

LILY ELLINGTON

MAGI

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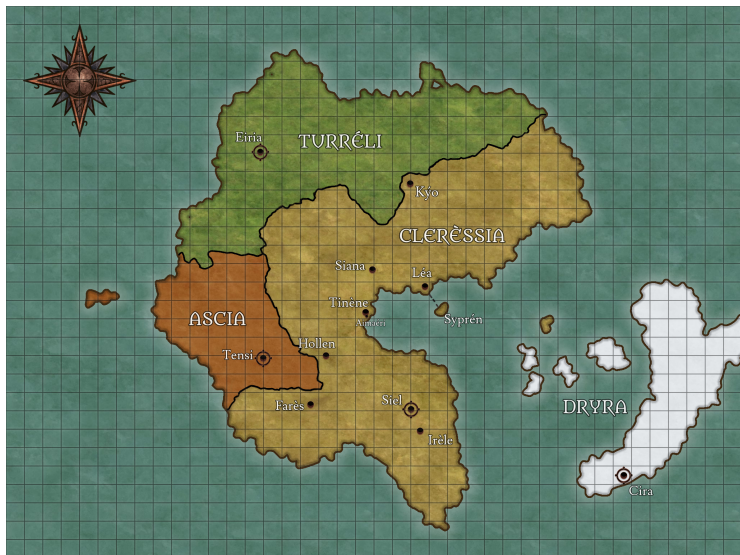
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Continental Map



The Past Chases the Present

Out of the pleasant silence, I suddenly hear an explosion ringing out from behind me.

I rise in a flash, clutching the pendant at my neck, the gem cool in my hand, my breaths sharp and shallow. After a moment, I realize that it was just a dream. Or rather, not “just” a dream since recurring nightmares are hardly “just” anything, especially when they make you relive the worst moments of your life.

I trace the soft curves of my necklace—a silver teardrop when a garnet gem—as I stare at my clock. 0338. Even more than usual, my heart refuses to resettle into a normal rhythm, pounding painfully against my empty chest. The explosion still rings in my ears, the ensuing fire burned into my retinas.

Contenting myself with the fact that I’m not going back to sleep—and I’m not even sure that I’d want to, even if I could—I get up and stare in the mirror. My silvery hair, reaching to the small of my back, is a mess, and I can’t tell whether there’s a lifelessness hiding in the deep violet of my eyes or its polar opposite.

With a sigh, I run my finger along my pendant once more.

“Eiral!” At my words, a light glow permeates the air around me as my pajamas fade, replaced with my magical dress: a dark silver, metallic armor. Despite seeming only a flexible, skin-tight fabric, it’s saved my life on more than one occasion. My hair is newly tied into an athletic braid, and my right hand grips a short katana, its blood-red hilt matching the accents on my armor itself.

But seeing this girl in the mirror, feeling this power rushing through me, I just feel even more empty. Uncharacteristic tears roll down my cheeks unbidden. With a sigh, I find myself unable to hold firm to my magic, and my transformation reverses. I kneel on the floor, palms pressed flat against the carpet, arms trembling. “I’m sorry, Nia-chi...”, I choke out through broken sobs.

A few long hours later, I find myself at the bus stop, impatiently playing with the hem of my skirt. A few other students are standing nearby, chatting amongst themselves as I lean against the fence, but I don’t care for their conversations, nor do they make any effort to include me. I sigh, regretting my choice not to just walk to school this morning, especially seeing as I had the time. Soon, the bus comes, and the ride to school is a blur.

I’m mostly just going through the motions this morning, and I find myself in classroom 2-3 upstairs, taking my seat next to the window in the second row.

“Good morning, Amara-ren,” the boy to my right says as I sit down.

“...Good morning, Molva-ren,” I mumble in return. It isn’t that I dislike him. Molva Atris is the one student in this school who seems to have not given up on me yet.

I take my notebook out of my bag and stare blankly at it, but

I can tell he's staring at me. My response was even more distant than usual, which even I can tell. As soon as my first two weeks at this school, I heard the whispers commenting about the aloof transfer student, how everyone had resigned to being nothing more than simple classmates with the girl whose distance and indifference came off once too often as an air of superiority. I'm respected well enough, but only Atris has continued to show any real interest in me despite my lack of reciprocation to anyone's attention. And, to my slight annoyance, I can't bring myself to push him away.

"Are you okay? You seem—"

I hide a small smile as he's cut off by the teacher entering the classroom, saving me from having to answer. But then I frown. He's right: I'm not okay, not today. And it's more than just that I didn't get much sleep last night.

"Amara Minori-ren." The teacher has begun taking attendance, with my name at the top of the list. Indicating that I'm present, at least physically, I try to force the worry out of my head. I devote myself to the lessons at hand. Partially just as a distraction, I'll admit, but it works.

At least until lunch. As usual, I take my food to the roof and sit under the pale blue sky, enjoying the breeze against my face. What is unusual, however, is that I hear the door open as someone else comes upstairs, causing me to freeze. There's no rule against students using the roof, yet still, it's surprisingly uncommon, even as it was the popular spot at my old school.

Atris approaches, indicating a spot across from me. "May I sit here, Amara-ren?"

Caught off-guard, I hesitate slightly before nodding. He takes his seat, opening his lunch box while I continue eating from mine. I try my best to avoid eye contact, unsure of how to

appease my newfound lunch partner, knowing quite well what his intentions are.

When the silence has long been awkward, he speaks up. "You've been quiet today. More than usual, anyway. Not even answering the teacher's questions." He chuckles, hoping to lighten the atmosphere, but I frown in response. Before I've even realized it, I've stood up and walked over to the fence surrounding the rooftop, staring out into the distance.

"I'm fine," I reply unconvincingly, but I hear him sigh. I turn back toward him, my voice slightly more firm. "I do appreciate your concern, but I don't need you to worry about me, Molvarren."

"I want to worry about you." He notices the romantic implications of his phrasing after I simply glare at him, and he backpedals slightly, his tone awkward. "I... I just think that someone should, at least." He blushes as he continues. "And I'd like to think that you don't dislike me quite as much as you do everyone else."

Facing away once again, my voice is barely above a whisper. "I do enough worrying all by myself."

Behind me, I hear him stand and, a few seconds later, feel his hand on my shoulder, causing me to flinch. "All the more reason to let someone else." His voice is quiet too, no louder than mine, and it carries much more strength. "I'm not going to push you, but I can tell there's something on your mind, and... if you ever want to talk about it, then I'll be happy to listen."

There's a feeling in my heart that comes rushing forward at his touch and his words, a feeling that I thought got buried long ago. Despite myself, I relax slightly, though my voice still betrays my hesitation. "I..." I nod slowly. "It's just that today is the anniversary of one of my friends from my old school in

Siel passing away.”

Just. I want to yell at myself for reducing my best friend’s death to “just”. The word isn’t only unfair: it wasn’t “just” that Nia had died one year ago, nor “just” that she’d died in what was labeled a terrorist attack, but that I’d been there, unable to stop them, unable to save her. The attack had come out of nowhere, but I had, somewhat coincidentally, been nearby. I’d immediately rushed to the scene. Nia was shopping at the mall that was targeted, and while the damage to the building was quickly repaired, no such repairs were possible for the forty-one people who lost their lives. The incident has been haunting me ever since. It’s been manifesting in my subconscious thoughts a lot recently—hence, the nightmares.

My small involvement in the affair was a secret, naturally. I’d become a member of the Magical Combat Assist unit after I received my powers, and though many people knew about the unit’s existence in the Clerèssian Intelligence Agency and the Maidens who were its strongest agents, the identities of these Maidens were classified information, helped along by some of our magic’s effects. I certainly couldn’t tell anyone that I was one of Clerèssia’s strongest. And if I couldn’t stop the attack... then what could that possibly say about how strong I really was? It was one of the reasons that I transferred to Irèle instead, leaving the military. Depressed, lost, and uncertain, all I wanted was to get a little further from my failures, even if I do still carry the keystone—my necklace—that unlocks my powers, though this morning was the first time I’ve activated it in months.

All of that crowds my thoughts, and since I can’t say any of it aloud, I’m silent for what feels an eternity but is probably only a few seconds. “But Nia-chi would have wanted me to move on by now,” I whisper, partially to myself, shaking my head. And

despite the fact that I know it's true, it does little to help fill the painful emptiness in my heart.

Atris is quiet for a moment, clearly surprised by my revelation and, if I had to guess, by my choice of honorific for Nia. I transferred to school almost a year ago, and I've never once spoken about my life in Siel, nor have I found anyone I'd even think to call -chi. I'm just not that close to people.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he eventually says, pulling his hand back. With both of us unsure of what else to say, silence falls once again between us. But, eventually, he speaks again, his words slow and hesitant. "I lost my grandmother when I was little. I'm not trying to say it's the same of course. I know it's not. But my parents always said that the best way to help you move on is to make new, happier memories to associate with the day instead." After another short pause, he adds, "If you don't have plans after school today, my younger sister and I are having a picnic at the Lonsen Park. You're welcome to come along if you'd like."

"...Iselle-ren?" His sister's name. Although we've never properly met, I'm at least vaguely familiar with the first-year student.

"Yeah. She's always looking to meet some older students." He chuckles. "Thinks it'll make her seem older than she actually is."

Still looking over the city, I'm quiet for a few moments, silent tears running down my cheeks. "C-Can I think about it?"

"...Yeah, of course. No pressure." He seems surprised that I didn't simply reject the idea outright. And, to be honest, so am I.

"You know what I love about you, Mino-chi?" Nia said to me on the way home from school one day. "I admire your strength. Even

when your work puts you up against, well..." She faltered before smiling at me. "You manage to never lose your composure."

I scoff, mumbling to myself. "Oh, how much I've changed. What would Kaskei-ren say?" Realizing that Atris is still standing behind me, I raise my voice slightly to quickly add, "Sorry, I'm rambling." Suddenly very uncomfortable in this conversation, I hurriedly grab my lunch box and retreat downstairs to the classroom.

To my surprise, afternoon classes pass relatively quickly, though I'm more distracted than I'd prefer to admit. I can feel Atris glance over at me a few times, but I instead split my focus between the math teacher's explanations and my tracing an outline of a sketch in the back of my notebook. Soon enough, the bell signals the end of the school day.

Returning my notebook to my bag, I notice Atris staring at me once again, his gaze less dodging this time. "You've a question you'd like to ask," I point out matter-of-factly, rolling my eyes. "And I don't think you need to be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you," he insists, though his eyes momentarily dart to the floor, his voice quieter than usual. "Are... you coming with us today?"

I allow myself a small smile. "If you insist it's no trouble, then sure."

He raises his eyes and returns my smile, nodding. "I do. Shall we go meet Iselle, then? She's in class 1-2."

"Lead the way."

When we reach her classroom, a trio of girls stands outside the door, chatting excitedly. I recognize the middle one as Iselle, her pale green shoulder-length hair neatly framing her smiling face.

"A-chi!" She rushes over to her brother as we approach. She

holds up the picnic basket in her hand. "I've been waiting all day!"

Atris, for his part, smiles and ruffles her hair. "I know. I've met you before, Isa." She adopts a fake pouting expression. "But have you met Amara-ren?"

"Well, that's me," I say when she shakes her head. "Amara Minori. Now you have." With a slight, nervous shyness to my voice despite my best intentions, I add, "Your brother invited me along to your picnic. Do you mind?" The girls behind Iselle share her surprised expression, a sentiment I'm all too aware of.

Iselle's is short-lived, however. "Of course not!" She looks like she can hardly contain her excitement. "We'll have to share the food a little bit more, but I don't mind." She takes a deep breath and realizes that she never properly introduced herself. "Anyway, I'm sure you've figured it out by now, but I'm Iselle. Molva Iselle. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." A beat. "Well, if you're so eager to have this picnic, why don't we get going?" If pressed, I'd be forced to admit that I'm also quite anxious to leave, what with the number of curious glances I feel on me.

She nods, and the two of us lead the way out of the school, Atris walking a few steps behind us. Iselle seems to be emitting a constant barrage of positive energy, a stark contrast to my neutral-at-best attitude. Yet, surprising as it may seem, it doesn't bother me at all. There's something about her that draws me to her.

The park isn't far from the school, only a handful of blocks to the west. The late spring sun combines with the breeze to make the weather unbeatable for a picnic, and I bask in the sunlight as we walk, the siblings content to carry the conversation

themselves. In the center of the park stands a large, lone tree, and we decide to set up at the edge of its shade.

Once the blanket is laid out, Iselle lies down on her back, staring up at the sky, giggling. "It's been too long since we've done this, A-chi."

"Is this something you two do often?" I ask.

Atris sighs. "Less often than we'd like." When I raise an eyebrow at his vague answer, he continues. "We've always been close growing up, but we drifted apart a bit when I moved here for high school last year."

"But now that I'm in high school too," his sister finishes excitedly, "we're back together. But we haven't found a good opportunity to do this yet." From that answer alone, it's clear to me that she applied to this high school just because Atris was here.

I feel myself tense slightly, but the others don't seem to notice. "Well," I say hesitantly, subconsciously making my escape plan. "I don't want to intrude on your brother-sister bonding time if—"

I'm silenced as Iselle rolls upright, staring directly into my eyes and adopting a sudden and intense seriousness that's almost frightening. "Nonsense." It's only once I finally nod my understanding does she fall backwards and regain her joviality in an instant. "So, Amara-ryo," she begins, the expected raised honorific sounding out of place in her teasing tone, "as a transfer students, you have the top marks in your class, broke half the school's athletic records, and, well, let's just say you have the attention of some of the boys in my year too." She flashes me a mischievous smile. "Yet no one seems to know anything about you. What's it like being our school's most mysterious student?"

