
A Tale of the Secret Saint
NOVEL
3
Written by
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A Tale of the Secret Saint ZERO



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE STORY THUS FAR

"YOU MUST BE SERAFINA. I am your cousin, Sirius Ulysses."

Sirius, the young knight brigade vice-commander, visited the six-year-old Serafina in the forest she had been living peacefully in with her young spirit friends. However, when faced with mortal danger, Serafina's extraordinary power was unleashed, and she returned with Sirius to the royal capital to start a new life.

Once there, Sirius established the Royal Red Shield, a unit comprised of capable knights dedicated to Serafina's protection. However, their all-important first mission was…a beach vacation on the continent's west coast?!

But what was supposed to be a relaxing holiday turned into an unexpected adventure as Serafina discovered the supposedly vanished first Spirit Lord's palace and the Royal Red Shield were called upon to exterminate a horde of terrifying monsters in the nearby woods!


Sea
Forest of Lent
The Arteaga Empire
Vlad Forest
Starfall Forest
Set Coast
The Royal Capital
Galle Village
Náv Kingdom
N
Entire Continent
Kingdom
Empire

Character List



SERAFINA NÁV

The second princess of Náv. Has crimson hair and golden eyes. She lived hidden away in the Forest of Lent because of her blindness since birth, but she returned to the royal capital after regaining her sight. Despite her tender age, she already possesses exceptional ability as a saint.



SIRIUS ULYSSES

Vice-commander of the Náv Horned Beast Knights at the young age of nineteen. Current head of the Ulysses dukedom and nephew to the king. A handsome man with gray hair and silver eyes, he is the kingdom's strongest swordsman.



SEVEN

A young spirit boy who has a pact with Serafina.



CANOPUS BLAZEJ

A young man from the islander minority group. After Serafina chose him as her personal knight, he swore an oath of fealty to her.



SCHEAT KNOWLES

Formerly belonged to the First Knight Brigade, but was transferred to the Royal Red Shield. A cheerful and boisterous knight with red and golden hair.



MIRACH QUARK

Formerly belonged to the Second Knight Brigade, but was transferred to the Royal Red Shield. A caring and helpful knight with a slender physique and baby face.



MIAPLACIDUS AMES

Formerly belonged to the First Knight Brigade, but was transferred to the Royal Red Shield. A brawny and masculine knight.



FACKT JIE

Formerly belonged to the First Knight Brigade, but was transferred to the Royal Red Shield. Nicknamed the "Ambassador of Sarcasm," a knight known for his gift of gab.



LUDO

A fenrir that Serafina met in the forest and is secretly keeping in her garden.

Procyon Náv
Serafina's father. The king.

Spica Náv
Serafina's mother. The queen.

Vega Náv
Serafina's older brother. The first prince.

Capella Náv
Serafina's older brother. The second prince.

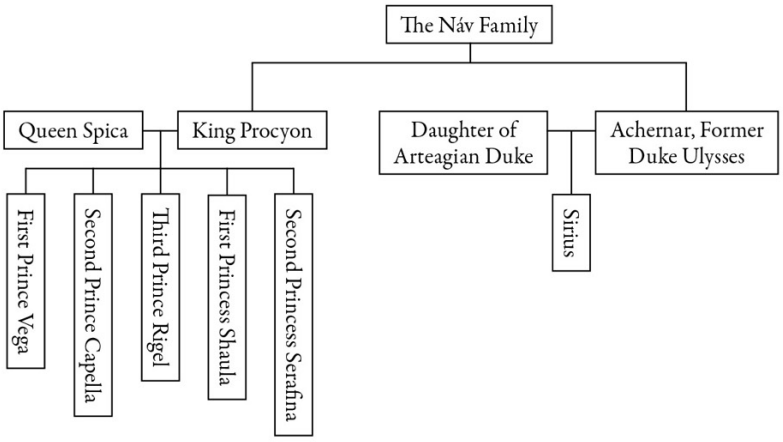
Rigel Náv
Serafina's older brother. The third prince.

Shaula Náv
Serafina's older sister. The first princess.

Wezen Wald
Captain of the Náv Horned Beast Knights. A gallant and highly respected man, yet terrible at paperwork.

Deneb Bonino
Former captain of the Second Knight Brigade. Was reassigned to captain of the Royal Red Shield.

Náv Kingdom Royal Family Tree



NÁV KNIGHT BRIGADE

Commander	Wezen Wald
Vice-Commander	Sirius Ulysses

HORNED BEAST KNIGHTS

	Captain	Vice-Captain	Members
First Knight Brigade ROYAL GUARD	Kaus Australis		Lukbar Haynes
Second Knight Brigade ROYAL GUARD			
Third Mage Knight Brigade MAGE KNIGHTS			
Fourth Saint Knight Brigade SAINT KNIGHTS	Adhara	Mirfak	
Fifth Knight Brigade ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS			
Sixth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY			
Eleventh Knight Brigade MONSTER SURVEYING WESTERN SIDE OF KINGDOM			

ROYAL RED SHIELD

	Captain	Members	Personal Knight
	Deneb Bonino	Scheat Knowles Mirach Quark Miaplacidus Ames Fackt Jie Sador	Canopus Blazej

Serafina and the Royal Guards' Interrogation Battle

IT HAPPENED THE DAY AFTER we took care of all those Lodrigone Continent monsters. I'm a pretty smart cookie, so I could immediately sense that something was off with my royal guard knights.

"Princess Serafina, is that all you're eating for breakfast? Dear me, you won't have enough energy to stay active for even an hour!"

"I spent all day at the beach today, Princess! Now look at me! I'm a beautiful golden color with no tan lines in sight! I've achieved the strongest form I possibly could—no, perhaps I've even achieved perfection!"

I was used to the knights chatting my ear off with stuff like that from the moment my eyes popped open in the morning until my head hit the pillow at night, but now, for some reason, they were all completely silent.

They're either plotting to get up to no good, or they're feeling guilty about something they've already done, I thought. My gaze ran over the row of knights sitting at the table, eating their breakfast without even a peep.

"I can see right through you." I scrunched up my face in an attempt to look serious and spoke in the gravest tone I could. "Someone here has done something naughty. Fortunately, I'm quite forgiving, so if you confess to your bad deeds here and now, I won't be upset. So…*out with it*!"

My demand made every knight immediately freeze in place, and they all exchanged silent glances. I was clever enough to unravel their line of sight and suddenly had a eureka moment.

"Aha! I've got it! Canopus!"

"Yes?!"

"Since you can swim deep down to the bottom of the sea, you must've hidden something of mine down there! That's why my special cushion I brought all the way from the castle is missing!"

"Princess Serafina, that is mere mudslinging! I humbly apologize for bringing this matter up, but within the span of a night, you kick each one of your cushions from your bed. Most of them fall beneath it or are hurled into the corners of your room. Every morning I gather them for you; I just haven't been able to do it yet today."

I looked down at my hands in bewilderment.

"Mudslinging? But my hands are clean, and I certainly didn't throw anything."

It wasn't like Canopus to tell such a blatant lie. Forget my cushion, he must've taken dozens of my prized possessions to hide in the ocean's depths! I was certain of it, but it would be a bad look for Canopus if I exposed all his misdeeds, so I decided to overlook the rest of his sins.

"Um, no, that's not what I meant…"

It was for that reason that I kindly (and blatantly) ignored whatever he was trying to say next and turned to my next suspect…

"Mirach!"

"Y-yes?!"

"You're the one who put that book about the Arteagian language on my bedside table, right?! Thanks to that, I had a nightmare last night. Scheat and Miaplacidus were saying all these horrible things about me in Arteagian, but I couldn't get a single word in since I'm unable to speak it!"

"Regardless of whether you're proficient in the language or not, the fact that you could tell they were speaking poorly of you certainly points to it being a dream. Not to mention that neither Scheat nor Miaplacidus can speak Arteagian, so there is no way, shape, or form that scenario could ever come to pass."

Mirach's response was so matter-of-fact. He slightly tilted his head to the side as if there was something he was pondering before he continued to speak. "The reason I left that reference book in your room to begin with was because I was following your directive. I remember you specifically instructing me, 'Even if we're going to the beach, I'm going to study every day! If I'm slacking off on my studies, you can scold me by leaving reference books all over my bedroom!'"

The memory hit me like a sack of bricks the moment he finished talking. I *did*, in fact, tell him that. I groaned internally. Why did the me from two weeks ago have to be such a darn overachiever?!

"I-I may have said something along those lines… But definitely not when it comes to my Arteagian language studies! Not only is the pronunciation super unique, but it's got not one, not two, but *six* different tones! I don't understand a lick of it. And get this, once Scheat and Miaplacidus were done badmouthing me, they came

straight up in my face saying: *'Męow, mêow, mëow, méow, mèow, mēow'!"* I then went on to mention that my nightmare included the two of them sporting cat ears and tails.

Mirach looked thoughtful as I finished my explanation. "In that case, perhaps the blame lies less with the reference books and more with that lost cat that you let in your room last night? I believe you brought a cat that wandered into the villa into your bedroom to sleep with you, did you not? When I was on my evening patrol, I heard it meowing incessantly."

"Huh?! R-really? I guess that closes the book on that one, then," I announced before muttering to myself, "I should've known better than to go up against Mirach. He can explain away anything."

