels in the background. Keep an eye on him starting next volume.

Announcement time: the third volume of *Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars* is about to go on sale (in Japan). Volume three closes out the first arc, so I hope you'll give it a read! I know Chinese-inspired military fantasy isn't the most common genre these days, but why not see how you like it?

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. I know I caused you a lot of headaches. I promise I'll work harder next volume.

The illustrator, cura. Every volume, you deliver an incredible cover and illustrations. Stella's couldn't look better!

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—you-know-who's long-overdue return?!

Riku Nanano

Allen's best friend

Zelbert Régnier

Allen's only male friend at the Royal Academy and Lydia's nemesis. He and Allen did everything together, until a battle claimed his life. His final resting place in the catacombs may not be so final after all.

"Yes!

That's the spirit!
I wouldn't have
my partner any
other way!"



Private
Tutor to the **14**
Duke's
Daughter

Girls' Night

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.

Thunder Fox

Atra

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

Duke Howard's second daughter

Tina

Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.





Duke Leinster's 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.

"Calm down.
Don't do anything rash,
Your Highnesses."

"I'd appreciate
an explanation, Régnier.
I assume we can blame you
for tempting Allen away?"

"Well?
What have you
been up to?"

First princess

Cheryl Wainwright

A flawless princess who attended the Royal Academy with Lydia and Allen. She's known as the "Lady of Light," and she equals Lydia in ability.



"I *will* keep
Mr. Allen safe!"

"At least I'll use
the skills you
taught me!"

White Saint
Stella

Stella is the president of the Royal Academy student council, Tina's elder sister, and the future Duchess Howard. An angel possesses her body at a strange altar.

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. It depicts a young woman with long, flowing white hair and large, dark, feathered wings. She is wearing a white, ruffled dress and white thigh-high stockings with blue bows. She is looking down with a gentle expression. In the foreground, the back of a young man's head with short brown hair is visible. The scene is set in a dark, forest-like environment with falling petals or leaves, creating a soft, ethereal atmosphere.

14

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Angel That Broke
the Star Oath

Allen's best friend

Zelbert Régnier

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“Yes!

That's the spirit!
I wouldn't have
my partner any
other way!”

A full-body illustration of Zelbert Régnier, a young man with spiky white hair and red eyes. He is wearing a long white coat with a high collar and a dark sash. He has long, flowing red ribbons or hair-like strands extending from his shoulders. The background is plain white.

Private Tutor to the 14 Duke's Daughter

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Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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“What do you
expect me to say?
I’m just a normal
student at the Royal
Academy.”



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters

Allen

A young man who fails to appreciate
his own unrivaled control of magic.
He finds himself trapped with
Stella at an enigmatic altar.

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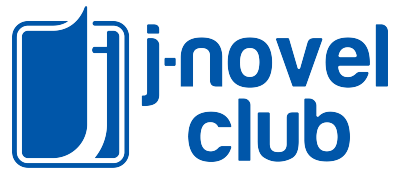
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 14

by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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