"Iselle..." her brother cautions. We both know that, in all

his experience, he's always needed a bit more finesse than that when it comes to handling me.

And, accordingly, my initial response is dry, emotionless. "You mean that as an opening to remove layers of that mystery." It isn't a question. The smile on the younger student's face fades as she looks away, embarrassed. Yet, I find myself sighing, knowing full well that Nia would be disappointed in me. "But if it makes you happy," I say hesitantly, "this stays between us." Suddenly, it's my turn to look away.

Both siblings are surprised by my sudden change of heart, though I know that Atris can sense the rationale behind it.

I take a deep breath before I start, my eyes pinned to the ground. "I used to be different, you know. Back in Siel." I chuckle slightly, even though it's not particularly funny. "You probably wouldn't even think I was the same person." I pause, my forced positivity leaving me. "Do you remember the terrorist attack on the city mall there last year?"

They both nod. "Yeah. No one ever figured out who did it," Iselle says. "It caused a lot of panic across the whole country."

"It was shortly after school," I continue. "She had an errand to run there, so I walked with her to the mall on my way home. The attack happened less than five minutes after we parted ways." I pull at my necklace, burying the pendant in my fist.

"She?" Iselle asks faintly, and I notice Atris's gaze drop to the ground.

"My best friend, Nia-chi," I manage to say after a moment. "The attack was exactly one year ago, today." I pause again, taking another deep breath. "Anyway, I moved to Irèle at the end of summer break and transferred to this school in time for autumn term. I didn't know anyone here, and it was just easier to stay in my own little world. Hence, the mystique, I guess."

Another pause, and I try to force a more cheerful attitude. "But I've turned the conversation dark and depressing, and here you two were, planning a fun little picnic."

Unsurprisingly, the air has indeed turned more somber by the end of my short explanation. Iselle seems to be having an internal debate before one side finally gives in, and she quickly clambers awkwardly over the picnic basket between us to put her arms around me, and I freeze up in surprise.

An energy seems to be radiating out from her, and it draws me inward, inciting me to return the embrace. When we pull apart a few seconds later, I notice that she's drawn a smile out of me. "Thank you. You remind me of her, actually."

Atris, simply observing the events playing out between us, smiles as well. He seems vindicated, having introduced the two of us.

"Really?" Iselle asks, and I nod in response, causing her to light up even more. "Then I have just one more question for now: Can I see your necklace? I've never seen a gemstone quite like that."

After a moment's hesitation, I agree, knowing that it'd be a strange excuse to avoid it. When I hand over the pendant, I feel a slight anxiety run through me, the kind when you're uncomfortably naked. I've worn that necklace for the last... well, pretty much ever since my powers were unsealed four years ago. It's strange not to have it around my neck.

A few seconds later, I hear my phone ring. "I'm sorry." I glance at the name. Kaskei Ari. My handler from my MCA days. We haven't spoken in months. "I need to take this," I tell the siblings as I answer the phone, taking a few steps away. "Hello, Amara Minori speaking."

"What happened to protocol, Snow Leopard?" a gruff voice

on the other end asks, a strong emphasis on the code name.

Annoyance rises within me. That's how he's going to start? I let my emotions carry through my voice, though I maintain a level volume. "One, I'm in the middle of things. Two, I thought I told you not to call me that anymore. Three, you're the one who just associated the two."

"That's not important," he replies, his voice softening somewhat. How quickly his tune changes when you have him cornered in a verbal exchange he can't win. "Listen. What is important is that you're our only magical agent in Irèle—"

"Nope."

"—who can take care of this. We've received intel that says there will be an attack on the central train station in just over half an hour. We don't have time to mobilize anyone else."

I sigh, knowing that he wouldn't be asking if it wasn't critical. But there are reasons why I left the MCA in the first place. Being constantly on call like this was only one of them. "What do you need?"

"It's a new threat that I don't know much about," he admits. "This is my first encounter with them. I'm hoping that you can gain some information to fix that problem." A beat. "What I do know, however, is there's what appears to be a credible threat being posed to the central station at 1615 hours."

I check my watch. 34 minutes until then. "Any ideas?" I'd like to ask about the expected means of attack, but I can't alert my picnic partners behind me. Regardless, Ari doesn't answer. "You want me to find one for you." As my frustration grows, I feel the barrier holding my magical power weaken, resonating in the necklace that Iselle is still holding.

She lets out a sharp squeal, and I turn around to see her drop the necklace onto the blanket, staring at her hands. "Uh,

Amara-ryo..." she asks in a small voice, her tone betraying her confusion and concern. "I'm sorry for dropping it, but your necklace felt like it was burning me."

That's... certainly unexpected. The only humans who can feel the magic in the keystones are the Maidens themselves. Yet Ari just told me that I'm the only Maiden in the city, a detail that I need to confirm. "And I guess I'm supposed to believe that I'm the only other female in all of Irèle?" I ask him as I move to assuage Iselle's concern.

He takes just a moment to decipher the question. "Yes, you are the only Maiden, even including those we don't employ."

I sigh, putting on a façade of disappointment. "Fine, I'll be there. But just this once, understand? You're old enough to know to be prepared for this kind of thing." I hang up the phone, allowing the feeling of my power to surge within me. I turn back around and adopt as innocently embarrassed of an expression as I can as Iselle and Atris look up at me. "I'm sorry, both of you, honestly. But something urgent came up that I need to take care of. I'll see you tomorrow, though." Before they can say anything, I grab my bag and necklace from the ground and start jogging in the direction of the train station.

Same, Yet Different

Once I've gotten near the station, I find a secluded corner where I won't be seen and take a deep breath. "Eira!"

My immediate concern is reconnaissance, which will be easier if I'm not recognizable as a Maiden. My magic prevents me from being identified, but it's not like my magical dress is subtle, what with an obvious katana at my waist. As such, I use my keystone necklace to unlock what powers I can without activating my transformation. Next, I pull an earpiece out of a pocket in my backpack, wirelessly connecting it to my phone. Even if I don't have much reason to use it nowadays, I still keep it ready and with me at all times. Habit, I suppose. Scrolling into the RECENT CALLS menu, I select Ari's number.

"Indigo Wyvern," he answers on the second ring.

I roll my eyes at the code name but hold in my complaints. "Snow Leopard. I just arrived on site. Any idea what I'm looking for?" I check my watch again. 18 minutes left. It might be enough time, but I have no information about whom I'm searching for. Or even where. This station is both large and crowded.

“Not much,” he admits with a sigh. “I intercepted a message that decoded to SET CHARGE. IRÈLE T STATION. PLAT 3. 1615.” He pauses. “There is a train scheduled to arrive at that time, so my working theory is that a passenger with explosives is either getting on or off with them.”

Those two are quite different, but: “It’s enough to work with. I’m going to do a quick sweep of the other platforms, just in case,” I respond, starting to walk to the first platform.

“Roger.”

The question that’s been sitting in the back of my head since I left the park is tired of being patient. “This doesn’t seem like a magical attack, nor one where you’d need my powers, so why call me? Why not just alert the local police? Or if it’s that serious, send an agency task force?”

“Because you’re off-the-books, and I trust you.” He sighs. “That message I mentioned was encrypted using a government-level encryption scheme, but we intercepted it passing through non-approved channels. I mentioned it to my superiors, but the agency’s official stance seems to be that it, apparently, is internal testing that lies above my pay-grade, so I’ve been told to ignore it and focus on the other work we’re dealing with.” He lets out a dry, humorless chuckle. “Ostensibly, the fact that I noticed it has been passed along to the relevant team, but I’ve worked here long enough to be able to read the room and trust my gut. Something’s not right here.”

“What?” I ask, dumbfounded. Loudly enough that a few people near me glance over at my outburst, causing me to blush and cower from the attention, and I quickly move to assess the next platform.

There’s a moment before he responds. “Given the method of encryption and this suspicious behavior of the higher-ups, I

think that whoever is behind this has someone on the inside, someone powerful. That's why I didn't tell anyone else official. But," and I can hear his smile through the phone, "as you've so sharply pointed out, you don't work for us anymore, so you're perfect."

Despite myself, I find myself smiling as well. "Or am I just the only girl who hasn't blocked your number yet?"

"Ha, ha. Very funny, Snow Leopard."

I soon reach the edge of the target area. "Platforms 1, 2, 4, and 5 clear. Nothing suspicious on sight. Nothing obvious on Platform 3 yet, either."

"Roger. Keep an eye out."

I check my watch again—9 minutes left—before innocently leaning against a pillar to begin people-watching, looking for anyone who stands out. If the attacker isn't arriving on the train, I imagine they'll have to be here soon. They're not going to want to rush planting the explosives. "What's the end game if I find our target?" I ask Ari.

"Keep them detained until I arrive, then I'll handle things from there."

"Understood."

A couple minutes later, a middle-aged man in a gray uniform arrives on the platform. He's not the only one here, of course, but there's something about him that draws my attention, despite his remarkably plain appearance. He seems to nervously and impatiently check his phone before he walks over to my pillar, setting down his bag. After a few seconds and another glance at his phone, he turns to me with a timid, embarrassed look. "Excuse me, miss? I don't mean to trouble you, but I need to use the restroom before the train arrives, but my bag's heavy and I'd prefer not to carry it with me again." A short pause.

“Could you make sure that no one steals it?”

His whole demeanor, even ignoring that his story doesn't quite make sense, makes me suspicious of him. He has to be the one, but I can't take any action purely off of a hunch. “O-Oh, sure,” I respond with an innocent smile. Of course, if I'm right, he just picked literally the worst person here to entrust with his bag.

He thanks me, turning away, and I bend down to check what he's hiding. Sure enough, under a few notebooks and a sweatshirt, I find several kilograms of explosives, rigged to a complicated interface I don't know how to disarm. “Snow Leopard to Indigo Wyvern. Explosives confirmed. Suspect retreating on foot.” At first glance, the bomb looks remote-detonated, presumably from a cell-phone signal. Which means I need to disarm it before chasing after him; otherwise, he might just detonate it prematurely, and well... that wouldn't be any better.

The Siel shopping mall incident flashes through my mind, and a sudden clarity holds my brain now. I take a deep breath, reaching for my magic. “Kyón!” I whisper, a deep blue stream of icy energy pouring from my hand into the bag, nearly instantly freezing its contents to a temperature far below that of any natural ice. “Explosives neutralized for now,” I tell Ari. “Moving to pursue suspect.”

“Roger that, Snow Leopard. Currently en route to your position. ETA 25 minutes. You have my permission to engage at your discretion.”

Fortunately, the man doesn't seem to have noticed any of this behind him, and neither has he gotten far enough away for me to lose sight of him. As such, it's an easy jog to catch up with him, even with the added weight of the bag. He actually is

heading toward the restrooms, so he's going to be providing me with the privacy I need to not draw attention to the situation. Perfect.

As soon as he enters the men's restroom, I double-check the corridor to ensure that no one is watching me, then follow behind him. He's too focused on pulling out his phone once again to pay me any attention, and before he can do anything, I've activated my transformation and knocked the phone out of his hand with a well-placed kick. While he's unbalanced, I place my hand on Requiem's hilt. "You're under arrest," I tell him as he stares at me wide-eyed. He rushes to pick up the phone, but I'm faster, sliding it away from him with my foot and drawing my sword, baring the full blade. "I don't think so."

"P-Please! Please don't hurt me!" At this point, the man decides that cowering in fear is an appropriate response, and though I've no intention to hurt him, he's right not to act out. This just makes everyone's life easier.

"Up." I command. "Hands where I can see them." His eyes still wide, he slowly gets up and puts his hands in the air. "You're going to walk outside the station. You are going to do so without causing any disturbance." I pause, making my voice as clear and authoritative as possible. "I do not want to cause panic, so I'm going to revert to my normal appearance, but know that even if I don't have this sword, I still have my magic. You won't make me use it, will you?" Though it's grammatically a question, it's so blunt as to be uninterpretable as one.

He vigorously shakes his head, his fear clearly showing. I revert my transformation but keep a grasp on my magic, just as I promised. As I gesture for him to lead the way outside, he begins walking, carefully watching his steps.

Soon enough, we reach the benches outside the station and,

with the bag in my hand, we wait for Ari to arrive. Eventually, a black car with tinted windows pulls up, and my handler steps out of the passenger side of the vehicle, a bittersweet smile on his face. "Good work as always."

Accepting custody of my prisoner, Ari handcuffs him to the inside of the car. When he returns, he's joined by another man I don't recognize, though he wears an agency uniform, the words *bomb technician* written across the front. Ari nods, and I hand off the explosives. "I've merely temporarily disabled them," I tell the technician, showing the man's phone. "It looks like the explosives are remote-detonated from this phone, possibly others. Is there anything else you need from me, sir?" He shakes his head, and I loosen the magic on the bomb so that it can be properly disarmed.

The technician takes the explosives to do his work, and Ari turns back to me, allowing his smile to grow. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he speaks in a friendly tone, different from the authoritative and stressed tone he's been using up to now. "I know I just said it, but: Good work, Amara-ren." A pause. "I'm sorry to have put this on you so suddenly, and I wish we could have reconnected under different circumstances, but you really came through. Thank you." He chuckles. "You know, things have been different without you."

Despite his gentle words, I can see what he's driving at. "You know, things have been different without Nia-chi," I reply in a contrastingly cold and distant voice as I tighten my grip on my necklace. I may have stopped this explosion easily enough today, but that does little about the one that shattered my world a year ago.