But I wasn't going to let myself get tricked again! I whipped back around to face the knights once more.

"All right, Scheat!"

"Yes!"

"You said you were going to pay a visit to your home village today, but you're really planning to sneak off and take a nap somewhere, right?!"

"Of course not!" Scheat looked truly caught off guard as he replied to my accusation. "Since you so kindly permitted me to act separately from the group today, out of appreciation for your generosity, I was planning to visit Zios Village and pay my respects at the graves of the departed!"

I beamed triumphantly as I took in his reaction. “Okay, then! Tell me why the souvenirs I gave you aren’t packed in your bag. If you’re really planning to pay your respects, you should be bringing pressies, right?”

The door to Scheat’s room had been open earlier, so I’d taken a little peek inside. That’s when I’d noticed a bag that was practically bursting at the seams resting near the door. But what was *not* included in the about-to-explode bag were a bunch of items made from jade shells that I’d given him as “a gift for the people of his village.” Those trinkets were still all sitting in a row on his table. Seeing that, I knew at once that Scheat wasn’t planning on visiting any graves—he was going to keep all those baubles for himself to display in his room!

“But, Princess, those jade-shell accessories you presented me were specially procured by His Majesty the King! They’re incredibly precious, and you have no idea when you’ll come across them next. Not to mention you yourself seemed deeply enamored with them. They’re hardly something I could just leave on a grave!”

He still seemed to be reeling, but I countered by holding up four fingers and bending them down one at a time as I spoke.

“We got four accessories: one for Mother, one for Shaula, one for me, and one for your sister. So go ahead and use the rest!”

I was so proud of myself for getting something for everyone, but all Scheat did was furrow his brow like he was thinking, *I knew it*.

“You only ended up taking one item for yourself? There were so many wonderful pieces to choose from: hair ornaments, pendants,

and even earrings! And I seem to remember someone gazing at the lot of them, her eyes sparkling wide! The dead can hardly go around wearing accessories, so *you* should make use of them, Princess Serafina!! It's no problem for me to bring the people of my village flowers to leave at their graves."

Silly Scheat, I thought to myself. It appeared that I would need to spell it out for him even more clearly.

"Of course I wanted the accessories—they were so pretty! But that's exactly why your friends would like them too. I think the most cherished gifts are ones you wanted yourself. Besides, these are the people that protected you, Scheat, and you're so important to me! That's why I want to give them the best present I can."

By the time I'd finished my monologue, Scheat was looking at the ground. I couldn't clearly make out his expression, but what I could see were little droplets tumbling from his eyes.

"Goodness me…" His voice caught in a heavy sob. "You're something else, Princess. You moved me to tears in a split second."

"Oh, Scheat. Are you crying because you're remembering your friends? To them, I guess your tears would be the best present of all. If that's the case, the accessories probably aren't necessary."

I nodded, satisfied with my assessment of the situation. But then Scheat and the rest of the knights began muttering among themselves.

"Our liege can be so cruel! It wasn't memories of my village that brought me to tears but the things that she said."

"We know, we know. Everyone here gets that!"

"The princess can be a little thickheaded at times, but she's already more than brilliant. We mustn't ask anything more of her."

I didn't really understand what they were rambling on about, so it was time for the next knight on my list.

"Miaplacidus!"

"Yes, Princess!"

But wouldn't you know, I couldn't continue my line of questioning because I was stopped by a chorus of knights.

"Princess Serafina! Isn't that enough?!"

"Huh?"

Master Sleuth Serafina still had plenty of suspects to investigate, but seeing how flustered the knights were starting to get, I figured I could wind down the investigation for now. *Everything in moderation.* I think that's how the saying went.

"Fine. That about wraps it up for today. But you can't do anything mean to me down the line!"

The knights cried out in unison once more. "There's not a single soul in the entirety of the royal guard that would ever wrong you!!"

These knights sure didn't know a thing about bowing out gracefully. And here I was, planning to let them off the hook. It looked like Master Sleuth Serafina was going to be left with no choice but to get it *aaaall* out in the open.

"All right then, why are all of your lips zipped today when you're usually so chatty, huh? You either have to be planning something

naughty or reflecting on a bad deed you already did."

The knights' eyes boggled—they looked completely stunned at what I'd said.

"The princess is incredible, in more ways than one. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined she'd perceive *that* to be the reasoning behind our actions."

"Indeed. The obvious interpretation would be that we're too afraid to speak to her as we did before because we realized far too late what a stupendous person she is."

I couldn't believe the words that were coming out of their mouths. I cocked my head to the side, puzzled at what I was hearing.

"*Stupid-endous?* Who is?"

"Why you, of course, Princess!" the knight chorused in return.

"*Excuse* me?" My eyes grew round as saucers, but the knights kept on speaking even more vehemently than before.

"Have you forgotten already? It was only last night that we vanquished monsters from the Lodrigone Continent in one fell swoop!"

"Our victory was only possible thanks to the incredible magic you possess!"

"Learning that our princess is a saint knocked us for a loop, but that overwhelming power you possess? It blew our minds!!"

The knights kept talking and talking, but everything they were saying sounded like nonsense to me, so I just stood there blinking my eyes.

"Um, Sirius told you from the get-go that I was a saint. So why were you all so surprised about it?"

I could hear practically every knight in the room gulp. "Y-you're absolutely correct, Princess!"

They looked to be at a loss for words, so I filled the silence. "Besides, I'm not anywhere close to being a proper saint. I shouldn't be receiving any compliments."

Their mouths hung open, but no more words came out.

Well, that had certainly quieted all of them up. I took their stunned silence as an opportunity to pilfer the last sweet roll from the large platter on the table.

"Yippie! The last sweet roll is mine, all mine!" I flashed the knights a triumphant look, but the only response was the sound of wind blowing through the air.

Well, that was weird. No one was even the least bit annoyed that I'd taken the last part of breakfast? They sure were acting suspicious today. I gazed up and down the row of knights as I slowly started chewing on the bread. They all seemed to be nudging Canopus. He had this look on his face like he was going to say something I didn't want to hear.

"Princess Serafina, would you mind telling us—"

"What's that? You wanna know what flavor's in today's sweet rolls? Um, let's see…"

I glanced down at my bread, which had a huge chunk bitten out of it, squinting my eyes so I could get a good look at what was inside.

But Canopus quickly started talking again.

"Of course, I am more than keen to learn about Her Highness's bread, but I was wondering if perhaps you could provide us with information on your abilities as a saint? Have you ever watched other saints in battle before?"

Oof. I hung my head dejectedly. "It was that obvious, huh? Nope, not even once. I haven't even had another saint teach me how to fight. That's why I know that my power is hardly up to snuff."

All the knights seemed to groan for some reason at my response, even though I could tell they were trying to keep it inside. *Did I really fight that terribly?* I looked up, eyes full of fear, but the expressions I was met with were frowny ones.

"…I knew she was bad at reading a room, but not this bad!"

"Yes, something did feel off about the remarks the princess made after the battle, but to think she'd be this clueless about her own strength!!"

"If saints like the princess were commonplace, monsters would have long since been completely eradicated."

They were keeping their voices low to keep me from hearing, but I didn't miss a single word of it. Not to mention they kept saying "princess" in conjunction with words like "bad" and "clueless," so I knew they were talking about me—and it wasn't anything nice.

"What's that?" I demanded, crossing my arms defiantly and shooting the knights the scariest eye daggers I could muster. "If you've got something to say about me, say it to my face!"

The knights all looked at each other and spoke together in unison: “You are the strongest of all the saints, Princess Serafina!!!”

…Okay, I knew *that* wasn’t true. Yep, they were definitely plotting something.

Return to the Hidden Palace (With Sirius and the Royal Guard)

ONLY TWO DAYS REMAINED until our fun times on the Set Coast would come to an end. With that in mind, I wanted to go and play with Oligor one more time. "Canopus," I said, gazing up at my personal knight, "I want to go and pick fruit today!"

This was because I wanted to get some of that "sweet red fruit" I'd promised to bring Oligor, but for some reason, that simple request caused Canopus to grimace.

"Could you perhaps be intending to retrieve some of the fruit that you promised to give that spirit in the hidden palace the other day?"

"Yep! That's the plan!" I replied honestly.

Canopus's grimace fell into a frown. "Princess Serafina, per your request, I did not inform Vice-Commander Sirius about your visit to the hidden palace. But it is my belief that you should cease any further covert activities."

"Whaaa? But all I did was go and play at my friend's house, right? Are you saying that Sirius is also interested in who I'm buddy-buddy with?"

"…'Playing at your friend's house'?" Canopus looked incredulous. "Princess Serafina, am I to understand that is what you perceive a visit to the hidden palace to be?"

When I nodded my head in confirmation, he fell to one knee, as if he'd suddenly gotten dizzy.

"Princess Serafina, while I'm not well informed in the ways of spirits, the ability to hide an entire palace from sight must require significant power. The owner of that palace is not your run-of-the-mill spirit, and if you've had interactions with them, I believe it's pertinent we inform Vice-Commander Sirius immediately."

This conjecture took me by surprise, so I quickly shot back. "Huh? You think Oligor owns the hidden palace? He said he was living there with some adult spirits, though. So isn't the 'owner' likely one of them?"