He falters, clearly unsure of how to handle the situation now that I've ruined whatever loosely celebratory mood existed

before. After a quiet few seconds, he finally finds something to say. "I know. Which is why I'm even more thankful for what you've done today." After another pause, he asks timidly, as if he were a nervous guy asking a girl out for a date, "Would you like me to keep you updated on what I find out about this guy?"

Against my better judgement, my curiosity wins out. "If it makes you happy." He knows what that means. I relay what little information I was able to pry out of the man while we were waiting. "His name is Enason Lambing. Civilian, accountant. He received a mysterious message a few weeks ago, threatening him and his family if he didn't follow the instructions. Too scared to go to the police. No idea who the source was." I sigh. "Of course, that could all be a cover-up story, but the whole incident feels too clumsy for him to be the mastermind."

Ari nods, and silence falls between us again, neither of us having anything to say. Or perhaps, each of us has too much to say and so we ironically stay quiet. Either way, he nods once again. "Well, I'd best go deal with our captive."

I watch him leave, not sure how to feel about... anything, really. Today's been a strange day, and I have an idea to make it even stranger. Before I can even decide if it's a good idea, I've headed back into the station and found myself sitting on a train bound for Siel.

I pull a pair of headphones from my bag and start listening to a broad-spectrum playlist, ranging from the soulfully heart-wrenching to the shamelessly upbeat and everything in between, just letting the random shuffle dictate its way through. I'm too busy distantly staring out the window to pay much attention to the music.

About forty-five minutes later, the train pulls into the station in Siel, and I begin walking down the city streets, thoughts

chaotic and fleeting. It's strange, of course. On one hand, I lived in this city for years, so everything is familiar; on the other hand, it's been so long that it no longer feels like home, though I suppose that my efforts to distance myself from here haven't helped in that regard.

As I aimlessly walk through the city, focusing on the quiet clatter of my shoes against the sidewalk, I can't help but feel that it's all a lot like Irèle. In the vastness of the skyscrapers and the crowded streets, sometimes it seems like these cities lose their own individualities. Of course, given their large populations, you're also almost guaranteed to find the full spectrum of individuals if you're willing to look hard enough, so it might be said that these cities have more character, not less. But equally true is that these observations don't always mean that much since we don't interact with the city as a whole but just those people around us—whether it's the people we live and work with and have close connections to or to the random people we might walk past on our way to the grocery store without realizing it.

At some point, I find myself in the entrance of a flower shop. "Hello there, miss," a woman at the front counter says warmly, smiling. "Hmm... I don't recognize your uniform," she adds, clearly curious.

"Y-Yeah," I manage to get out. "I'm visiting from Irèle." Given Irèle's size and relative proximity to Siel, I'm slightly surprised she doesn't recognize the uniform, but it's not like it matters. "I guess I'm looking to get flowers for... a friend here." I mean, I wasn't consciously planning to, but I also didn't think too far ahead about coming to Siel in the first place. But now that I'm here, I have an idea.

"Do you have something in mind, or would you like some

help picking something out for your special someone?" She winks, knowingly, and I realize the connotation I've given her.

I decide it's not worth directly correcting her. After all, I do know what I want, and that should speak more clearly to my intentions. "May I have a bouquet with a mixture of pink carnations, crimson roses, and purple hyacinths?" Flowers symbolizing remembrance, mourning, and sorrowed regret.

She pauses almost imperceptibly before she speaks again, and I wonder if she can tell that I know the symbology. I suppose it's too much of a coincidence otherwise. "Of course," she says. "Give me a few moments, if you would." As I wait, I meander around the store, mindlessly inspecting various displays scattered around the room. There's all manner of arrangements from large bouquets and wreaths to small lapel pins and petal decorations, and the flowers themselves cover the full spectrum of colors.

As promised, it's only about fifteen minutes before the woman returns to the counter with the bouquet I've asked for. Once I've paid for it, I head back outside, cradling the flowers in the crook of one arm. With an actual plan for where I'm going and a newfound determination, I make my way westward toward the cemetery where Nia is buried. Fortunately, it's not a long walk from here.

As I approach her gravestone, I find that I'm not the only person to have this idea: a young girl stands there, facing away from me. I give her some space, waiting quietly about ten meters up the path.

Not long after, she bows her head and turns to leave. When she reaches me, she pauses for a moment. "M-Mino-chi?" she asks in an incredulous voice. Once I nod quietly, Nia's younger sister brightens into a wide smile contrasting the tearful redness

in her eyes, and she jumps up to wrap me in a tight embrace. "I've missed you, Mino-chi."

I return the hug, pulling her close to me. "Me too, Rena-chi... Me too."

When she pulls away, her eyes flash with an idea. "Are you in a hurry to get back to Irèle?" I shake my head. "In that case, would you like to come over for dinner? My parents are out of town today, so it'd just be the two of us, but..."

"I'd like that," I tell her softly. "As long as it's no trouble."

She shakes her head, wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye. "No trouble at all." A pause. "Well, I'll give you some time with Sis." In a more cheery, excited tone, she adds, "Come find me at the entrance whenever you're ready, okay?" When I nod, she begins walking up the path with a fresh energy in her step, and I gather myself and walk to Nia's grave, setting the flowers on the soil.

My words come out more ramblingly than I'd prefer. There's so much to say and yet more which is best left unsaid. "Hey, Nia-chi. I'm sorry for not coming sooner, but... I wasn't sure if I could, to be honest. And I'm still not sure, but here I am, I guess." I take a deep breath, trying to calm the slight shaking in my body. "Life's been... Well, it's been different. A lot quieter without you and without the agency breathing down my neck all the time," I chuckle. "I miss you."

I miss you, too, I hear her voice say in my head. It's my imagination, of course, but it feels so real. *I'm glad you came today. A beat. You seem quieter now. Are you okay?* It's just like her to be worrying about me when she's the one who's clearly the least okay out of all of us.

"I don't know," I whisper, realizing the truth behind those words.

You're fine, she chuckles lightly. It's also just like her to ask the question just to brush past my answer to imbue some optimism into the air. *You may have put up a wall, but it's not to keep people out. You feel isolated and imprisoned, but you're the warden, Mino-chi. And you know that.*

"I just want things to go back to the way they used to be."

And I just want you to be happy. She pauses, then adds softly, her voice still carrying a sudden sharpness, *Were things really that bad today?*

I hesitate, but I'm forced to admit that no, actually, they weren't. Even dealing with the attack at the train station was exhilarating and reminded me of why I wanted to join the MCA in the first place, though it would have been nice if it hadn't interrupted the picnic. Meeting Iselle and finding Rena here... I smile. "Thank you, Nia-chi."

Of course. Anytime. I can hear her wide, contagious smile shining through her voice. *Now, go. You don't want to leave Rena-chi waiting too long.*

Despite her advice, I linger another few moments before I do eventually turn back to meet Rena, my previously saudadic melancholy tempered greatly. Nia's right, of course, and she's also right that I've known that for a long time, unsure of how to act on it. Though, seeing as this copy of Nia only exists inside my head, it's hard for her to be wrong about that. "Small steps," I tell myself. "You'll be fine."

Rena is leaning against a tree at the cemetery's edge, staring off into space with a distant expression as she twirls one of her twintails in her fingers, but she perks up as I approach. "Ready?" she asks, reaching for my hand.

I nod and oblige. Together, we make our way through the city streets, the early-evening breeze quite refreshing. It's

been so long since the two of us have talked or spent time together—since I moved to Irèle toward the end of summer vacation nine months ago—that the silence between us has a comfortable tenseness to it. It isn't necessarily an unpleasant silence, but neither of us is sure how to break it.

At the end of our walk, however, we reach her apartment. "After you," she says, gesturing me inside. It's the same apartment I've visited so many times, and it still has the innocent home-like feel that it's always had. As we walk into the dining room attached to the kitchen, she asks, "Why don't you take a seat, and I'll get dinner ready?"

"Are you sure you don't want a hand. I don't mind helping."

She shakes her head, slightly embarrassed. "Nah, I'm just heating up some leftovers from what Father made a few days ago, when they left on business."

I shrug, taking a seat at the wooden table and tracing my finger along the grain while she begins pulling food out of the fridge and heating up the stove. Her parents are both executives at the same company, and while it's never that exciting, they do spend a decent amount of time traveling as a result. "How do your parents feel about being out of town today, of all days?"

Rena takes a moment to compose her answer. "Obviously, they wish they could be here," she admits, "but they visited the cemetery before they left. They're grieving, of course, but they also know that Nia-chi would never have wanted today to be about her." She smiles. "You know how much she hated being the center of attention."

Silence takes over the room until I find my voice again. "I'm sorry that I haven't been back before today, but..." I sigh. "How have you been, Rena-chi? You started middle school this year, right?"

She peeks her head under the cabinet to look at me. "I'll admit that we've all missed you, but we always understood why you left in the first place. So, you don't need to apologize, okay?" She waits until I nod before she returns to her cooking. "But yep, I'm in middle school, right?"

"What's that like?"

"You were in middle school once, weren't you, Mino-chi? It's even the same school, so you know what it's like." She laughs before deciding to actually answer the question, her words slow and thought out. "Being in the new school makes me feel so much more grown up, you know? And yet, a lot of the time, it feels just the same as my elementary school, like nothing's changed at all." She pauses a moment while she plates the food. "But it's been fun. One of my old friends—you remember Fria-chi, right?—is in my class again this year, and I've made some new friends in Choir Club, too."

I'm surprised. "Choir Club? I don't think I've ever heard you sing."

"Mhm," she affirms, bringing food to the table. As we begin eating, she continues. "I've always loved to sing, ever since I was little, but I've also always been afraid of anyone else hearing me, which is why you never did," she says bashfully with a slight chuckle. "It was always my little secret thing to do when I was alone. Then, one day last year when I was home alone—I forget why—I was singing and dancing in the living room." She uses her fork to point unnecessarily toward the rug that would have functioned as her improvised stage. "Nia-chi came home early and stood in the doorway, watching until the song was over. Her applauding was the first point I realized she was there."

I let out a small giggle. "That does sound like Nia-chi."

"At first, I was embarrassed," Rena continues, "and then I was

mad at her for watching without me knowing. But then she said I should join the Choir Club. I didn't then, and though she mentioned it a couple times after that, she never pushed it. She must have kept her promise not to tell anyone else, if you didn't know." She pauses. "And then, at the beginning of this school year... it just felt right? I'm still nervous when I think about singing in front of other people, yet it's somehow oddly freeing when I actually do it, you know?"

I nod. I do know that feeling. "Like, when you're singing, you almost feel like a different person. Someone who only lives in the moment and forgets what fear even is, blocking out everything but what you're focused on accomplishing."

Now it's her turn to be surprised. "Well... yeah. Exactly that. It happens to you, too?"

"Not with singing"—and I don't just almost become a different person—"but yeah, I know what that's like." After a moment, I add in a gentle voice, "I'd love to hear you sing sometime, if you're okay with that."

She blushes, lowering her eyes before looking up at me with a shy smile. "Y-Yeah. We have a recital coming up, actually. On the fourth of the month. I'll send you the details." A small pause. "A-Anyway," she says, changing the subject, "how have you been, Mino-chi? What's it like in Irèle?"

I sigh, turning to stare out the window. "As you said, it's strange how everything's the same and simultaneously all different. It's still a big city, the school energy feels the same, the classwork is just as hard, and yet... I feel like I've slotted into an existence that's completely different from the one I had here. Maybe because no one in Irèle knows who I was, it's been easier to be someone else."

She's quiet a moment. When her words do come, they're slow,

soft, gentle as the hand she places on mine. “Mino-chi, do you like this new Amara-ryo?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “She’s less exhausting in some ways, and her life is a lot less chaotic without having to worry about all the drama from dealing with everyone else.” She cocks her head, and I elaborate. “I left Siel because I needed some space, some distance, but in that emotional state, it was too easy to go too far, and that Amara-ren is alone and afraid, even if she won’t let herself show it.”

Rena squeezes my hand. “Well, I’m sure that when she’s ready, she’ll find at least one person in her new school to be her friend. Isn’t that how you met Sis?” I nod slowly, thinking of my interactions with the Molva siblings today. “And do me a favor,” Rena continues, “remind her that she has old friends, too, okay?” She gives me a warm smile that I find both inviting and incriminating, and I can’t believe that I haven’t reached out to her sooner.

I nod decisively and also resolve to talk to Iselle tomorrow—and not to answer the question of her being a Maiden. “Will do. Thanks, Rena-chi,” I say, adopting her contagious smile. “More importantly, however, is that there are topics far less depressing to talk about.”

She agrees, and after we’ve spent the better part of the next two hours talking—mostly her talking and me listening—I reluctantly move to take my leave. It’s getting late, and it’s been a long day.

“I’ll send you the details about our choir performance,” she says. “Until then... you know.” She winks and pulls me into another hug as the sun begins to set outside, wrapping the world in its new pink-orange hue. “Take care, Mino-chi.”

A New Confidante

The next morning, I make sure to leave my apartment with enough time to walk to school and avoid having to take the bus. The morning air lets me forget that it's going to be quite warm this afternoon, and I'm quite grateful for the delusion at the moment.

When I arrive at the school, rather than going to my own classroom, I stop by class 1-2. "Excuse me, have any of you seen Molva-ren yet this morning?" I ask, much to the surprise of the handful of students, and the room undergoes a quick attitude shift to one of interest and intrigue, which I choose to ignore.

"Iselle-chi? No, I haven't seen her yet," a girl in the front row tells me, shaking her head. I recognize her as Ostanne Chiara, one of the girls talking with Iselle in the hall yesterday.

I start to pull out my notebook to leave a note until I hear my name from behind me. "Amara-ryo? What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Chiara answers for me with a sly smile.

Iselle looks at me expectantly, mild surprise and confusion across her face. Dropping my voice to a quiet whisper, I ask, "Can you meet me on the roof for lunch today? There are a

few things I'd like to talk to you about, but"—I glance at her classmates behind her. "Well, you know how shy I can be." That, and the question of whether or not she's a Maiden is a governmental secret, so it'd be best if there weren't other people around.

She cocks her head, then shrugs, apparently attributing all of this to whatever mystique she mentioned yesterday. In the end, she flashes a smile. "Sure thing, Amara-ryo. I'll be there."

As I walk up to my own classroom, I can't help but wonder what those first-years thought of me looking for Iselle. Especially Chiara, who saw me with her and her brother yesterday. Even though my actions are hardly out of the ordinary in general, they're uncharacteristic of me in particular, and that's enough to draw attention to them. Reputations are powerful.

"Good morning, Amara-ren," Atris says as I reach my seat. "Was everything okay yesterday? You took off pretty suddenly."

I take off my bag and sit down with a sigh. "Yeah. Sorry about that, but it was a pretty sudden and important problem that I needed to take care of."

"Anything I should be concerned about?"

Well, I suppose that terrorist attacks are worthy of concern, but it's also something I can't tell him about. The incident was kept under wraps and wasn't even reported on the news. "Everything worked out. Beyond that," I say slowly, "I'll just say that it was a female-anatomy problem involving someone I know, so... no, probably not." One of the quirks about how we receive our powers is that every Maiden is female—hence the name—and since the situation did involve Ari, my excuse technically isn't a lie, even if it was intentionally misleading.

Atris looks away, suddenly uncomfortable at my revelation, which I suppose was the point. "Well," he says, "knowing you, I

was worried that Iselle had scared you away. She can be a bit intimidating, I know.”

“I seem to recall telling you yesterday that you don’t need to worry about me.” I pause as the teacher walks in and begins taking attendance.

“Amara Minori-ren?”

“Present.” I turn slightly toward Atris and whisper, “However, I do appreciate your concern, though your sister did nothing to scare me away.”

Classes are... well, classes are just as uneventful as ever, but I don’t let it bother me. They’re enough to hold my attention and tame my otherwise unhindered thoughts.

“Do you want me to join you again?” Atris asks me as lunch begins.

I roll my eyes in partially false annoyance. “Not today. I could really use the space, if that’s alright with you.” Still vague and misleading, but still true. He nods hesitantly, but fortunately, he doesn’t put up any further resistance.

Once I reach the roof, I think back to when I found out that I was a Maiden, about four years ago. Apart from our abilities to transform into our Gown and use magic, our other ability is to detect and sense the flow of magical energy, which is the reason I can suspect Iselle. Even someone as close to her as her brother wouldn’t have been able to feel anything from the necklace. There are some other indications, of course, but as a general rule, unsealed Maidens are only sensitive enough to sense magic flowing extremely close by, usually only something they’re touching—again, like Iselle and the necklace yesterday. I, however, was a bit different.

I started having this recurring dream where I'd stand in a dimly-lit semicylindrical corridor like an aquarium tunnel, barely bright enough to see my hand in front of my face. But rather than the tunnel showing the beautiful depths of the ocean or the empty blackness of outer space, faint trails of colored light would trace the surface like the aurora borealis. It was gorgeous and mesmerizing, and I would find myself daydreaming of this same scene, a fuzzy warmth coursing through me in time with my heartbeat. Though it seemed to be merely a dream state, it felt real and tangible, even while I was conscious. But as is the nature of dreams and qualia, no one believed me. After all, no physical changes manifested, so no one could even hope to notice.

A month or two later, Nia came over to my place, and we were watching a horror movie. I don't remember which one, but it was by no means egregiously terrifying, even for a pair of twelve-year olds, though I was already slightly emotionally sensitive that day, which wasn't the best combination. And at one comparatively intense jump scare, I felt my heart rate spike and a chill run down my entire body. That's not a particularly uncommon reaction to a horror movie, so I paid it little mind until Nia jumped when she reached over and felt my air, its sheer frigidity burningly painful to her against her touch, even though I felt only slightly chilled as I could feel the dream lights faintly dancing in the back of my mind. With an oral thermometer revealing no significant temperature change, I regained a normal skin temperature and heart rate within just a few minutes, but it raised enough concern to visit a doctor the following day.

By that point, I was certainly back to normal, so all of the initial tests came back negative. Then, the doctor, Nomiya Sai, returned to the room. "Amara-chi," he said, "I know this is going to be unpleasant, but I'd like for you to think back to what was happening and put yourself in that same emotional state. You said you were watching a

horror movie, so bring that fear forward, whatever it is, and make it as real as you can. Okay?"

I was confused at first, but after a moment of hesitation, I nodded and closed my eyes. In my mind, Nia and I were back in her bedroom, watching the movie. And even though I knew when the jump scare was going to be, the tension still built to its peak, and as Doctor Nomiya unexpectedly reached to grab my arm, my response was the same as the night before: that rapid heartbeat, that chill, those pulsing dream lights, that overwhelming fear and surprise combined with Nia's anxiety over both the film and me.

"Okay, Amara-chi, you can stop now," he said gently. "I'm sorry for putting you through that again." After a pause, he continued. "You may have noticed, but your reaction was the same as you described: your skin temperature dropped significantly, just as your heart rate rose just as far."

"But I still don't feel any colder," I insisted. "I obviously felt my heart racing, but other than that, just the pulsing lights."

He gave me a half-smile, nodding. "Yes, that does serve to back up my hypothesis. To confirm it, though, I'll need someone else's expertise. If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll be right back." He got up and went into the hallway, leaving me with my confusion for a few long minutes. When he returned, he leaned against the back of his chair. "The person I need doesn't work here. She's... a specialist, if you will, but I've been told that she can be here in about an hour." Offering me an apologetic glance, he continued. "Unfortunately, that means you'll have to wait for her. Is that okay with you?"

"What's going on?" I asked, hoping that my concern didn't show up through my voice.

Doctor Nomiya was slow to respond. "You'll be fine, trust me. I just don't want to worry you with the details yet." His eyes turned serious, yet still soft. "Nothing to it, but it's a... complicated explanation that

just isn't worth it if we're wrong."

In hindsight, the excuse made sense: though the existence of the Maidens is pretty widely known, the Maidens themselves are still a secret, so you don't want to tell a girl that she is one unless you know for sure that she is. In the moment, though, all it did was confuse me, and despite his instructions, I was more than a bit worried.

As he left, I pulled a book from my bag and began reading to pass the time. It also helped focus my attention away from the situation until Doctor Nomiya returned with who looked to be a high-school-aged girl following him. "I'm sorry for the wait. This is—"

"The specialist, if you would," she interrupted bluntly as she came closer, visually inspecting me with interest and causing me to blush. A part of me wanted nothing more than to look away in embarrassment, but there was something about her that drew me to her. Yes, she was beautiful, her deep red hair elegantly framing her face and giving her an air of maturity, but it was her aura that captured my attention. I didn't even notice Dr. Nomiya leave. Later, it became obvious that it was her magical powers that I could sense, but I couldn't have known it at the time. After a moment, she suddenly stood up with a "Hmph." Even more confused, I saw her pull off her ring and place it into my hand. "Do you feel anything strange about this ring?"

It took a moment for me to sense it over my own racing pulse, but I eventually did. "Y-Yeah. It has a pulse, like... a heartbeat." Rings didn't normally do that, in my experience.

"Tap out the rhythm." So I did, for nearly a minute. The pace wasn't consistent, speeding up and slowing down with no discernible pattern. At the end, she nodded and spoke in a hushed voice. "You are familiar with the existence of the Maidens, the girls with magical powers bestowed upon them?" When I nodded slowly, she continued. "As so, too, are you one of us. You have great potential and a particular affinity for ice magic, it would seem."

I was stunned. "Wait, we're... both Maidens?"

She sighed, and it seemed like she wanted to roll her eyes. "Yes, I am actually Miú Aya, a member of the military's Magical Combat Assist team."

* * *

"Amara-ryo?" Iselle's voice cuts through my reminiscence as she gets to the roof. Fortunately, she's the only one who came up. "You said you had things to talk about? Is everything okay?"

Right. Out-of-character behavior gets noticed. I stand up and walk over to the fence surrounding the roof area. "Yeah, everything's fine. First, I wanted to apologize for having to run off yesterday. Something big came up that I needed to attend to. Your brother seemed concerned that you'd scared me off, but..." I chuckle. "Rather, I was wondering if... some time, we could..." I trail off as I stare out toward the horizon.

Iselle giggles. "You know, you're pretty cute when you're embarrassed."

I can feel my face flush at her words. I cross my arms, still staring through the fence. "You know, you're exacerbating the situation."

All my response does, however, is elicit another round of giggling from her. "Perhaps that's the goal." When she finally calms down, she adds, "But the answer to your question is: of course. So, at least you have that."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at her playfulness before I turn around to face her. "Well, I certainly appreciate it. But, as important as that obviously was, I do have something more serious to discuss." I pull off my keystone necklace and hand it to her. "What exactly did you feel yesterday with this necklace?"

As Aya had been, I have to be careful and somewhat cryptic, but I can hopefully make this process easier for Iselle. Half of my confusion then was just trying to gauge Aya's reactions and silences.

She thinks about my question for a moment. "Everything was normal, but then the necklace felt like it was burning me. Like, a really cold, icy burning?" She pauses. "It doesn't seem to have done any damage, but it caught me off-guard, and I dropped it in a panic." She shakes her head, chuckling. "That doesn't even make any sense."

"Actually, it might." She tilts her head at me. "Well, do you feel anything now?" I ask gently. I make sure to cut off the flow of my magic, so the passive radiation should be too weak for her to detect. Accordingly, she closes her eyes and shakes her head. Slowly, I allow my power to flow through me and into the keystone, careful to keep the power diffuse enough to not hurt her.

Soon, her eyes shoot open. "I feel it!" exclaims.

So I was right. Just to be sure and to avoid any placebo effect, I repeat Aya's experiment, shaping the flow of my power so that it should feel to Iselle like a heartbeat. Sure enough, she's perfectly in time, despite my deliberate variations in both speed and strength. I sigh. Now comes the hard part: explaining everything.

"Molva-ren," I tell her, "what I'm about to explain stays strictly between us. No one else can know about this. Not even your brother. Okay?" She hesitantly nods, confused, and I take my turn to hesitate as well, knowing that this is the last chance I have to maintain her innocence on the issue. With another sigh, I take back the necklace."Eira!" Before her eyes, my school uniform fades in a dim glow before being replaced by my Gown,

my katana on my hip, a faint light purple aura radiating from me. “Alsýon!” At my word, we’re enclosed in a small, transparent, soundproof pane of ice.

For her part, Iselle seems mostly just stunned, and the only sounds she manages to get out aren’t especially coherent. I consider locking the roof’s door but ultimately decide against it. Maidens emit, as part of our Imprint, a field that makes it impossible for us to be recognized in our transformation unless the person already knows us in both forms. It’s what functionally allows our identities to be confidential, though since Iselle saw me transform, she isn’t affected by it.

“You’ve heard of the Maidens before, right? The girls with magical powers bestowed upon them?” I ask her gently. She nods slowly, still confused. “And now, you’ve met one. What you felt was my power flowing through the necklace, which acts as a sort of lock around my power. In my case, it’s primarily ice magic, which explains why it felt to you as a freezing burn.” I pause. “Each Maiden has a keystone like that and, importantly, the only humans who can detect the energy are the Maidens themselves.”

“Which means... that I’m a Maiden as well?”

I nod, glad that she’s quick to follow. “Your power is still stilled, meaning that you can’t activate it the same way that I just did, but it does appear that you’ve been chosen to receive powers as well.” I clasp her hands in mine and focus on the tiny Imprint I can sense from her. “A specialty in water magic, if I had to guess.” Releasing her hands, I add, “So, yes, you’re one of us. I had some strange and confusing experiences before I found out about my own powers, and I wanted to save you from that.”

She’s understandably quiet for a few seconds, trying to wrap

her mind around what I've just said. "What do you mean, that I've been chosen for powers? And how would I unseal them?"

I take a moment to compose my answer. "The Maidens' powers come from the Queendom of the Fae in the Mist, the spirit realm. They're gifts so that humanity may defend itself against the Faes' enemies: power-hungry creatures of darkness that often see magicfree humans as easy prey." I pause. "I don't actually know how the choosing process works, other than the fact that young girls are ever chosen. To answer your other question, a Maiden cannot unseal her own power, though she can unseal another's, as can the Faes themselves. As for my experience..." I hesitate for a few seconds, trying to figure out how to explain. "Most Maidens' first experience with magic is through someone else, and her own energy is extremely weak until it's unsealed. You seem to fit that description, as even I can't easily detect your Imprint, so I wouldn't be too concerned. My seal, however, was strangely almost nonexistent, making me extremely sensitive to my own flow of energy and even triggering it accidentally a few times."

A silence falls over us for nearly a full two minutes as Iselle struggles to piece everything together and I return to staring at the horizon. "Unseal it in another..." she says slowly. "Could you unseal my power, Amara-ryo?"

It's my turn to be quiet until I can make my words obey my thoughts. "I could. I'm not going to, though. At least, not yet."

"Why not?"

I sigh. "There aren't that many Maidens. I only know of about a dozen across the entire country. A few work for the military, mostly in Magical Combat Assist, but even those who don't are still registered, just in case." I pause again. "If I were to unseal you, I'd have to report it, and it feels like there's something big

starting to happen, especially around the agency. Something messy. Don't know what, yet, but you'd end up dragged into the ensuing whirlwind, and you don't want that, trust me."