But Canopus shook his head. "There may be multiple spirits who can claim that title, but I am certain he is one of them. They say that the beauty of a spirit correlates to its power, and your friend was extraordinarily resplendent."

"I guess so."

"I thought you might have a specific reason for not wanting this information to reach Vice-Commander Sirius's ears, but now that I know it's only because you had such a casual perception of the situation…"

"Huh?! I-I do have a proper reason though…!" As I trailed off, scenes from when the knights and I previously played "Sirius Tag" flitted through my mind. I'd been shocked to learn from one of the knights that Sirius had refused a gift that a young lady had tried to give him before. At the time, he said that he didn't take presents from people he wasn't familiar with and asked that I do the same.

"Listen, Serafina, you also mustn't accept gifts either from people who aren't me or your immediate family," he'd told me, to which I'd responded, "Okay!"

I'd been very clear—too clear—about accepting his suggestion…

"The other day, I promised Sirius that I wouldn't accept gifts from people that weren't him or my family. He's going to give me a biiiig talking to if he finds out I took that dress from Oligor."

Canopus's eyes shot open wide. "So you're saying that the reason you don't want to tell Vice-Commander Sirius about the hidden palace is because you're scared of him?"

Canopus might have been my personal knight, but he didn't get it at all! I desperately had to make him understand.

"You don't know how terrifying he can be, Canopus! He starts using all these difficult words whenever he gets grumbly. They're so difficult that I can't understand half the things he says! I can barely manage to keep up!"

Maybe I was able to get my fear across, because Canopus nodded silently.

"I wish there was a way we could introduce Oligor to Sirius without provoking Sirius's wrath. Still, if we keep the whole palace thing a secret, it's not like he's going to find out."

Since we'd be leaving the Set Coast in a scant few days, the whole incident could probably be swept under the rug once we returned to the castle. That's what I was thinking at least, but Canopus shook his head once more.

"I don't agree with that assessment. *What is done in the dark will come to light.* No matter how affable a spirit may be, if it's discovered that you encountered an unfamiliar one without reporting it—and then purposefully interacted with them a second time? It goes without saying that Vice-Commander Sirius will be livid. At the very least, I will be punished."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Punished? You? But you didn't do anything wrong, Canopus."

His expression was deathly serious as he responded. "I've more than erred in my conduct. I neglected to report something of critical importance."

"R-really? Do knights have to tell the others about all of their friends? I didn't realize that was an ironclad rule!"

Phew! I might have completely missed out on that knightly precept if Canopus didn't tell me about it.

I gazed up at him. Canopus had just been along for the ride, but now it was serious. I had to avoid getting him in trouble at all costs.

"I've got it! I just need to bring Sirius along with me to meet Oligor so that we can all be friends!" I broke out into a big grin.

"…Come again?" Canopus, on the other hand, looked extremely confused. From what I gathered, not introducing your friends was a big no-no for knights. Well, if that was the case, it was time to launch "Operation: Hey, Look! Everyone's Friends!" and get Sirius and Oligor acquainted with one another.

Now that I had a plan in mind, there was no time like the present to act on it, so I raced off to find Sirius.

***

"Sirius, are you busy?"

Sirius raised his head as soon as I called out to him. He was in one of the large rooms in the villa along with Captain Deneb, Mirach, Scheat, Miaplacidus, and the other knights. They were standing around a table and looking down at a bunch of papers that were spread all over it.

Ooh, that doesn't look like much fun, I thought. In fact, everything looked so difficult that I pretended not to see it at all.

"I met another kid on the beach a few days ago. I was thinking about going by their house this afternoon. Will you come with me?"

"You never cease to impress me, Serafina. We've only been here for ten days, yet you've already acquainted yourself with someone?"

Oh, this was promising. Sirius seemed to take it that Oligor was an "acquaintance" of mine, not a "friend." If I took everyone to meet him and we all became friends, I could get out of this pickle without a single lecture. My face lit up; this was going better than expected!

Sirius returned his gaze to the paperwork on the table. "Right… I doubt that continuing to review these documents is going to herald any new discoveries. I suppose I'll take you up on that offer to meet this individual."

I could feel my smile getting bigger and bigger.

"It's a promise! Canopus and I are going to stop by the forest to pick some fruit as a present for him. Let's all go after that!"

"Fruit from the forest? That's an unusual idea for a gift. There's a chance you could run into monsters, so bring a few more of the knights with you."

"Got it!" I chirped cheerfully.

Though Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus were looking at all that paperwork too, they asked if they could accompany me to the forest as my bodyguards. I was worried that might cause some trouble, but Scheat responded, "Vice-Commander Sirius did say, 'I doubt that continuing to review these documents is going to herald any new discoveries,' so we would rather do something where we can actual be of use."

Sirius didn't deny their request, so the three of them joined me and Canopus as we headed for the forest. We found the sweet red fruit we were looking for almost immediately and soon my basket was overflowing with them.

Once everything was good to go, I sat ready in a chair outside the villa's entrance.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Serafina," Sirius said as he made his appearance soon after.

"No worries. I just finished counting how many clouds are in the sky." I breezily replied.

Sirius gave a little nod, but then his eyes trailed to all the knights standing behind me. "I understand Canopus, but you're

bringing along Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus too? Is the house we're going to so spacious that all of us will be able to fit inside?"

"It'll be no problem!" I said, picturing Oligor's palace in my mind.

Clever, clever Canopus didn't say anything careless. In fact, he didn't say anything at all, and his expression was blank. I didn't need to worry about him, so I turned my attention to the other knights.

"Besides, the three of them don't seem as energetic as usual, so I was hoping they might perk right back up when we get to Oligor's house."

The three knights in question widened their eyes in surprise at my statement.

"Th-that's why you invited us along?"

"We thought you wanted us to come as your bodyguards, but *that* was the reasoning behind it?!"

"We're complete and utter royal guard failures for being such a burden to our liege!!"

The three of them all sounded so gloomy, so I gazed up at them with my biggest and brightest smile. "You can tell me if there's ever anything bothering you! I might be able help you out, even if it's just something small."

While we were out picking the "sweet red fruit," all three of the knights were quieter than usual. Not only that, but their expressions looked strained. I'd never seen them looking so down in the dumps when we were at the castle, so I wondered if they were having a problem due to our surroundings.

But we'd already gotten rid of all those Lodrigone Continent monsters. What other issues could there be? I was trying to rack my brain for a possible answer when Mirach interrupted my thoughts.

"I humbly apologize for causing you concern, Princess. But everything has been dealt with, so there's nothing for you to worry about." He sounded extremely apologetic.

"Really?" If that was the case, then why did everyone look so darn serious? I was still quite confused, so Mirach offered a little more of an explanation.

"Until recently, this area has been dealing with two issues. The first was the Lodrigone Continent monsters, but thanks to your assistance, we were able to successfully eradicate them. What was giving us all these headaches was the other issue: the temperature of the sea. However, the supposed solution was akin to trying to grab clouds out of the sky, so we had nothing to go on and were at a loss about what to do. But signs of a solution suddenly appeared out of nowhere a few days ago."

"Ooh! That's great news!"

"Indeed, but now we're stumped as to why the sea temperature issue suddenly resolved itself. When we investigated to try and find some clues, no one reported that any golden seashells had been found."

"Golden seashells? So you were all looking for shells?" I hadn't realized the knights got to participate in such fun activities as part of their job. I was still processing this information when Sirius reached out and pulled me into his arms.

"This land has been under the royal family's jurisdiction for many generations because someone very important lives here. Someone His Majesty would very much like to meet. He wants to ask that someone lower the sea temperature."

"Hmm… So Father thinks the sea water is too warm? Did you want the shells to give as a gift in exchange for asking a favor?"

I was still puzzled, but Sirius's reply sounded almost mirthful. "Something like that. You're such a smart girl, Serafina. But now the sea's temperature has naturally started to drop—no gifts or favors needed—and nobody knows why."

Aha, now it all made sense. They were trying to find the answer to a riddle. That's why everyone was looking at those papers so seriously.

"Sirius, even if you work really hard all the time, it doesn't mean your brain is always going to follow along. It's important to step away and clear your head sometimes… Or so I've heard."

"The only person I can think of that would say something like that to you is the king himself." Sirius began to walk, still holding me firmly in his arms. Seeing this, Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus hurriedly called out after us.

"V-Vice-Commander! Are you planning to go out wearing *that*?"

"It's laudable that you aren't in your knight uniform…but you might want to reconsider what you have on…"

"We're probably going to be visiting the seaside residence of a local family. Perhaps a slightly less…extravagant ensemble would be

more appropriate…?”

Sirius shot the three knights a scalding look.

“I chose the simplest outfit out of everything I brought.”

This seemed to shock the knights into a moment of silence.

“…Y-you mean to say, this is…”

Sirius nodded with a somber expression, and all three knights hung their heads like they knew it was time to throw in the towel. I wanted to do something that would cheer them up, so I stuck my thumb up and waved my fist at them.

“It’s okay! Oligor probably won’t care what clothes we’re wearing!”

Then, the knights all began to smile as if they wanted to cheer *me* up.

“Exactly! That’s why if your acquaintance starts to shiver when they see the vice-commander, it’s not because they’re terrified, since they can tell he’s a high-ranking official, but because it’s a little chilly today!”

“Huh? It’s not cold today. It’s the middle of summer.” I pointed out the obvious since we were walking under the blazing sun, but they all pretended not to know what I was talking about and kept on yammering.

“Or perhaps, if your acquaintance winds up flat on the floor, it’s not because they’re frightened of the vice-commander but because they’ve tripped over their own feet.”

"Oligor wouldn't do something like that." I retorted. I could tell they didn't believe me at all, but they were trying to make it *seem* like they did.

"You're right, Princess!" they chorused in unison. *"Our hearts are racing, and we haven't even arrived yet!"*

They said this while glancing side to side nervously and clutching at their chests. It was incredibly suspicious behavior if you asked me.

Still, when I started heading toward the beach, the three of them looked perplexed. "Are you planning to meet up at the beach?" they asked.

When I told them we were going to climb the large rocks of the Lodrigone Continent, everyone—including Sirius—looked shocked out of their minds.

"That's where they live." I reassured them. When I said that, everyone besides Canopus started to look wary.

"I haven't heard of any townspeople residing on the rocks."

"I don't think it has hide nor hair to do with this, but I can't help but be reminded of what His Majesty said the other day. You know, the story about that important figure who built an invisible villa around the large rocks."

"That's enough out of you."

Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus were talking about something I didn't really understand, but Sirius's reaction told me it was a really big deal.

“Serafina, is there a house up there on the rocks?”

“Sure is! Would you mind letting me hold on to you as we climb?”

I could tell that Sirius looked hesitant, but he finally heaved a resigned sigh and plopped me on top of his shoulders. Then, after using the cloth hanging from his shoulder to tie us together, he deftly began scaling the rocks.

“Whoa! Knights are incredible! You can climb up these rocks so fast.”

Canopus was also quite the impressive climber the other day. Looking down, I saw him and the three other knights zipping up the rocks completely unfazed. Sirius put me down once we reached the top, and I cautiously reached out to where I’d bumped my head. That invisible thingamabob was still there.

And just like last time, the invisible palace revealed itself.

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“Egad! N-n-no way! Noooo waaaaay!!!”

“I-I knew it had to be something! Change is always precipitated by a reason! We were simply unable to uncover it! But to think that reason was Princess Serafina?!”

“This can’t be happening. Did the princess not only resolve the problem with the Lodrigone monsters but this one too?!”

The three knights were going on about a lot of things I didn’t understand again. In contrast, Sirius asked me a simple question in a calm voice.

"Serafina, are you acquainted with the owner of this palace?"

"I'm not sure. I know a child spirit who lives here, but I don't know whether the palace is his or not."

"You called this individual, 'Oligor,' correct? The first Spirit Lord's name is 'Ligon,' but there's a striking resemblance that I can't entirely write off as coincidental."

Conveniently, Oligor showed up just as Sirius finished mumbling to himself. He ran toward me as fast as he could, his long green hair that was practically as long as he was tall flowing behind him.

"Serafina!" He squealed, jumping into my arms. "*You came!"*

I gave him a big hug back and beamed brightly. *"Of course I did! I promised you I would bring you some sweet red fruit, didn't I?"* I turned back to Canopus and took the basket he was carrying.

"We picked a whooole bunch! How 'bout we eat them all together?" I remembered halfway through my invitation that I wasn't the only one there. *"Oligor, I brought some new friends with me today —they're knights of this country."*

Now it was time to introduce him to Sirius and the others. "This is Oligor. He's a spirit child who lives in this palace." I glanced up at them and was shocked to see how intense they looked.

"Huh? Um, th-there's no need to look so frightened. That's not very friendly, you know." I wondered why they heck they would try and be so intimidating toward Oligor when they were meeting him for just the first time. Finally, Mirach spoke, but his voice was trembling.

"H-his current form may be that of a child's, but th-this individual bears an uncanny resemblance to the portrait of the first Spirit Lord…" It seemed like he was going to say something else, but he froze up like a statue when Oligor looked his way.

"Serafina, I suspect they're telling stories about me. Could you ask them to stop? I don't want to talk about myself in front of you."

The knights, who'd been babbling in a flustered manner, abruptly clammed up. Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus all clasped both hands to their mouths. Their eyes, which were as big as saucers, kept darting back and forth between Oligor and the palace. I took that to mean they were excited to see the inside, so I asked Oligor, and he let us in.

The three knights seemed really surprised by the palace's unusual interior. They kept twisting their heads around and around, looking completely flabbergasted by how the big trees were entangled right into the building. They were sandwiched by Sirius leading the pack and Canopus bringing up the rear. Those two both looked apprehensive, but they just kept walking in silence.

We went back to the big, wide room I'd gone to last time, and I plopped down on the same sofa as last time.

"Look at how fluffy these sofas are!" I burst into a fit of giggles, but no one else joined in my laughter. Maybe they weren't fans of plushy furniture? But after a few moments of waiting in silence, Sirius finally took a seat next to me. The other four quickly came and stood around us. I wanted them to get to know Oligor a little bit better, so I started talking to no one in particular.

"Oligor said I remind him of his friend, Luntia. Also, he's a bit of a crybaby. He was so happy that I looked like her but had the same golden eyes as him that he wouldn't stop being all weepy."

Scheat groaned loudly, while Miaplacidus exclaimed, "Well, there's our answer right there!"

In contrast, Mirach sounded on the brink of despair. "…I'm certain that's the name of the first Spirit Lord's wife."

There was a nervous quality to Sirius's voice, but he managed to speak. "So it's because those tears returned to the sea that this land has gradually begun prospering again. Serafina, would you mind expressing our gratitude to your acquaintance…for interacting with the world once more."

Scheat and Miaplacidus were clutching each other's hands tightly as I told Oligor what Sirius said. Aww, they were such good friends!

"Th-the princess has started making incomprehensible sounds. She and the Spirit Lord were exchanging similar noises earlier—surely they couldn't be conversing, right?!"

"Why did only four bodyguards attend to her today? Considering her value, every knight enlisted in the royal guard wouldn't be enough! Why did no one warn us about what our princess can do?!"

Once I'd passed along Sirius's message, Oligor looked at me like there was something on his mind. *"I thought I'd remain shut away in this palace until I returned to the light, but before I knew it, I was touching the world once more. I've been wanting to see you again*

ever since the day you first visited. I made my way down to the beach many times and gazed over at the villa where you're staying."

"You did? You should've come over so we could play, then."

I offered Oligor the basket that held the sweet red fruit, and he eagerly took one out and bit into it.

"Yes! This is the flavor I remember! It's so delicious. The ones Luntia chose were always sweet—just like this. But for whatever reason, I always selected fruit that tasted bitter."

I giggled at that. *"I guess I'm good at picking out the sweet ones, just like Luntia! And Sirius and the knights are just like you! The ones* they *picked out were bitter and disgusting!"*

Oligor and I continued talking for a little while longer until I remembered the reason I'd brought Sirius and the others along. *"Oh, right! Would you be okay with becoming friends with everyone else that came with me today?"*

"…If that's what you wish."

A huge grin spread across my face as I looked up at Sirius and the knights who were standing around us. "Oligor said he'll be friends with everyone here!"

"Eep! I wouldn't dare to dream of such a distinction…"

"I-I'm afraid I must decline…"

Scheat and Miaplacidus responded almost automatically. Those two always seemed to have a reply at the ready—I was seriously impressed by their quick reflexes. But it almost sounded like they had some reservations about becoming Oligor's friends. There's no way

"Operation: Hey, Look! Everyone's Friends!" would work if they were going to be like that, so I pretended I didn't hear what they said.

"Oligor has a hard time picking up what we're saying, so I want everyone to introduce themselves slowly and one at a time."

No sooner had I made my request than Sirius rose from the sofa and got down on one knee in front of Oligor. "My name is Sirius Ulysses. It is a profound honor to make your acquaintance."

"Hmm… Is this your knight, Serafina?" I picked up on just a hint of dissatisfaction in his question.

I cleared my throat and stuck my chest out nice and proud.

"He sure is! And he's the strongest knight in the whole country, to boot!"

"And here I thought you'd be interested in spirits because you look so much like Luntia. Once you're in the pocket of such a flawless opponent, you'll never be able to escape!"

"Nope, that's only a temporary situation! Once I get bigger, Sirius won't be able to stick me in any of his clothing."

"I didn't mean that literally…"

After that, Canopus, Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus all formally greeted Oligor. "And now we're aaaall friends!" I smiled broadly, satisfied that I'd pulled off my operation without a hitch. *Yes!* I cheered internally. There would be no lectures from Sirius to sit through now!

Then we all had a nice chat, with me acting as a go-between to interpret what everyone was saying. But all the knights aside from

Sirius looked incredibly grim. They didn't seem like they were enjoying themselves at all. Even Canopus was acting like his normal self at first, but after Scheat whispered something that sounded suspiciously like "You know…that's the first Spirit Lord," all the color drained out of his face.



Noticing how tense they looked, I couldn't help but wonder if conversing with a spirit had worn them out. Everything in moderation, right? That's why I decided maybe they needed to take a break.