"If there's something happening, then it's all the more reason for me to help!"

That's what I expected her to say, and on the face of it, it makes sense, especially given the Maidens' premise as humanity's defenders. I sigh once more. "I worked in MCA for about three years. It's not all fun and games. Do you know what it's like to fight horrific magical creatures that want to control or enslave all of humanity? Or even just assisting in nonmagical combat, the things you see, the things you have to do? Do you know how hard it is to live with yourself when you've killed creatures and seen people die?" I'm rambling now, my voice more forceful than I intend, but my words are a torrent, unstoppable now. "And what about the times you fail? I..." my voice cracks. "I was the first one on the scene when Nia-chi died. Beat the first responders by four minutes. I was the best Maiden the MCA had, and I had literally just dropped her off, yet I still couldn't do anything. Do you know what that's like?"

Iselle comes over and puts her hand gently on my shoulder. "It's not your fault. It's not your fault."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't make it any less painful." I take a deep breath to steady myself, wiping my eyes before I continue. "Do you really want to put yourself through that? I won't lie: it has its rewards, and it's really satisfying when things go well, but becoming a fully-fledged Maiden is a good way to quickly lose your innocence." Another deep breath. "I left the CIA and Siel because I wanted to live a normal life, away from all that chaos. And it still caught up with me yesterday, dragging me back under. That's why I left the picnic yesterday: to stop

an attack at the train station, even after I'd told the agency almost a year ago that I was done working for them." I look directly into her eyes. "I just don't feel comfortable putting anyone else through that, especially when I've just sprung all this unbelievable information on you. You're in no position to make an informed decision, and there's no taking it back. And since you're still untrained, getting... recruited... into this particular mess could be a death sentence." I drop my gaze, unable to hold eye contact any longer, a nervous chuckle escaping me. "I'm sorry, Molva-ren. I really wanted to have a nice, innocent friendship, and look what I've done now."

She simply giggles. "Well, I can understand why you'd be so quiet about your past, so I appreciate you sharing it with me. Don't worry, I can keep a secret." She continues more seriously. "I'm sure that I'll ask you to explain some of that again at some point to make sure that I really understand, but our friendship does not have to revolve entirely around us being Maidens, either." She grabs my chin to force me to look at her. "I may not be able to give you the normal life you've been looking for, but I can give you a friend, at least." She winks, and one couldn't say it's not adorable. "I'm sure we'll figure out something, 'kay?"

"...Mhm."

She holds up a finger as an idea flashes in her eyes. I raise an eyebrow as she turns and walks back to her bag sitting a couple meters away, pulling out a notebook and a pen. When she returns, bounding toward me with the paper outstretched, I can see that she's written a phone number—hers, presumably.

"Thank you, Molva-ren."

She clicks her tongue a few times in disapproval. "No need to be so formal, Minori-ryo." She puts a strong emphasis on my first name, even if she does choose to keep the raised honorific.

“You wanted to be friends, didn’t you? Well, your training begins now.”

I can’t help but smile at her bluntness. “Thank you, Iselle-ren.”

In Concert

In the little over a week since the train station incident, Ari hasn't been able to determine... well, much of anything regarding the attack beyond what I'd gotten from interrogating the suspect. What limited coherence did exist among Ari's interrogation consisted of little more than geckos, and the man didn't even own any pets. In the end, we weren't really any further along than before, though we can confidently say that the attack must have been orchestrated by a group larger than our one captured suspect, especially given his lack of finesse, but neither the size of the group nor any of its members have become clear. But nor were our suspicions regarding the agency's choice to ignore the attack when they only hesitantly congratulated the capture, subtly reprimanded Ari, and let me off with an unofficial warning for engaging in the affair. Officially, since I'm no longer an MCA member, I had no involvement in the capture, which is fine by me.

I suppose that I should be grateful that there hasn't been any related activity since then, but since it feels like we're on the edge of something significant, what with the agency's

trepidation, the silence has been an uneasy one.

I try to force myself not to think too much about it. Rather, Rena's choir performance is tonight, and Iselle literally jumped up at the chance to come with me when I mentioned it to her a few days ago. As I'd suspected, her brother politely declined.

As I search my closet for something nicer than a t-shirt and jeans to wear tonight, I come across a box I'd forgotten I had. On top is an old journal that I used to keep sporadically, whenever I'd remember it exists only to forget it again a week later. My curiosity gets the better of me, and I open it to the page marked with a thin ribbon, roughly a third of the way through. The page contains a lone journal entry, dated almost exactly one year ago.

7:17:11 Enna 33

I have desires, of course, and things that I like or dislike, things I enjoy, things that upset me. But there are far more that I have no opinion on; to say even that I am neutral toward them is too strong a commitment. Nor could I tell you why I like ice cream nor why I miss Nia-chi, and that's the most terrifying of all. Of course, ice cream is sweet, and Nia-chi was my best friend, but those are hardly answers, nothing more than empty words on a thin sheet trying to cover up the gaping void behind the scenes.

At her funeral, people cried and grieved, yes, but they also celebrated the parts of her they loved the most. Yet I, her best friend, found myself entirely unable to articulate, even to myself, why I was upset, what had been lost. Clearly I was, as my own tears and grief attested, but I could no more understand those feelings than I could

throw a ball to the sun. A young girl who'd just lost her best friend, I was not asked to speak, and while I am grateful, it is not the same emptiness in my throat as in theirs—there is something they could never understand.

My heart sinks as I read this entry. I remember this one. It's marked the date of Nia's funeral, but I actually wrote it just after the clocks eased themselves past midnight into the following day, completely incapable of putting words to paper beforehand. A small, perverse smile does return to my lips as I think about how if Iselle and Atris are concerned about me now, their reactions to this mechanical past-me right after Nia's death would likely have been disbelief that such an emotionless automaton was actually secretly human.

It's part of how I managed to work for the CIA, actually. My coping mechanism has always been to shut down and compartmentalize to parse what would otherwise be overwhelming stress. And that was a large part of the reason why I was able to keep a level head through all that. But Nia's death was too much to handle.

* * *

I end up going with something simple and not too flashy: a cream-colored blouse and black ruffled skirt that falls just above my knees. The red ribbon that Nia gave me a few weeks before her death holds my hair in a ponytail.

I stand waiting at the Irèle train station for Iselle to arrive, leaning up against the pillar in the center of platform 3. I glance at the clock on my phone—1637—and sigh, somewhat regretful of how early I got here since we're planning to catch the 1707

train.

As the girl in question walks up to me excitedly, herself twenty minutes early and practically springing with each step, I give her a warm smile. “Minori-ryo!” she calls out, surprising me with a hug.

“Good morning, Iselle-ren. I love your dress,” I say as I pull apart from the embrace. The slant of the light on her azure sundress highlights its minimalist pale blue floral pattern.

She blushes and glances away, trying to deflect my attention. “So... what’s Calleni-ren like?”

“You’ll see soon enough.” She’s clearly unhappy with this lack of an answer as she scoffs and rolls her eyes. I giggle at her reaction before answering properly. “She’s a first-year middle school student and Nia-chi’s younger sister. She’s sweet and really easy to get along with, even easier to make smile, and she’s always had a maturity beyond her age, even when we were all young. Nia-chi and I were pretty much inseparable, but Rena-chi was definitely a common addition to our group.” I pause. “I said that you reminded me of Nia-chi, and while Rena-chi’s definitely her own girl, the two are pretty similar. As far as her singing goes,” I smile, “I’ve never personally heard her, but I suppose she must be pretty decent if she’s comfortable being in the choir given how scared she’d said she was about it.”

“What about you? Would you sing for me if I asked you to?”

I just stare at her for a moment. “I’m a trained special agent,” I say, my voice low. “Yet I’d still kill more people with my singing than I would with my blade and magic combined.”

She smiles. “You must be exaggerating.”

“Do you really want to test that theory?” I ask with a thin smile. She’s right, of course, but I’m sure than no one in the station would appreciate the kernel of truth behind it.

The conversation idles until the train arrives to take us to Siel. "What's it like to go back?" she asks a few minutes into the ride.

I take a few moments to gather my thoughts. "It's strange," I tell her. "I lived there for so long that it's still very much home to me, and the city itself hasn't really changed in the last year. I've changed a lot, though, so it almost feels like going back in time." I pause. "There's a distance now that I'm not the 'Mino-chi' that I used to be when I lived there."

She giggles. "I have a hard time imagining anyone calling you Mino-chi."

"I know, right? It's just Rena-chi, now, and her parents."

"What about your parents? Siblings?"

It's again a moment before I answer. "I'm an only child. My parents divorced when I was little, and my mother moved in with her new husband a couple years later. Last I heard, they'd moved to somewhere up in Turréli, but that was years ago." I pause. "My father still lives in Siel, but we've never been close, and I spent just about as much time at Nia-chi's place as mine anyway. He's paying most of my living expenses, but I haven't really spoken to him since I left."

"...I'm sorry." There's a long silence before she asks in a calm yet hesitant tone, "Do you miss it? Living in Siel?"

I sigh. "I mean, I don't necessarily hate my life in Irèle, if that's what you're asking. Things were definitely simpler back then. More chaotic, of course, with the MCA work, but I pretty much always knew what I wanted and how to achieve it. It was just a matter of doing it. Helps that I still liked my MCA job." I pause. "And I definitely miss both Nia-chi and Rena-chi."

"We're from further away than you are," Iselle explains. "Hollen, up in the midlands. But that's sort of what my brother said when he'd come to visit over breaks last year." She pauses,

then quickly clarifies. "That part about it being home and yet... not, somehow?" She sighs, turning her gaze out the window. "We have an older sister, Natalia-ryo. Graduated university and is now up in Farès, working as a personal assistant to some big-name executive. We were never that close growing up. She was in middle school before I could even talk that well, and she can be a bit self-absorbed, but I vaguely remember her feeling the same way, too."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" I ask with a smile.

"N-No! I just—" she turns back to me, flustered and blushing before she realizes that I'm not upset. "You're mean," she says, falsely pouting and giving me a playful shove.

I simply chuckle. "If you don't mind me asking, how do you feel about your sister?"

It's her turn to be quiet a moment. "I mean, I don't necessarily hate her, if that's what you're asking." She smiles before continuing. "A-chi and I have always been inseparable, but Natalia-ryo would generally keep to herself. She was never that family-oriented, preferring to throw herself at her studies or her after-school clubs or her job. It's why she's as successful as she is today. Nothing's out of reach for her. Yet..." she trails off, turning back to the window. After a moment, she shrugs. "She doesn't really feel like a sister, but I respect her, I guess."

I'm not sure how to follow up on that, so we're quiet for the remainder of the ride. When we reach Siel, the somewhat comfortable silence remains as we begin walking toward Rena's middle school.

Our path takes us through the heart of the city, popular shops lining both sides of the street. Though plenty of people are milling about, running errands after work, my attention is caught by something less obvious: an Imprint. It's faint, but

still clearly detectable to me, yet it's definitely not coming from the two of us. My mind racing, I quickly pull out my phone.

"What's going on?" Iselle asks, the same question rattling through my brain.

"I'm not sure..." I pull her to the edge of the street, out of earshot of the passing citizens. "I'll explain in a moment." I take a deep breath before clicking Ari's number.

He picks up after the third ring. "Indigo Wyvern. State your status."

Another deep breath. "This is Snow Leopard, requesting communication level zero." A nonexistent communication level, as far as the agency is concerned. It's a code phrase Ari and I created in case we ever needed to speak, just the two of us. Given that our investigation is off-the-books, it's best to be careful.

He takes a moment to, I presume, check that no one is listening around him. "CL Zero granted."

Iselle looks up to me in confusion and slight fear. "What is going on?!" she mouths, but I hold up a finger to silence her.

"I'm in the Siel city center," I explain to Ari. "At Main and Third Avenues. Are there any Maidens nearby?"

"Apart from you, no. We currently don't have anyone stationed anywhere in the southeast quadrant, and there aren't any civilian Maidens in Siel, either." He pauses, and concern colors his voice. "Why?"

"I can feel an Imprint." I hesitate, trying to form shapeless thoughts into words. "It doesn't feel belligerent, but it does feel a bit sharp, chaotic. Regardless, it doesn't feel like run-of-the-mill Fae magic."

He's quiet a few seconds, though I can hear his keyboard clacking in the background. "I don't see any reports consistent

with magical disturbances anywhere near you recently, but I'm trusting you." He hesitates again. "Snow Leopard, can you see if you can identify it?"

I don't really want to deal with this, but I also know that, in this moment, I don't really have much of a choice. We need more information, and right now, I'm the only one who can get it. I sigh and allow my annoyance into my voice. "I can try."

When I hang up, Iselle is staring expectantly at me, her fear and annoyance far stronger than mine. "Minori-ryo. What is happening?" she asks, her voice slightly uneven.

I sigh again. "I don't know exactly where it's coming from, but I can feel a magical disturbance nearby. It's faint, and though I can't identify it yet, it doesn't seem especially friendly. My former handler—the person on the phone—asked that I investigate it." I pause. "Wait here, and I'll come find you when I'm done."

My explanation does little to ease her concern, but she hides it quickly. "And you're sure you don't want an extra pair of hands?"

It takes me a second to grasp her implication. "You don't want to be involved," I tell her. "It's not all rainbows and sunshine. Besides, you're not trained to know what to look for."

She mumbles a response that I can't quite make out. Though it doesn't sound like one of agreement, she doesn't force the issue any further, letting her silence speak for itself.