When I told Oligor that, his face got all droopy, but he immediately returned to smiling when I promised I'd come back and see him again next year.

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We left the palace and were about to say our goodbyes, when Oligor spoke up like he'd almost forgotten to say something.

"Oh, right! There's something I wanted to give you, Serafina," He reached into one of his pockets and produced a silver key. *"This is the key to Luntia's secret room. She got up to a lot of interesting things in there. I helped her with some of them, which made it even more fun. At first, I locked the door so nobody could come in and see, but you look so much like her that I decided it would be okay if you took a look."*

"But isn't that room important to you, Oligor?" I was pretty sure he didn't want anyone to go in there because it held so many memories of Luntia, not because of what it contained.

"It's all right. I've already absorbed everything that was important into my being—her kindness and compassion. Although her pronunciation was a little off, her words were still filled with love."

"Okay, I'll accept this key, then. Thanks."

"The secret room is in one of the villas on the castle grounds."

I nodded before grinning at him and waving, "*Got it! I'll come back and see you again, Oligor!"*

"That's a promise! I'll be waiting for you." Oligor returned my smile and waved back at me.

Because of that, I left feeling all happy inside, and we concluded our visit on a pleasant note.

Just like when we climbed up the large rocks, Sirius let me ride on his shoulders on the way down. Once we got to the bottom, I had a question for him. "Don't you think Oligor's a nice boy? Since we're all friends now, we should come back and play with him again."

I threw that last suggestion out there as well, but no one even commented on it. It looked like my plan had worked after all. Yep, "Operation: Hey, Look! Everyone's Friends!" seemed to be a resounding success! There's no way I'd be in for a scolding if I admitted that Oligor had given me a dress after a few days had passed. I was feeling over the moon about that, but Sirius just sighed. He was looking extremely fatigued.

"You certainly made a 'one-of-a-kind' friend. I won't be surprised no matter what kind of companions you introduce me to from now on."

Oh? Did that mean the black fenrir I was keeping in my garden was fair game as well? I turned to Sirius with a smile, a new operation already starting to form in my head. "Good idea! I fully agree!"

I was giggling to myself at how all the pieces seemed to be falling into place when I heard the knights behind me chatting among themselves. They sounded super tired.

"…It's not that I didn't already know to expect the unexpected when the princess is involved, but we were only supposed to be visiting an 'acquaintance's house' today. This turn of events was simply too much for such a simple visit!"

"That did *not* just happen! It didn't even feel real! And what was with that palace? That's the exact kind of place humans aren't supposed to meddle with! And to think we were worried about the vice-commander's outfit! How far off the mark could we have been?!"

"I can't wrap my head around the fact that we conversed one-on-one with such a distinguished entity. Ha ha ha… I'm still trembling in my boots as we speak."

Upon hearing what the three other knights had to say, Canopus dazedly muttered under his breath. "If the three of you are so shaken up, then it does indeed seem like we encountered the first Spirit Lord. I must wonder though, why didn't I pick up on it?"

Apparently, since Canopus was busy watching over me every single moment of the day, he'd missed out on some important information the other knights had been privy to. I was curious as to just what kind of information that might be, but no one seemed willing to tell me when I asked about it. I groaned internally. I already knew the knights were super tight, but it didn't seem fair that they wouldn't let me in their inner circle too!

A few days later, having enjoyed the cerulean sea and sky to our heart's content, we departed for the castle. Seated snuggly in the carriage, I watched the sun glitter off the large rock cluster as I thought back on how much fun we had.

"I'll be back to see you next year, Oligor!"

The words slipped out unintentionally, but I could've sworn I heard his voice respond, *"I'll be waiting for you!"*

Thanks to that, I was full of smiles the whole journey home.

A Warm Welcome Back and Serafina's Three Brothers

ONCE WE'D RETURNED from the west coast, Sirius and Canopus accompanied me as I immediately went to see Father.

"My dear Serafina! You've made it home safely!"

I'd gone to Father's office to let him know that I was back at the castle, but no sooner had I stuck my head through the door than he'd swooped me up into a tight hug. He peered at me with an expression of utmost concern. "Since I had to come back to the castle earlier and leave you behind, I was so worried that you'd be crying every day because you missed me so much. Were you all right?"

Before I could reply, Sirius had beaten me to it. "You're a busy man, Your Majesty. There's no need for you to unnecessarily worry." Even I could pick up on the sarcasm in his tone.

Father scowled at Sirius before looking me up and down. "You seem to have caught a bit of sun, and you seem quite healthy. It does appear you managed to have a pleasant time there."

"I did, Father! I even made a new friend!"

"Did you now? A new friend in only two weeks? I wouldn't expect anything less from my darling Serafina!" Father looked so proud, but Sirius shot him a serious look.

"I hope you'll still be able to say that after finding out just who her friend really is."

Father's face darkened at Sirius's comment. "I'm not so narrow-minded as to place restrictions on who my daughter can befriend! No matter who they may be, I'll accept them from the bottom of my heart!!"

"Even if they're a 'certain someone' you've been looking for?"

Father's mouth dropped open so quickly, I thought it might hit the floor. "Huh? Just what are you implying? Wait—him? You met *him*?!"

"That I did. Serafina wanted to introduce me to her new friend, and when I did meet him…well, you can imagine the rest."

"Mercy me! How in the world did that happen?! Wait, I feel as if my legs are about to give out. Do you mind if we sit and talk?" Father slumped into a nearby chair. I could tell the two of them were going to be there for a while, so I said my goodbyes and went back to my room with Canopus.

"Canopus, do you have all those jade-shell accessories we got?"

"Yes, Your Highness. I have the ones for Her Majesty and the first princess right here."

"I hope they like them!" I giggled happily.

As we were walking down the hallway to deliver the lovely jade-shell trinkets to Mother and Shaula, we happened across all three of my brothers coming from the opposite side. I stopped in my tracks, suddenly remembering that I'd also gotten some nice souvenirs for them, but my brothers didn't look too pleased when they noticed I was there.

"Well, well. Look who we have here. The selfish little girl who's taken advantage of our father's kindness."

"What?" My eyes widened in surprise. Had I done something wrong?

My brothers crossed their arms and glared down at me while they started recounting all of my misdeeds.

"Rumors have been spreading like wildfire ever since you came to live at the castle. If you'd stayed hidden away at the villa, no one would've paid you any mind! But now that you're back in the royal capital, everyone is gossiping about why they haven't seen you before. They're saying since the benevolent king and queen kept you away from here for so long, there must be something terribly wrong with you!!"

That wasn't a rumor—it was true.

My parents were worried about me since I was blind from birth, and had sent me to live in a place where I'd be under ample spirit protection.

"That's why, in order to cover up your problems, Father went out of his way to make Vice-Commander Sirius your guardian and establish a royal guard just for you! Even *he* doesn't have his own unit of bodyguards! It's totally unprecedented!!"

"I-Is that true?" Now that I thought about it, Father only ever had members of the First Knight Brigade with him. Since Sirius had put together the Royal Red Shield so effortlessly, I'd foolishly believed

that everyone in the royal family had their own personal guards. Now I realized I was getting special treatment.

"You're a disgrace to the royal family! If something was so wrong with you, they should've just left you in the countryside forever! Bringing you back here messed everything up!"

By the time my brothers had seemingly wrapped up their complaints, my head was hanging in shame. Everything they'd said was right on the money. However, they kept on ranting, clearly not finished with getting everything off their chests.

"Look at you, surrounding yourself with high-class individuals to make yourself look better! You only get special treatment since you ride on the coattails of others!"

"He's right! Vice-Commander Sirius is only looking after you because Father told him to. And the knights in your royal guard are only protecting you because it's their job! It's not like you bring anything to the table on your own!!"

"Exactly! And yet, you got too big for your britches and even took the vice-commander with you to go frolic at the beach. Just who do you think you are?! Stop dragging everyone else down and show even just a fraction of your own worth!!"

My brothers seemed completely done with saying their piece to me, because they turned their gaze to Canopus, who was standing behind me, and glared at him contemptuously.

"You're one of those 'islanders,' right?"

“Someone of such low standing is a perfect fit for Serafina’s personal knight!”

“Listen up. What you just witnessed was a conversation between siblings. You better not tell Vice-Commander Sirius what you heard—or anyone else, for that matter!!”

Canopus stared at the three of them in silence. My brothers didn’t seem to appreciate that attitude because my middle brother, Capella, angrily took a step forward. But before he could get any further, a relaxed voice rang out from behind us.

“Dear me, it’s so noisy in here. Whatever are you doing in the middle of the hallway?”

Startled, I turned around to see Commander Wezen strolling toward us. When he saw me, his face broke out into a wide smile. “If it isn’t the princess? I’m glad to see you made it home from the Set Coast safely.”

“Oh, uh, yep. I did.”

The commander gave me a little nod before moving his line of sight to my brothers. “Sirius is also back, so he’ll be attending the meeting that’s about to start. I hope you’ll be joining as well, Your Highnesses. Oh my, look at the time.”

He placed his hands on my brothers’ backs and started urging them forward. “We best be on our way. As you certainly know, no one escapes Sirius’s wrath regardless of their standing… Even I get a tongue-lashing if I let the slightest bit of paperwork pile up.”

“C-Commander Wezen!”

"Get your brawny arms off me!"

As my brothers started to splutter their protests, Commander Wezen looked back at me with a grin, and I gave him a little bow in return.

"We'll be taking our leave now, Princess." With those words, the commander departed, shepherding my brothers along with him.

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Alone once more, I looked down at the presents in my hands that I hadn't been able to give my brothers. My face clouded over as I looked up at Canopus. "You can't tell Sirius about what just happened, okay? If you do, he'll get worried about me and try to resolve the situation."

"It's only natural for him to be concerned and want to help you somehow," Canopus responded.

I shook my head. "I appreciate that, I really do. But these are my brothers we're talking about. Maybe they simply don't know how to interact with their little sister that suddenly showed up out of nowhere one day. If that's the case, what if we're never able to get along unless I take the matter into my own hands?"

Canopus gave me a blank stare, so I kept on going.

"Besides, I only realized that I'm getting special treatment because of what they said. They were able to tell me the truth without sugarcoating it *because* we're family."

"…I don't think an expression that infers anything sweet is fitting for how they spoke to you."

"Oh, Canopus. They probably just seemed rude to someone like you, who's always so polite. But the kids I met on the west coast talked in a similar manner too."

…I'm not sure how to feel about the royal princes being compared to local children playing at the beach, Canopus thought.

"I'm sure Father, Mother, and Sirius are all paying special attention to me because I was blind until just recently. It's only natural that my brothers would think it was unfair."

"But!"

"It's okaaay, Canopus. They're my big brothers!"

I could see concern written all over his face, but lately, I was starting to figure him out. He was a big old worrywart when it came to me, just like Sirius. *He's just being overly anxious again,* I thought. I gave him a small smile as I reached out to grab his hand.

"Let's go see Mother and Shaula. I want to give them their presents right away."

"…Understood."

I was really impressed by how Canopus could swallow his feelings and switch gears in order to accommodate my requests. It was in that moment that I made up my mind to get my act together and make sure my brothers accepted me so that Canopus wouldn't have to worry anymore.

Interlude:
Serafina's Kidnapping Preparedness Training

DURING ONE OF THE regular morning meetings, Captain Deneb Bonino of the Royal Red Shield scanned the faces of every member present as he issued a word of caution.

"The daughter of Count Bayard was kidnapped yesterday! Thanks to the efforts of the family-retained knights, she was returned to her home in about half a day after the incident took place, but it goes without saying that what she endured was terrible. I implore you all to steel yourselves and ensure a similar incident does not occur under *any* circumstances!!"

"Yes, sir!" The knights enthusiastically chorused back in response. But once the morning meeting had concluded, they were singing a different tune—one that didn't have nearly as much conviction.

"Seriously? Comparing knights hired by a count to the royal family's exclusive guard? No one here would ever bungle it up so badly that our liege would be abducted. If I made a mistake that got Princess Serafina kidnapped, I'd immediately repent and lay down my sword as a knight!"

"There'd be no need for that! Vice-Commander Sirius would murder you before you even had a chance to resign."

"Ha ha! No doubt."

The knights were happily bantering among themselves when one of them spoke up, a quizzical expression plastered on their face. "I did hear that no matter how vigilant a knight may be, it's challenging to protect someone who lacks a sense of danger."

"Oh…"

That was the moment when an image of the unquestionably trusting Serafina floated into their collective minds. It was true their liege was easily inclined to believe whatever she was told, and there was a very real fear she might happily go along with a kidnapper…

Though they tried to banish such a thought, they were all weighed down with this shared concern. This led to the knights offering suggestions one after another.

"Perhaps we should confirm how high Princess Serafina's sense of danger is—or rather, how low it is?"

"I'm on board!"

"Let's give it a try."

Upon finalizing their plan, the knights promptly set it in motion.

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"Princess Serafina, you will now commence kidnapping preparedness training. You're utterly adorable, so there might be bad people out there who want to take you home with them. That's why, no matter how tempting someone's words may be, you must never *ever* go with them. Do you understand?"

Serafina nodded seriously at Canopus's explanation.

"Got it! I won't *ever* go anywhere with a stranger!"

"Excellent answer. From now on, bad people are going to start approaching you, but you must not go with them under any circumstance. Even if you have to hit or kick them."

No sooner was Canopus done speaking than Mirach emerged from the shadow of a tree, his face covered with a mask in order to hide his identity. "Hello there, cutie," he drawled. "I'll give you an incredibly delicious snack if you come with me."

"Let's go!"

"…Princess Serafina, didn't Canopus just tell you not to go off with anyone you don't know?" Mirach kindly admonished her as he slumped down weakly.

In response, Serafina beamed at him. "Yep. But you're not a stranger, Mirach, so I can eat that delicious snack with you."

"Wow, I'm impressed that you knew it was me. I even tried to change my voice."

"Well, there's no one who has eyes as kind as yours. And they're violet, one of my favorite colors!"

Mirach put his hands to his chest, and his breath caught in his throat as he stammered. "P-Princess Serafina…"

Seeing this, the other knights, who had been lurking in the shadows of the trees, awaiting their opportunity to take the stage, began to whisper among themselves.

"Sheesh! The would-be kidnapper ended up bowing down to the princess! This is more like villain preparedness training for wannabe bad guys!"

"It's just 'cause Mirach's far too sheltered and naive!"

"Let me show you how a pro gets it done," Miaplacidus confidently bragged before popping out in front of Serafina. He was wearing a sack that covered his entire face.

"Hello there, little lady. Would you like to get something yummy to eat with me?"

"Sure, but can Sirius come with us too?"

"Absolutely not! He'd beat me to a pulp! Let's go, just us two!!"

"Just me and you? Isn't that like…a date? I dunno, didn't you say that you want to marry the first person you date, Miaplacidus? If it's just the two of us, that means you'll have to marry me."

"Eep! That's unthinkable! Vice-Commander Sirius would have my head!! On second thought, I rescind that invitation. If you accompany me on my first date, my future wife will absolutely be furious."

Seeing Miaplacidus falteringly back away from his target, the knights still waiting in the shadows of the trees vented their displeasure.

"Good grief! The number-one knight who was plucked from the First Knight Brigade is retreating after being defeated by a six-year-old in a war of words?!"

"Come on, you could hardly call that a war of words. How could it be, when Miaplacidus readily waved the white flag?"

"Maybe we really *do* need villain preparedness training."

Amid the chatter, Scheat rose to his feet. "All right, it's time to hit the ground running. Bear witness to my majestic performance!!"

Scheat sprung out into the open, his entire face hidden behind a mask. “Mwah ha ha! I’m a bad guy! If you don’t want any harm to befall you, then come with me!”

Unlike the white shirts Mirach and Miaplacidus were wearing, Scheat was clothed entirely in black, including his mask. It made for a horrifying visage in the eyes of a young girl. To further embrace his character, Scheat let out a creepy chuckle as he twirled a dagger in each hand.

Serafina instantly burst into tears and called out in a quivering voice. “C-Canopus, Mirach, Scheat, Miaplacidus… Help me…” She visibly shrank as she clutched her knees to her chest in fear.

“Huh?! Uh, Princess Serafina…” Seeing her in this flustered state, Scheat realized he’d gone too far, but reaching his hand out to her only exacerbated her fear. Scheat was locked in place with his arm still extended, unable to get any closer to Serafina, who was trembling as she looked up at him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“You bastard!” An angry voice broke the silence. Before Scheat could even turn to see who had called out, a now-unmasked Mirach jumped from the shadows before delivering a powerful kick to his gut.

“Oof!”

“Are you all right, Princess Serafina?! Your knight Mirach has come for you!!” Mirach stepped in front of Serafina as if to protect her from Scheat.

Moments later, Miaplacidus (sans face-covering sack) came running in from the other side. Scheat was still clutching his stomach

in pain, but that didn't stop the other knight from elbowing him in the jaw.

"Ngh!"

"Princess Serafina, Miaplacidus is here! We'll punish this evildoer for you right away!" True to his word, he promptly put himself in a position that would allow him to flank Scheat with Mirach.

Unbeknownst to Scheat, Canopus had secretly been creeping up on him as well. He had been barely managing to keep himself upright, but a sharp kick to his leg sent him tumbling to the ground once and for all.

"Gwaah!"

"Never fear, Princess Serafina! I won't let him touch a single hair on your head!" Canopus proclaimed valiantly, which prompted a relieved nod out of Serafina.

One after another, Mirach, Miaplacidus, and Canopus had shown up and quickly dispatched the villain. So quickly, in fact, that Serafina couldn't believe her eyes. It was then that she realized something was amiss and glanced around almost in a panic.

"Scheat! Where's Scheat? D-did the bad guy's friends take him away?"

The three knights who'd jumped out of the shadows to protect her looked down at the defeated evildoer on the ground who was silently writhing in pain.

"I don't think you need to worry about him."

"Perhaps he's receiving retribution for his excessive tomfoolery."

"If that were indeed the case, he'd have brought it on himself."

By some incredible coincidence, all three of their opinions seemed to align. Serafina gave them a curious look, but her concern for Scheat trumped anything else. She began to scour the vicinity for him, casting glances in every direction.