With one more backward glance at her, I jog toward the source of the disturbance. All magic creates an Imprint, meaning that unless I want to risk alerting my target to my presence, I'm going to have to do this the normal way.

Unfortunately, the Imprint is faint, making it hard to track. What is fortunate, on the other hand, is my particular attune-

ment to foreign magic. One of the quirks that resulted from my magical seal being so weak is that I can detect small fluctuations of magic in the world, far smaller than other Maidens. As a result, I can sense this Imprint even though its source is either relatively weak or far away. After just a moment, I'm able to get a bearing on where I'm going. Of course, it's off on a diagonal relative to the city's street network, so it takes a bit more navigation to find. As I get closer, however, I can feel the Imprint strengthen, making my job easier. What becomes clear is that this one was far away—not weak.

Eventually, about fifteen minutes and four kilometers after I left Iselle, I pass a dark alleyway. Glancing down its length, I notice a man and a woman standing a few meters away from the main road. I make sure to stay out of their line of sight, and I'm only just within earshot of the conversation, but I gasp as two things about them draw my attention.

One is the Imprint itself. It's radiating from the woman as a dim, dark-red aura. Though she seems to be actively projecting some sort of magic, it's unlike more fluid Imprints I've seen of other Maidens and the Fae representative I've met. I don't, however, seem to be able to use it to reverse-engineer the spell she's casting.

"What about our protection? That's certainly worth its weight in gold."

But it's the second thing that holds my gaze, for the mysterious woman's conversation partner is none other than Colonel Stroa Kisa from the Clerèssian Intelligence Agency. The fact that he's facing away from me isn't enough to make him any less recognizable, what with his long dark hair, stone-gray suit adorned with a colonel's insignia, his slightly shorter right leg, and my memories of his incessant meddling in MCA affairs.

And that was definitely his voice.

“With all due respect, Colonel,” the woman snarls, the title coming out with pure derision, “you promised a lot more than that: men on the ground, spread of information...” She pauses for dramatic effect. “Shutting down the Maiden response.” Another pause. “This could be a worthy arrangement for both of us, but only if you uphold your end of the deal.”

“You would do well to remember who—”

“And you would do well to remember that our Order is the new master of life and death. It’s in your best interest not to test me, lest something... unfortunate... should happen to you.” Another dramatic pause as she stares at him. “You speak of your protection, yet you failed to protect us last week when two of your own got in the way. See that it doesn’t happen again.” Without even waiting for a response, the woman turns away, her heels clicking loudly against the pavement, progressively quieter as she leaves.

As much as I obviously don’t trust the mysterious Imprint woman, I can definitely appreciate how severely she put the colonel in his place. Before he can retreat toward me and reveal my hiding place, however, I clamber behind the opposite side of the building and make my way back to Iselle, my heart pounding.

Once I get there, I find her impatiently leaning against a wall. “What is going on?” she asks again, pointedly.

I try to still my pounding heart, unaided by the exercise. “I’ll explain, but I need to explain this to my handler as well.” I pause, glancing around, then pull Iselle into the nearby alley. “Eira! Alsýon!” In my soundproof ice shield, I dial Ari’s number once more, placing the call on speaker.

“Snow Leopard, CL Zero granted. State your status. What’s

going on?" he asks, mimicking my companion's question.

"You were right to be suspicious of the agency," I tell him. "I found Colonel Stroa talking with an unidentified woman, who was clearly the source of the Imprint. She called herself a member of an Order which she claimed was the new master of life and death. Unfortunately, I couldn't identify the magic she was using, just that her Imprinted aura seemed almost crystalline, like neither the Faen nor the Kotaí magic I've seen. And for me to detect it at four kilometers..." I take a deep breath. "I also have strong reason to believe that this Order is the one behind the train station incident last week given that she chastised Stroa-ryo for allowing two of his own to get in their way, which I'm assuming is the two of us."

"That Imprint is definitely different," he says, not that he'd have any way of knowing first hand. Scientific instruments can't detect magic any better than humans, so he's just relying on Maiden and Faen testimonies.

I nod, even though he can't see me, then take another deep breath. "They were discussing the arrangements of an alliance, and the woman was discontent with Stroa-ryo's failure to keep his end of the deal, threatening him. She wanted the agency's protection, our agents in the field, the spread of information, and..." I trail off.

"And..." he prompts. He knows this isn't good.

"The repression of Maiden forces against them."

He's quiet for a few moments. "Then it's good you aren't official. What was she offering in return?"

"I don't know," I tell him, my voice unsteady. "It was prearranged, but it has to be substantial, given her demands. All she said was that if the colonel was to get what he asked for, then he's going to have to give her what she wants first."

A nervous silence fills the air as Iselle and Ari process this information. "And if this Order," Ari says slowly, "is the one behind the train station attack as you suggest, then we might be in trouble." He pauses. "If they have Stroa-ryo in their pocket, then it's going to be hard to get the law out from under them." He pauses again, and I know it's coming, just from the way his voice leans. "Snow Leopard, can you...?"

I scoff, portraying an annoyance that isn't entirely false. I glance at Iselle, who's looking at me with concerned eyes, a reaction that's only too reasonable. "I don't have any more leads. I know it'll be difficult, but do your magic with what I've told you, then we'll talk about using mine."

"Fine, fine," he says, and I know he's waving his hand dismissively. "I'll keep you updated."

I hang up, release my magic, and turn my attention to Iselle, whose fearful and expectant eyes are drilling into me. I sigh and lead her back onto our original path toward the school. Fortunately, we left with plenty of time to spare, so even with that delay, we'll make it in time for the conversation. After a moment, I turn to her. "You understood that conversation, right?"

She nods, though her fear shines through her expression, her voice still sharp as she responds. "More or less, though some of the details went over my head. You're not going to do anything?"

"It's not that simple," I say slowly. "I can't detect the Imprint anymore, but even for me to sense it at all at that distance is proof that it was unusually powerful. Enough that I'm not sure I'd win in a clean fight against that woman." I pause. "So, we need information, and it's not like we can go interrogate the colonel. Since the conspiracy is within the agency, my handler

and I are essentially rogue agents, unsure of whom else we can trust.”

She forces a small smile, squeezing my hand. “You seem to trust me as well, if this conversation is anything to go on.”

“I told you that I left the MCA for a reason. Besides, I told Rena-chi that we’d be at her concert, and you were the one who said she’d train me in being a normal girl again.” Her face still shows her uneasiness. “If Kaskei-ren finds anything, he’ll tell me, and I’ll deal with it then. But we can’t know how to act without more information, and that’s his specialty.”

Even with my explanation, she maintains a certain level of skepticism and disapproval, which I can’t fault her for. “And you’re sure you have this situation under control.”

“About as well as we can right now. Which...” As much as I don’t want to admit it, if the agency is going to be suppressing Maiden support, then my participation is going to paramount to any resistance, and having Iselle would be extremely helpful. I don’t want to put her through that, but the sooner she gets unsealed, the sooner she can begin training.

“...Okay.” Her voice is still sharp, and I know that I haven’t won this argument, even if she’s choosing to drop the subject. Underneath our return to normal conversation, there’s a slight tension as we continue walking toward the school.

A New Era

With just final exams now standing in our way before summer break, there's been a nervous energy propagating the school recently. Small groups of students cling together before and after school, frantically pouring over their notebooks in hopes of finding that one fact that just so happens to be the one they need. From what I can tell, students' anxieties about these exams are directly proportional to how well they'll actually do. Though, I'm the exception to that rule: there's more on my mind than just the exams.

A slight chuckle escapes the student next to me as we sit on the roof during lunch. "Exams getting to you too, Amara-ren?"

I roll my eyes. "Oh, shut up, Molva-ren." It comes out a bit snappier than I intended, but he doesn't seem to notice. Part of me wants to tell him that it's so much more complicated than that, but I know full well that his response would be to immediately ask me to elaborate, so I keep quiet. I can feel his gaze linger upon me for a few seconds, and I adjust the hem of my skirt subconsciously. "It's just the math exam this afternoon. I'm not worried."

Now it's his turn to roll his eyes, albeit sarcastically. "Amara Minori-ryo, the next world-class mathematician. Oh, what the world may lose by wasting her time with these exams when she could be off solving... whatever problems they are that we mortals could never hope to understand."

He's trying to lighten the mood, to make me smile, but I simply ignore his comment and instead lay back, closing my eyes against the sunlight. It wouldn't do me any good to admit that I had, in fact, once dreamed of being precisely as he described, if a bit less arrogant about it. Besides, it turns out that I'm just not that much better than anyone else.

"Anyway," Iselle says pointedly from my other side, "I was trying to tell you about the concert, but you keep ignoring me!" I think that's probably because he doesn't particularly care, but she makes sure that he's listening before relaunching into her explanation anyway.

* * *

Iselle and I had taken seats in the front row at her suggestion, finding ourselves slightly more underdressed than many of those surrounding us, despite Rena telling me that it wasn't a formal event. At a second glance, however, it appeared that most of the people around us were parents, so it may have simply been a generational thing, or that they were simply wearing what they'd worn to work. I did notice that, as far as I could tell, Rena's parents weren't there. I guess I'd assumed that they'd be back in town by the concert since they were rarely gone for more than a week at a time; perhaps they were seated somewhere else and I just couldn't see them.

The concert itself was not quite what I'd expected. Four students stood downstage, dressed in what appeared to be school idol costumes

in vibrant costumes, strongly contrasting the school uniforms worn by the remaining students, who all stood upstage, Rena among them. Despite the leads' dresses, the music bore no resemblance to the upbeat, pop-style music that idol groups tend to perform. Rather, the four danced with slow, purposeful gestures, backed by the upstage students' a cappella harmonies. The minimalist approach was surprisingly effective, preferring to let the raw vocals and lyrics carry the mood. It was lovely.

After the final song, the students took a bow as the audience's applause filled the air, almost as loud as the singers' amplified voices. The others gathered their belongings, eagerly chatting with their neighbors, while Iselle took my hand as I led us through the school's hallways to the music room—the club's base of operations. Rena had invited us to their post-performance hang-out. And as awkward as it may have been to be the unknown guests, a full two, three, and even four years older than everyone else, all-in-all, Iselle and I each had a great time. Rena seemed excited that Iselle was there at all, especially when she heard Iselle call me by my first name.

* * *

“Minori-ryo!” I hear her call, pulling me out of my daydream. She seems almost as annoyed as she was with Atris a moment ago.

“Hmm?” I answer innocently, hoping that she hadn't been calling for a while.

She lets out a sound of disapproval. “What is it with you two and not paying attention today?”

“Maybe it's the exams,” Atris points out, somewhat sharp. I take a moment to notice that Iselle doesn't seem nervous about hers, and I chalk that up against my earlier observations about

everyone else.

She scoffs at him before turning to me again. "Do you have any plans for summer break?"

"Not really," I admit. Even though classes end shortly after exams, between Nia, Ari, Rena's concert, and the exams themselves, I haven't really considered what I'd be doing that far out. "I don't know. I have some books I've been wanting to read, but that's about all the planning I've gotten done."

She perks up in excitement, and I see Atris shake his head, a slight exasperated smile on his face. "I want to travel around some of northern Clerèssia: the observatory in Kyo, the castle at Tinène, the Syprén island shrine..." She sighs. "We're from a small town up in the midlands, and it's nice and all, but I've always wanted to explore other places." She adopts a fake pouting expression for a moment, glaring at her older brother. "I keep trying to convince Atris to go with me because I'm afraid to go alone, but—"

"I'm going to be staying with the rest of our family back home," he explains.

"Exactly," Iselle says with a bit more frustration than is probably warranted. She quickly readopts her excited attitude, however, and reaches over to place her hand on my arm, catching me off-guard. "Anyway, would you come with me, Minori-ryo?"

I hesitate a moment before flashing her a mischievous smile. "Do I get a choice in the matter?"

She scoffs again, offended, dramatically putting her hands on her hips. "Of course you do! Forcing you along wouldn't be fun for either of us!"

I soften my voice into a more gentle one. "Well, if nothing else comes up that I need to take care of..." I pause, knowing

that she understands what I'm alluding to. "Then I will happily go with you. Last time, my travels that way didn't exactly leave a lot of time for tourism."

She giggles softly. *Why doesn't that surprise me?* she seems to ask rhetorically with her gestures. "It's settled, then," she says aloud, determined. "We just have to make it through these exams."

* * *

And soon enough, though not as soon as they'd prefer thanks to the school's staggered exam schedule, all of the students find themselves on the summer-break side of time. At the end of the last day of spring term, Atris and I walk down to class 1-2 to meet Iselle. There, she's talking with Chiara and another girl whose name I can't quite remember, her back to me.

"Ugh, I'm ready to just sleep for the entire summer," Chiara groans. "I never expected the exams to be this much harder in high school."

"I know," the third girl adds. "But at this point, I'm just glad they're over."

Iselle shakes her head. "Come on, you two! It's summer break now!" She reaches over and gently shakes Chiara's shoulders. "Now's the time to be excited about all the wonderful things you can do!"

I can't help but smile at her energy. "Iselle-ren," I say gently, walking up and placing one hand on her shoulder. "It seems that the wonderful thing that Ostenne-ren is excited about is being able to sleep in tomorrow. Don't ruin that for her."

Chiara gives me a small nod of thanks for stepping in, and her assailant turns around with a slight pouting expression.

"Alright, alright, Minori-ryo. Sorry, Chiara-chi."

I teasingly roll my eyes at her. "Are you ready to go?" She nods slowly, then says her final goodbyes to her friends as I make my way back to the other side of the hallway. "Ugh, girls," I say mockingly disapprovingly to Atris, nodding my head back toward Iselle.

"You're one to talk, Amara Minori-ren," he says chuckling, emphasizing my rather feminine name. "You're more of a handful than Iselle has ever been."

"Oh, please," I respond, a hint of exasperation in my voice as I tug at the hem of my skirt. "She and I are nothing alike."

He just chuckles again. "Nope. Nothing at all."

Too many responses collide in my brain for any of them to be coherent, so I just stand there dumbly until Iselle joins us. She looks between the two of us, trying to decipher the situation, but eventually shrugs. "Ugh, you two." She shakes her head. "Come on, let's go."

Atris shoots me a knowing smile and nod before moving to follow his sister, leaving me to awkwardly catch up to the two of them.

As we walk toward their apartment, a surprisingly short walk in the early-summer air, I let the siblings carry the conversation, content to merely follow. My attention isn't on them, nor on the surroundings that my gaze manages to touch in my absentmindedness. It isn't until we've walked into their apartment and Iselle is staring at me with a pointed glance that I realize how inattentive I've been.

"Seriously," she says with a sigh of exasperation, "what is up with you two?"

I'd love to answer honestly, but with Atris still in the room, I do my best to give her a knowing glance. "Maybe Ostenne-ren

and I have more in common than you thought?"

She nods. "Maybe. But I don't think that's it."

Atris continues staring between us, trying to understand the stalemate that the discussion has become before shrugging. "Either way, I'd better finish packing everything and get going. It wouldn't do for me to be late for Natalia-ren's birthday." When I cock my head at him slightly, he continues. "It's the day after tomorrow. She's turning twenty-six this year."

That's not the only part of his comment I was reacting to, but I let it go. When I can't find anything to say to follow up, Iselle starts to take the reins of the conversation. "Make sure to wish her a happy birthday for me, will you, A-chi?" He nods, then she turns back to me. "Minori-ryo, will you come with me?"

I begin nodding, but Atris cuts in. "Actually, can I talk to her for a minute before I leave?"

Caught between them, I look back to Iselle, who nods. "I'll just be in my room. It's this way, end of the hall," she adds, pointing.

As the siblings make their way toward their respective rooms, I place my bag on the floor before following Atris into the northern side of the apartment. Unsure of what he wants to discuss, I lean against the door frame, waiting while he assesses his room, presumably figuring out what still needs packed. The room is by no means messy, but it is relatively cluttered, making his planning slightly more complicated.

A few moments later, however, he moves to his closet with a certain decisiveness. "Amara-ren," he says as he begins sorting through clothes, "I wanted to say that I'm glad that you and Iselle are going together. She really didn't want to come back to Hollen this summer, so as far as the rest of our family's concerned, you're the one who asked her to go with you, and

she couldn't bring herself to turn down the invitation."

"But—"

"Yeah, I know. I was there when she asked you, remember?" He pauses to smile at me before returning to his sorting. "But it's one of the reasons why she was so aggressive about it. For the record, though, she's not actually afraid to go alone but of the multiple earfuls she'd receive if she were to."

"Would it really be that bad?" I ask, a bit surprised.

"In some ways. In others, no." He sits on the bed as he takes a moment to compose his answer. "She's fourteen, but since Natalia-ren's so much older, our parents tend to forget that she's not, like, six by comparison." He sighs. "As the two girls in the family, they get compared a lot, something I was lucky enough to avoid most of the time. Natalia-ren set the bar so impossibly high in so many ways, and being held to those same standards, even as an anchor, has been really hard on Isa. Especially when she gave up trying to follow in her footsteps and just become her own person."

That's certainly not what I expected to hear. "I may not have known her that long, but I'd say that she's become a wonderful person in her own right."

"Oh, I totally agree. I'm not best friends with people I don't like." He smiles. "But there's always been a tension between her and Natalia-ren, though Isa usually tries to downplay it. She won't admit it, but now that she has the option not to be home for Natalia-ren's birthday—a celebration of the unchosen rival she could never hope to beat—she's definitely excited to take it." After a moment, he gets back up, returning to his packing.

I shift my weight onto my other leg, leaning against the other side of the door frame. "Why are you telling me this now?" I ask.

"I'm worried about her," he answers after a short pause. "She doesn't show it, but... Well, rather, she usually tries to pass it off as something else, but it's no surprise that she always wants to feel included, respected. She hates being seen and treated like a child." He pauses again, sighing. "I told you before that she's always looking to become friends with the older students since it'll make her seem older than she actually is." He turns to me. "Don't get me wrong, she really does like you specifically, but I also think that deep down, you're also the perfect candidate for that, given your reputation at school."

I frown slightly. "A reputation I'd spent time cultivating."

He sees through my insincerity, however. "But one you're not too actively maintaining, Miss Pluperfect. Your interaction with Ostenne-ren this afternoon?" he smirks. More seriously, he continues, "Sometimes it's subtle, but you've both been acting differently since you met. It seems that you've both been great for each other."

"I can't help but feel like she's done more for me than I have for her." Specifically, how I've gotten her involved, at least peripherally, in Ari's and my investigation.

"Even so," Atris responds with a smile, though he seems unconvinced. "Trust me, she welcomes that opportunity, whether she's entirely aware of that consciously. Anyway," he says after a pause, "I want to thank you. She and I are undeniably close, but we're siblings. Your friendship is different, and I know it means a lot to her. I only ask that you treat her like a close friend and not the innocent first year she can come off as sometimes. Help her have the summer break she's been waiting for."

"I'll do my best." I smile. "But did you have the same pep talk with her about me?"

"Maybe," he admits, chuckling. I genuinely can't tell if he's being serious. "But you should go. Don't keep her waiting, do you? I'll see you when you two get back."

He's right, and it also saves me from not knowing how to continue this conversation. "Alright. Thanks, Molva-ren."

As I make my way to Iselle's room, Atris's story continues running through my head. In hindsight, his explanation makes sense, but I hadn't expected that about Iselle's childhood. I soon find her laying in her bed, atop the covers, phone in hand. When I hesitate the doorway, she pats the space below her with her feet, and I take the indicated seat after a moment's pause.

She doesn't immediately say anything, instead choosing to watch intently as I glance around her room. "Hmm?" I ask after an uncomfortable silence where I can't think of anything to say.

She's still quiet another moment before she eventually speaks. "Well, we still need to figure out some of the details for our trip. But before that, I think you should call your handler, even if just to tell him that you're not going to be in Irèle for a while."

She's right. Ari's kept me updated on his search over the last few weeks, but his hands are even more limited than we'd expected, especially with the need for secrecy, and I've been procrastinating on telling him about our trip. "...Okay." I pull my phone out of my bag and pull up Ari's number. With a deep breath, I press the call button as Iselle resettles in her bag, her feet coming to rest once more at my side, her gaze on her phone. "This is Snow Leopard, requesting Communication Level Zero," I say once Ari's answered.

"Granted," he responds after a moment. "Everything's been quiet on my end. A few possible blips here and there, but nothing actionable. Why? What's going on?" I tried to lean into the rote, formal language to hide it, but he must sense my

hesitation.

“Spring term just ended, and a friend and I are going to be traveling during summer break,” I explain after a brief pause. “We’ll be exploring a large part of northern Clerèssia, so you’re not going to have me on-call for local operations starting in the next day or two.”

He’s quiet a moment. “Understood. If something should arise, however, will this friend pose any challenge to you pursuing it?”

Despite—or, rather, because of—my nerves, I let out a small chuckle as I glance at Iselle. “No, I’m not worried about that.” Keeping the operation a secret from her isn’t really a concern of mine at this point, especially after what Atris told me. “Besides,” I tell Ari, “the only people who ever found out were my father and Nia-chi’s family, so I think we’ve seen that I can keep it a secret as need be.” I pause once more and take a deep breath. “I do have a favor to ask, though. Crimson Fox and Black Swan are still stationed up there, right?”

He seems surprised by my question, but I can hear his keyboard clattering for a moment. “Hmm... Looks like Black Swan is on assignment in Turréli...” After another few seconds, I get the other half of the answer. “But yes, it seems that Crimson Fox is on standby in Siana. Would you like me to make contact with her?”

I do a quick calculation. Siana is between Tinène and the Syprén Island shrine, which makes it an easy detour for us. “It’ll be at least a couple days before we’ll make it to Siana,” I tell Ari. “Just ask Crim to keep an eye out, and I’ll make contact with her when we arrive.”

“Roger. I’ll let her know, but you know how she can be,” he says. One to act on her own instincts, yeah. A good leader who

can struggle with following. Beyond her skills, it's the main reason I want to talk with her—she's probably the Maiden least likely to allow the agency to shut her down. I'm just hoping that she'll be more likely to listen to me. "I don't have the exact details now, but Black Swan is on a long-term undercover mission," he adds, "but I can keep you updated on her as well."

I notice Iselle looking up at me intently once I've hung up. "The castle at Tinène," she says excitedly, "has a gorgeous stained glass mosaic. Legend has it that it was built by the goddess Neyu herself as a mark of appreciation for her followers." She pauses, her smile wide. "Apparently, the colors—especially the blues—are perfect matches for the overlooked ocean, and I've read that the otters are especially adorable. My favorites."

Her phrasing seems too constructed, too intentional, too artificial to be purely innocent, but now I have an idea. I'd prefer it to be a surprise, however, so I instead adopt a playful voice, asking, "Is that your way of saying that you want to go there first?"

She gets up and makes her way to the door. With her hand upon the frame, she finally gives her answer. "Well, it's also the closest, isn't it?" She heads back toward the central area of the apartment, her steps quiet on the carpet.

I'm left alone in her room, left to worry that I may not have handled that well. Not knowing what else to do, I take a moment to look around her room again. It's relatively small, just a couple meters on each side. Her bed is pressed against one corner, its white frame matching the narrow nightstand. A pale pink beanbag holds a few stuffed animals in the opposite corner, next to her desk, and a handful of small posters and pictures frame her closet on the adjacent wall. Despite the unmade bed, the room is quite neat and organized.

I lean backward, locking my eyes onto the patterned ceiling as my brain stops focusing on the world in front of me. I think back to my conversation with Ari and the mission that Black Swan is on. She's someone whom I've only worked with once or twice, but she made for a difficult teammate to plan around. She's not weak, and she can definitely pull her weight in a confrontation, but her low self-confidence meant she was constantly in her own head and really struggled any time she didn't just rely on her instincts and reflexes. I'm a bit biased since that clashes pretty strongly against my more methodical, planned movements, so it's true that we simply don't work well together, but her training only ever seemed to exacerbate that tendency. So, I find it surprising that she'd be the one chosen for that operation when, at first blush, it seems to me that the other Maidens might be a better fit, unless there's something specific about this assignment that's well-suited to her.

It's a few minutes before Iselle returns, a glass of water in each hand. "A-chi just left," she says, handing one of the glasses to me. "So, it's just us now. What's the situation?"

"Thanks." I hold up a finger while I take a drink. "We'll need to take a detour after Tinène." She flashes me a curious glance, though I know she was listening to my conversation with Ari. "There's a Maiden in Siana that we should talk to."

Her True Self

I'm woken by the light sound of rustling as Iselle gets out of bed and begins getting dressed. How she, on the other hand, already woke up is beyond me, as it's still an hour or two until the summer sunrise. Opening my eyes, I notice that she's changing by the light in the attached bathroom, the door mostly closed to prevent it from spilling into the bedroom. I smile at the gesture and close my eyes once more, desperate to not get out of bed just yet.

After Atris had left for Hollen, Iselle and I went over our plans for the trip in general, as well as what we hoped to accomplish in Siana. However, without talking to Crimson Fox, it's pretty much impossible to know what will happen. Once we'd settled what we could, we continued chatting for a while before I eventually went home to finish packing, agreeing to meet her at the train station at noon the next day. Even without a direct train route, we arrived in Tinène and checked into our hotel room by mid-evening yesterday. And though we went to bed at a time in accordance with our plan to head to the castle before anyone else would be there, I guess Iselle didn't share my

difficulty in falling asleep. I'd expected her to be stuck awake in excitement, but instead, I was the one whose thoughts were racing, preoccupied with the surprise I have for her and what will come of it.

But when the alarm I set goes off about ten minutes later, I force myself to roll out of bed. "Good morning, Iselle-ren," I manage to get out with a yawn that doesn't quite hide a simultaneous groan.

She giggles. "Good morning. Not a morning person?" For her part, she's sitting comfortably on her side of the bed. A bright smile is spread across her face, and she shows no sign of exhaustion.

"Not when I can avoid it."

"Weren't you the one who suggested getting up early to visit Aimaéri?"

I frown. Yes, but not because I wanted to wake up early. Rather, "It's worth seeing it at sunrise. Besides, it's a popular tourist destination, and you know how I feel about crowds." Not quite the whole truth, but close enough. I shrug, moving to pull on my clothes for the day. It's not long before Iselle breaks out into another round of giggling. As I switch my pajama top for a different t-shirt, I turn to face her. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," she says. "Just you, Minori-ryo. Who knew you were such a great actress?"

I raise an eyebrow at her, expecting her to continue, but she doesn't. "Care to elaborate?" I eventually prod.

"Didn't you tell A-chi and me that we wouldn't recognize the person you were before you transferred to Irèle?" I nod as she pauses. "Well, I'm realizing just how true that was. See, you're infamous at school for being extraordinarily private and enigmatic, polite but terse and distant, no-nonsense and

hardworking to a fault. But,” she continues, “little does anyone else know that you actually have quite a playful side, and for someone who always uses the individual stalls in the locker room at school, you seem awfully comfortable openly changing in front of me.” She giggles once more. “And who would have guessed that you’re a cuddler in your sleep?”