She seemed truly worried about what could have happened to Scheat, so the other three had no choice but to assume a position that would conceal the fallen foe from her eyes. To add insult to injury, Mirach gave the scoundrel one more solid kick.

"Enough already! I got it!"

No sooner had Serafina thought she'd heard a muffled voice when a now-maskless Scheat crawled out from behind where the other three were standing.

"P-Princess Serafina. I was captured by the bad guys, but my righteous heart somehow allowed me to escape! I know I'm late, but I'm here now as your knight."

"Scheat!"

Serafina burst into tears as she ran up to him. But as she approached, her eyes widened in surprise, and she began to pat his face all over.

"Sch-Scheat! Your jaw is black and blue! One of the bad guys must've hurt you, huh?"

"Yes, indeed." Scheat scowled. "I was bested by a nefarious rogue with an unmistakably evil aura, one devoted to a life of bachelorhood."

Upon hearing this explanation, Miaplacidus became angry and defensive.

"I'm not committed to a life of bachelorhood! I just haven't found a wife yet! And my aura isn't evil either!"

Scheat just gave him a mocking look before continuing in a dry tone, "Miaplacidus, I'm talking about a rogue who ruthlessly elbowed me in the jaw with no mercy whatsoever. This has nothing to do with a proud knight of the Royal Red Shield."

Serafina was curious why hearing that made Miaplacidus's face grow tight, but since Scheat was moaning in pain, she turned her attention back to him.

"Why are you holding your stomach like that? Is that also something a bad guy did?"

"Yes…" Scheat shook his head as if he couldn't believe it himself. "I was attacked by the worst kind of scoundrel you could imagine. One who suddenly ambushes his own comrades with an intent to kill."

Upon hearing this explanation, Mirach also became angry and defensive.

"I was merely delivering divine retribution to the villain who threatened my liege!"

But Scheat just sneered at him before continuing in a dry tone, "Mirach, I'm talking about a scoundrel who pretended to be my comrade while kicking me straight in the gut for being committed to my role. This has nothing to do with a proud knight of the Royal Red Shield."

Serafina was curious why hearing that made Mirach furiously chew on his fingernails, but since Scheat still didn't seem to be rising from his prone position, she turned her attention back to him.

"Why are you lying on the ground? Did your legs get hurt so badly that you can't stand?"

"Unfortunately." Scheat sounded deflated. "I was done in by the most depraved of knaves. One who showed a complete lack of empathy toward his comrades."

Upon hearing this explanation, Canopus became angry and defensive as well.

"I can't forgive anyone who tries to harm Princess Serafina!"

But Scheat just squinted at him and continued in the same dry tone, "Canopus, I'm talking about a knave who, seeing me already beat up and exhausted, proceeded to launch yet another relentless attack that left me flat on the ground. This has nothing to do with a proud knight of the Royal Red Shield."

The three other knights were silent for a moment, but they seemed unable to hold their tongues any longer than that.

"The way you handled things was totally wrong!"

"You completely terrified Princess Serafina!"

"That sin is worth a thousand deaths!"

Mirach extended a hand to Scheat, who grabbed it and staggered back to his feet. Once he was standing again, he winced in pain.

"You're all in the right—I completely overdid it. As members of the Royal Red Shield, you took the correct stance. Just…it really hurt, okay? At least let me complain about that much…"

Miaplacidus grimaced as he got a better look at Scheat's swollen jaw. "I…may have gone too far as well."

"Yeah, that kick was more direct than I was planning it to be. My bad." Mirach gave Scheat's hand, which he was still holding, a little squeeze.

"Sorry. My body moved before I could think," Canopus bowed to Scheat apologetically.

Scheat fixed the three men with a stern gaze before he finally spoke. "Okay, so until I recover from my injuries, all three of you will give me your portion of meat at dinner!"

As soon as that declaration was made, Serafina was struck by an epiphany. How could she have forgotten that she had the power to heal?!

She turned back to Scheat with tear-filled eyes. "I-I'm so sorry. I forgot to heal your injuries. Would that be okay, Scheat?"

"Huh? Th-this no biggie! They'll just linger around as bruises for a bit, and I'll get to eat all the meat I want in the meantime… A-ack, Princess Serafina, please don't look so sad… Gah! Yes, please heal me!!"

When it came down to it, Scheat cherished Serafina just as much as the other three men. That's why he couldn't resist when she

gazed at him with so much concern and readily accepted her offer to heal him.

"Your power really is something else, you know. I don't even have a single scratch left." Scheat was scouring every inch of his body after Serafina healed him, but he couldn't find even the tiniest blemish. Looking ever so slightly disappointed, he heaved a small sigh.

"Am I only going to be left with the memories of my suffering? And to rub salt in the wound, I heard they're serving fluffy bird tonight, a rare treat," Scheat's shoulders slumped in dismay. But despite his friend's teasing, that night—and the next three nights—all of them offered Scheat their portion of meat.

After enjoying four servings of meat for several days in a row, Scheat was in high spirits and enthusiastically proclaimed his loyalty to Serafina to anyone who would listen.

Point of View: Canopus
Princess Serafina and the Black Fenrir

"THERE'S NO KNIGHT blessed with a liege as wonderful as mine." I knew I could speak those words to anyone with complete conviction, and for me, that was the very definition of happiness.

The other day, when I was accompanying the princess as I usually do, she was confronted by the royal princes. From the very first words of that encounter, I knew they were set on disparaging her. This incensed me to the point of finding it hard to hold my tongue. Still, I'd somehow managed to keep my cool when the princes turned their eyes to me with disdain.

I'm what they call an "islander." In addition to not coming from the vast mainland of this country, I belong to an ethnic minority group that have webbed hands as a distinguishing feature—my people's standing could hardly be considered high. In the past, I would have felt pressured to take a step back, fearing that my presence might diminish the princess's worth in the face of such disdain. However, I was able to return the prince's gazes without backing down during this incident.

The words my liege had once told me rang clearly through my head. "I think your webbed hands are wonderful. Is that wrong of me?" At that time, Princess Serafina had explained that one's origins should not elicit discrimination, even going so far as to reveal the reason she had been kept hidden away by the king and queen.

It was then that I proclaimed the following to my liege: "Because of your kind and considerate words, I am sure that I can carry myself with pride, no matter what anyone says about my homeland." Although the princes were also royalty, it was due to this conviction that I was able to face them with my head held high.

Princess Serafina had given me the gift of both pride and freedom. Since these were of the utmost value to me, I was grateful from the bottom of my heart and vowed to act in accordance with the princess's wishes no matter what the future held. However…

"P-Princess Serafina?!"

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was time for my protective duties to begin for the day, so I'd come looking for Princess Serafina in her private garden. My liege sometimes whiled away her free time in the garden, but the scene before me was one I'd never witnessed before, and I was unable to look away. I'd come across the princess sleeping peacefully under one of the trees—but instead of resting her head on a pillow, she was snuggled up against a black fenrir.

On this continent, there were only two monsters that were known to be black. Called the "Two Great Beasts," they were considered harbingers of disaster and had powers far beyond those of normal monsters. Sightings of a third black monster had been confirmed the other day when Princess Serafina had gone to Starfall Forest to observe the Saint Knights. That report, however, stated the creature had been released into the forest. And yet, here Princess

Serafina was, slumbering on a monster that was undoubtedly that ominous shade.

As soon as I registered the color of the beast Princess Serafina was using as a pillow, my heart began to race. Still, whereas the Two Great Beasts that were synonymous with calamity were behemoths, this one was currently around the same size as the Princess. Therefore, although it was undoubtedly a black monster, it probably wasn't as ridiculously strong as the others—yet.

I cautiously unsheathed my sword, holding it at the ready as I silently closed in on the monster. Judging from how the princess was using it as her pillow, it likely didn't pose an immediate threat to her. However, it wasn't guaranteed that would always be the case, and it was my duty as her personal knight to keep her safe.

I approached the sleeping duo with the utmost care and swiftly scooped up Princess Serafina in my free arm.

"Mhm… Huh? Canopus?" The princess mumbled sleepily as she rubbed her eyes with both hands, but she seemed to come to full alertness when she noticed I had my sword directed toward the black monster.

"What?! C-Canopus, no! You can't! That's my friend!" She flailed all four limbs wildly, but I knew the moment her feet touched the ground she would approach the monster once more, so I slightly tightened my grip on her, resolving not to put her down.

"Princess Serafina, it is my job to protect you," I explained. "I must not allow you to get close to a monster, no matter what you say."

She gave a little whine, but it appeared my words reached her because she stopped struggling and fixed her conflicted gaze on the black monster. It was then that the black beast roused from its slumber. It looked our way as if it was trying to assess the situation but didn't attempt to approach us. Probably because I still had my sword turned on it.

Still in my arms, Princess Serafina called out, "Ludo, it's time for me to study, so I have to go now. No leaving this garden while I'm gone, okay?"

It appeared the princess had given this monster a name. *This doesn't seem to be a new development. She must've been taking care of it for a while.*

Princess Serafina looked up at me and pulled me away from my thoughts. "Canopus, I'll keep my distance for now, so please don't hurt it. It just happened to wander into this garden, but it has nowhere else to go. Even though it's still just a baby, it's already experienced an attack from its companions."