“Really? I...,” I trail off, caught off-guard. Nia, Rena, and I had a handful of sleepovers growing up, seeing how often I was at their apartment, and in particular, Nia and I fell asleep together on the couch or in her bed with some regularity. And she was the type of person who’d have teased me about cuddling her if it ever happened—especially if she’d found me cuddling Rena instead. “*You know, Mino-chi,*” she’d have said with a smirk and a wink as she pulled Rena toward her, “*my sister isn’t a stuffed animal. Perhaps we should find you one?*”

But Iselle makes a sound of affirmation, her tone more serious. “Mm. I was trying not to wake you up, but I’m honestly surprised that I managed it.” A moment later, her voice regains all of its playfulness in an instant. “You didn’t make it easy.”

I turn back around, blushing, to finish getting dressed. “W-Well, I hope you weren’t too uncomfortable or anything.”

“No, I don’t mind. For an ice Maiden, you’re surprisingly warm. Just,” she adds after a short pause, that teasing tone still dripping from her voice, “no untoward fondling, ‘kay?”

I sigh, too tired to think of a comeback against her incessant assault, choosing to dismiss it instead. I double-check my pockets, making sure I have everything I need. “Sure, whatever. Why don’t we just get going?”

She finally acquiesces, and she thankfully relents during our brief walk through Tinène’s twilight streets, allowing me to lapse into autopilot. The area is well-signed, so it’s easy to navigate

without too much conscious thought, and I simply fade back into a half-asleep state until we approach our destination.

The castle itself is imposing, but that's more the result of its function than its size. According to the legends, it began as a few small houses centered around a chapel that would form the initial town of Tinène. Much later, though still a thousand years ago, it was transformed into a defensive strategic point where the monarchs could retreat to safety during wartime. As such, it more resembles a military fort than a lavish palace. Soon after the monarchy was abolished at the start of this grand cycle—just over two hundred years ago—it was converted into a cross between a historical preservation site and a public park. Though far larger, the castle retained the name of the chapel, and now the entire preservation bears the name, a remnant of old Clerèssian. If memory serves, the name means something akin to “home” or “haven”.

“Come on, Minori-ryo!” Iselle exclaims as she lightly tugs on my arm, leading me toward the central building.

I smile. “Excited for something, are we?”

Instead of replying, she lets go of my hand and bounds toward the door. I shake my head and follow at a more casual pace. At least she's patient enough to wait for me.

About ten meters from the door, the main corridor widens into a large, square foyer. Standing opposite us is a pair of ornate wooden doors, which lead to the chapel. Between them hangs a silver banner depicting nine stars—three each of maroon, cerulean, and a dark green—joined through their centers by a golden rope. Dotting the walls are small bronze sconces providing light to the wooden benches below.

Iselle pauses, almost seeming to steel herself before she begins walking toward the doors, grabbing my hand once more. She

gasps in awe as we pass through the door on the right, stopping a few steps inside the chapel.

It's only after I scan the room and confirm that it's empty of anyone else that I allow my gaze to drift upward. I've been here once before, but it's still hard not to be surprised by the sheer magnitude of the stained glass display. The room is certainly not small, measuring roughly fifteen meters wide, twenty-five meters long, and five meters high, but the ocean mural commands the space, taking up a large portion of the back wall. Since it faces eastward over the sea, it magnificently catches the rising sun behind it, which only serves to emphasize the breathtaking colors.

I lead the rarely-speechless Iselle by the hand up to the window, pressing her hand against the glass, deep in the true-to-life waters. "Eira!" I say, activating my full transformation.

If her confusion and surprise wasn't evident in the way she looks up at me, it's certainly clear in her voice. "Minori...-ryo...?"

She should be able to feel my powers gently flowing over her, searching for the strongest point of hers as I pull a small necklace from my pocket and fasten it around her neck, the amethyst butterfly pendant falling just below her collarbone. When I find the core of her Imprint, I take a deep breath.

"I call out to you, fellow daughter of the Fae," I say in the Faen language, imbuing the language with my magic and allowing Iselle to understand it. As I do so, I wrap the flow of my energy around the necklace, weaving it into the spell. "I promise to be your protector, just as we, together, are the protectors of the world. Release your seal and accept your destiny!" I soften my gaze, taking her other hand in mine with a smile. "We welcome you, sister Iselle."

At the conclusion of the spell, a pale glow emanates from Iselle as her regular clothing fades into her magical Gown: a translucent teal-blue dress atop a strapless white brassiere and shorts, the dress's layered skirt streaked with lighter blues and whites reminiscent of the waves. Her normally blue-green hair shimmers in a bright, pale blue, and her new keystone glows brightly from her neck.

Fortunately, I'm braced for the blast of power that erupts from her as her seal is broken. A shiver passes over me as the magic emanates throughout the room. I wonder if she can also feel the comparatively calm, gentle energy flowing from where her hand meets the glass.

Minori, daughter of ice, an equally calm, gentle voice sounds in my head, the words in accented Clerèssian. Welcome once more.

Thank you, Neyu-ryo, I relay. This place has always been comforting to me, and it seemed an all-too-fitting place for her to be unsealed, especially when she told me she wanted to visit anyway.

Neyu gives a light chuckle. *She may have felt drawn here, she says slowly. Magic does work in strange ways.* Despite her phrasing, I don't get the impression that she specifically knows of any such mysterious lure, let alone orchestrated it. *But since you are here, and seeing that she is a daughter likewise of water, would you entrust her to me momentarily?*

I nod. *I would be grateful, and I am sure that she would be honored.*

Returning my attention to the room, I feel the overwhelming cascade of Iselle's rush of magic coming to rest at a natural baseline. Her Imprint, formerly weak by even my senses, now flows brightly throughout the room, rivaling my own as it pulses in her inexperience.

She staggers momentarily, a slightly dazed expression on her face. Her breathing slightly uneven, she places a hand on

my shoulder, leaning her weight into me. "Sorry," she says after a few seconds, fully supporting herself once again, though without taking a step back. "I just felt really tired all of a sudden."

"No need to apologize. If anything, it's my fault for not warning you." She cocks her head as I explain. "When a Maiden is unsealed, she releases a large amount of magical energy. It's almost like a blast wave, although it doesn't carry any force on its own." I pause. "Either way, you spent a lot of energy that you're not used to spending. You also didn't get to funnel that release, and you might think of it as like how you might feel more exhausted after a short sprint than a long jog, even if they actually took the same amount of energy."

She simply looks up at me for a few seconds before wrapping me in an embrace, burying her face tightly in my shoulder. I return the gesture, smiling as her warmth encompasses me. "Thank you, Minori-ryo." Despite her efforts, her voice comes out slightly uneven, though I can still hear her smile. There's more to her sentence that she can't quite get out, but we both know what she means.

"I'm sorry for waiting," I say quietly as we pull apart, keeping my hands on her shoulders. "Welcome aboard, Blue Otter."

She drops her gaze to the floor, a shy, almost embarrassed smile across her face. "Snow Leopard," she says after a moment, raising her eyes once more. "I knew you were paying more attention than you'd let on."

"You weren't particularly subtle." I chuckle. "I'd been hesitating ever since we went to Siel, but I knew this had to happen eventually. That whole conversation was the tipping point to make it happen sooner rather than later, but I wanted to keep it a secret. I hope you're not too upset about that."

"Not really," she says quickly, then pauses. "So, what now?"

Are you going to report me to the agency?"

"Not really," I giggle, regaining my seriousness after a moment. "Well, not quite yet, anyway. Given the situation, I'm not sure that it'd be good for the agency to know about you, regardless of what the policy may be. And besides, they'd just pawn you off for training anyway." Under normal circumstances, she'd be put through more than the baseline civilian Maiden training given that she's expressed interest in joining the agency. I'm the only Maiden in the area, but they would be unlikely to request me to handle the training since I'm no longer an active agent. It'd probably fall to Crimson Fox, though they might have called in Emerald Viper, an Ascian Maiden who lives a bit closer—southeast of Ascia's capital, Tensi—and is closer in age, being only a few months older me than me.

She smiles. "What would that entail?"

"Normally," I begin with a stress on the word, "the first lesson would be in activating and deactivating your powers. However, these aren't normal times, and I suspect this won't be a normal first lesson." I pause, turning to the glass. "Neyu-ryo?"

Thank you, Minori, she says, projecting to both Iselle and me. *Are you ready, daughter of water?*

When Iselle nods, I turn to Neyu. "Take your time, but I'm sure that people will be here to see the space soon." To Iselle, I add, "You're in good hands, Iselle-ren. Trust me. When you're done, deactivate your transformation and meet me in the hallway." I pause, gesturing to the doorway in the side wall, which leads to a staircase. "You can take the stairs through there and get to the front that way. There's a staircase at the end of the hall that comes down behind the main entrance."

With Iselle's quiet sound of agreement, I head to the room's entrance, pausing to look back as I go. She stands there, her

hand reaching toward the glass, her gaze turned upon me. A calm smile rests upon her lips as the sun shines beautifully through the glass to filter through her dress, giving extra depth to the highlights on its skirt. I'm struck by how beautiful she is, and it's enough for now to suppress my guilt and anxiety about being the one responsible for releasing her power.



Eventually, I reach the door and close it behind me. Reverting my transformation but retaining my magic, I make sure to close the other entrance before taking a seat at one of the benches on the side wall. Despite the unpadded wood, the bench is surprisingly comfortable. I cross my legs and lean back, letting my gaze unfocus against the beamed ceiling. It's

not long, however, before I yawn and realize I'm dangerously close to falling asleep. Instead, I let out a quiet "Vedlyn," and a column of cold air begins to form, swirling gently around me, causing me to shiver.

About ten or fifteen minutes later, two middle-aged couples walk in, one of them accompanied by an elementary-school aged girl. Despite Aimaéri being famous—alongside its history—for its view of the stained-glass mural, especially at sunrise, it's actually more common for people to arrive later, slightly after sunrise. Since it's stunning regardless, why wake up quite so early? That's why I was confident that no one would be here when Iselle and I showed up.

With her still in the chapel, however, it's best if she could keep the privacy and anonymity. I can't know what Neyu is planning for her, but other people stepping in could be problematic, especially if they see her transform. "Excuse me, are you here to see the chapel?" I ask, standing up and cutting off the swirl of air around me as the group approaches me. When they nod, I continue, "You'll need to wait out here for just a few moments."

"Why?" the little girl asks, tilting her head and causing her ponytail to bounce. It's not a harsh or demanding tone, more a gentle curiosity, but her mother puts her hand on her shoulder with a slight scowl.

"I'm not sure exactly what's happening," I say truthfully, "but there's someone in there at the moment who needs the space to herself for just a little bit." An idea pops into my head. "Some sort of shrine maiden, it seems? Regardless, it shouldn't be too long."

The girl's father is the first to respond as the two families take to different benches. "I didn't know Aimaéri had shrine maidens."

They don't. "I didn't either, actually."

After a ten minute period which seems to last far longer, I feel Neyu's Imprint gently wading toward me. *As a daughter of water, she says, I have given to her what I am able to give in this form and in this time. It will be up to her to master her potential.* I hear the lilt of a quiet smile grace her tone as she finishes.

Thank you, Neyu-ryo, I respond. Even if no one else is to know to truth of the matter, it is perhaps appropriate that you are considered gods and goddesses of our world.

In only some ways, perhaps, she allows. In others, it is a title no more befitting of me than it is of you or any other. There's an empty pause before she speaks again. *You should know, Minori, that the winds and waves do seem to turn a certain way, though I cannot know precisely what should unfold. It is nothing but mere speculation, but as I can sense your concern, I feel it in me to satisfy it with mine.* Despite the warning, her tone shifts to belie an optimism and hope. *Take care of her, Minori.*

Once she withdraws and I return my focus to the world in front of me, I notice the girl's mother on the phone while the girl chats with her father, though the girl keeps glancing over at me. The other couple, also at a bench on the wall opposite me, talks quietly between each other. In the meantime, a handful of other people have arrived, most of them standing around the periphery as they wait. Soon, Iselle walks in as well, having reversed her transformation and wearing the blouse and denim skirt she put on this morning. The butterfly necklace still sits around her neck, but it no longer actively glows.

"Ah, sorry I'm late," she says as she approaches me. "I hope I didn't make you wait too long for me." She pauses, then lowers her head sheepishly. "My alarm didn't go off this morning."

I pull her into a loose embrace. "It's fine," I say once we pull

apart. We've all had to wait anyway, actually." She cocks her head. "It seems there was a shrine maiden using the space. I wonder if she's still here."

"I don't think so," she says slowly. "There was a girl coming from upstairs as I came in. She looked she might be the shrine maiden you're talking about." She pauses a moment. "Should I check the chapel?"

Given that she knows exactly when the so-called shrine maiden left the room, it'll be no surprise that the room is empty, and she also knows there's exactly zero chance of actually interfering with whatever hypothetical ritual might have been occurring. Even so, I sigh. "I won't stop you, I guess. Just don't blame me if you get scolded, okay?"

She rolls her eyes with a teasing smirk, beginning to walk toward the chapel entrance nearest us. "You know full well that I absolutely will blame you." When she reaches the door, she pulls it slightly ajar, peeking through the small opening. After a moment, she opens it fully, turning back to me with a giggle. "But it looks like you're safe from my wrath for now, Minori-ryo." She holds out her arm toward me. "Shall we?"

I shake my head, chuckling, as I walk toward her. "Sure." After a moment, I cock my head to ask, "She had told you to let everyone go in, didn't she?"

Her body tenses slightly, and there's a beat before she answers. "You caught me," she says with a giggle.

I smile as I meet her at the entrance, the other visitors moving to join us after our unofficial holdup.