Princess Serafina tried her best to elicit my sympathies for the black fenrir, but I remained on high alert. After all, my priority was—and always had been—keeping the princess safe.

I cradled her in one arm and started to walk toward the room where her tutor was waiting. "With all due respect, my liege, that is a black monster. That distinction means that it is more than capable of living on its own. Were that black fenrir to perish, that would simply be its fate. Monsters generally cannot live among humans, so I urge

you to prioritize your own safety and keep your distance from that creature."

Unfortunately, the look on Princess Serafina's face told me that my words were not resonating with her whatsoever. I needed to take a different approach. "If anything were to happen to you, heads would fly. Those of the royal guard, including myself…"

"Nooo!" This time, my words clearly struck their mark; Princess Serafina went rigid in my arms, visibly shocked.

"Th-that can't happen!" She adjusted her position and threw her arms around my neck. "What should I do?" she wailed. "Sirius said that he'd slay the fenrir next time they crossed paths!"

In the region where I was born and came of age, all the children were raised together. I'd often held young children in my arms, and the experience seemed to be quite useful, as Princess Serafina appeared to find reassurance when nestled within them. I couldn't express with words how delighted that made me. I longed to fulfill whatever wishes she might have, so long as they didn't pose a threat to her safety.

"…The black fenrir can't be allowed out of this garden if you don't want anyone else to know about it. However, you mustn't forget that you're dealing with a monster. There's no knowing how dangerous it could be. From now on, I'd like to be with you whenever you're interacting with it."

I'd never heard of monsters and humans being friendly with each other. Upon encountering a third party, the basic instinct of a monster was to measure the strength of its opponent and choose

either fight or flight—at least, that's what conventional wisdom suggested. But this black fenrir seemed entirely relaxed around Princess Serafina, even to the point of allowing itself to be used as a pillow while she napped. Perhaps because it was a beast of such high standing, it was able to recognize the princess's own superior qualities and accept her.

…So even a beast could intuit her true value? I felt that I could concede at least that much to the black fenrir. As things currently stood, I believed myself to be stronger than it. With that being the case, I could manage to accept a compromise where I turned a blind eye to Princess Serafina caring for the monster as long as it posed her no harm. If it were to bite the proverbial hand that fed it, I would immediately ensure the black fenrir ceased to exist.

But this compromise neglected to consider one very important truth: All wrongdoings will eventually be exposed.

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As if to prove this, it was only the very next day when Vice-Commander Sirius stopped by to visit the princess in the afternoon. One of his meetings had been canceled, and he'd found himself with some unexpected free time on his hands.

"Serafina?" he called out inquiringly.

At that exact moment, she was in the garden, using the black fenrir as a pillow once more as she counted the clouds passing by in the sky. Although her first move should've been to hurriedly conceal the black fenrir's presence, she innocently gazed up at the vice-

commander from her current position. Perhaps she'd forgotten exactly what it was that she was snuggled up against.

As soon as he laid eyes on her, Vice-Commander Sirius's lips twisted into a frown.

"Serafina," he asked. "What exactly is that black clump you're resting on?"

"Um! A pillow!"

"A pillow? It looks like it's alive to me…"

"Well, that's obvious—" Princess Serafina interrupted her comment with a gasp. She gazed at Vice-Commander Sirius as the realization dawned that she had to keep the black fenrir's existence a secret from him.

"W-well, that's obviously not the case! It must've just looked like it was moving because I was sleeping."

She tried to reenact the scene by bouncing her head back against the black fenrir, but the monster—which had been lying docilely until that point—seemed to think she was playing and wrapped its limbs around her.

"Eep! L-Looks like my pillow's straps came out." Passing the legs of a black fenrir off as pillow straps would be a hard task. Princess Serafina seemed to have reached the same conclusion, because she pivoted her strategy to hurriedly asking a favor of the vice-commander instead.

"S-Sirius! Look over there!"

It was painfully obvious that she was trying to distract the vice-commander from her wiggling black "pillow," but, surprisingly, he glanced in the direction of her outstretched finger. I was mildly impressed that Vice-Commander Sirius would play along with this childish attempt at deception.

While his head was turned, the princess immediately roused the black fenrir. "Ludo, run over to that tree!"

As soon as the command was given, the black fenrir ran at full speed to a tree in the distance, but Vice-Commander Sirius would clearly be able to see it scampering off when he turned back around. The vice-commander had a kind of kinetic vision that ensured he didn't miss a single enemy movement on the battlefield. I mentally readied myself, knowing there would be no getting out of this situation now.

"Serafina, we need to have a talk," Sirius said as he scooped her up into his arms.

Princess Serafina let out a desperate whimper, as if she could already imagine the scolding she'd receive from the vice-commander based on his expression, and it didn't seem as though I could provide her any assistance. All I could do was stand there in a state of deep regret, my fists clenched tightly at my side.

I recalled the words that had permeated my heart the other day: "There's no knight blessed with a liege as wonderful as mine."

There was not a sliver of doubt about that in my mind…but I wondered if I could properly protect Princess Serafina as one of her royal guard. As I watched Vice-Commander Sirius holding her in his

arms with an even sterner expression than usual, I was filled with remorse. Perhaps I should have been more forceful in my reprimand. Had I done that, the calamity of Vice-Commander Sirius's wrath likely wouldn't have befallen her.

Perhaps she could read my mind, because Princess Serafina poked her head out from between the vice-commander's arms and gave me a very clear wink. Was it merely wishful thinking that the words—*she's got this*—ran through my head? Or maybe she just didn't have an accurate understanding of what was awaiting her. Either way, to properly fulfill my duty as a member of Princess Serafina's Royal Red Shield, I trailed after the vice-commander as he took her away.

Sirius Interrogates Serafina

I WAS BETWEEN a rock and a hard place. Yeah, that was the perfect way to describe my situation.

I'd been using the black fenrir as a pillow and counting all the clouds in the sky when Sirius carried me off to his room lickety-split.

Currently, I was sitting on the sofa, warily eyeing Sirius's stern expression and desperately racking my brain to figure out if there was something—anything—that could explain everything away. One of the ladies-in-waiting was preparing tea for us, and Canopus was also stoically waiting in a corner of the room.

What I'm trying to say is, there were two perfectly good adults there besides me and Sirius, but I doubted they'd be able to accomplish much even if I asked. The opponent I was up against was just too darn terrifying. Probably only Father could save me now. But considering the circumstances, there likely wasn't a soul who thought even the king himself could get me out of this mess.

But before I could think of asking for any assistance, Sirius spoke up. "Serafina," his voice was so sharp it felt like a knife, "are you keeping the black fenrir in your garden?"

"Huh? What was that?"

"Are you keeping the black fenrir in your garden?"

"Oops! The lady-in-waiting was clinking around the tea utensils so I didn't quite catch that!"

It was so tight between this rock and hard place that the only option I'd come up with was to pretend I couldn't hear him. "Serafina, are you keeping the black fenrir in your garden?"

He repeated his question once more, this time waiting for a moment when the lady-in-waiting wasn't in the middle of her tea preparations. But as luck would have it, Canopus sneezed at the perfect time.

"Oh no, Canopus sneezed so I couldn't hear you!" Once I said that, I noticed Sirius glaring somewhere in the vicinity behind me.

"No touching the tea utensils! Canopus, hold your breath!" It was an absurd order, but a hush quickly fell over the room. As we sat in complete silence, Sirius repeated his question for the fourth time.

"Are you keeping the black fenrir in your garden?"

"Yes. I'm keeping the black fenrir in my garden. I'm very sorry about that," I admitted truthfully as I hung my head.

When I'd introduced Sirius to Oligor the other day, he'd told me, "I won't be surprised no matter what kind of companions you introduce me to from now on." I'd hung on to a sliver of hope that meant he might look the other way, but it didn't seem like that was going to be the case this time.

Sirius continued, the look on his face still hard and unyielding. "Serafina, what did I say before? I seem to recall telling you I'd turn a blind eye just once and that I would slay that monster next time I encountered it."

"I remember. But that was only so you could prevent it from hurting anyone, right? It won't do anything like that, so…" I was pleading with him, but Sirius's response was firm.

"Serafina, monsters cannot be tamed by humans. It might *seem* like it's listening to you right now, but that's because it's aware that it's weaker than you. Once it becomes stronger, it will undoubtedly attack you."

"You're saying I'm stronger than Ludo?" My surprise prompted me to seek confirmation, but Sirius just gazed at me as if he was deep in thought. He wasn't saying a word, so I wondered if it was a difficult question to answer. He gave his head a slight shake before speaking again, his expression reflecting some sort of inner struggle.

"Generally speaking, the fact that the black fenrir isn't attacking suggests that it views the other party as more powerful. However, when it comes to combat prowess, you're decidedly weaker than it. I'm wondering if there might be another reason why it's not attacking you."

"Maybe it's because I have hidden powers! Like an ultra-special punch attack!" I offered what I thought was a very valid new possibility, but Sirius completely ignored me like I hadn't said anything at all. He sunk back into silence once more before making another suggestion.

"By the way, I'll admit I was shocked to see you speak this black fenrir's 'name' so easily. It's astonishing that you could've befriended it in such a short amount of time."

"Oh…" I'd said too much.

Realizing this far too late, I hastily clasped my hands to my mouth. But Sirius looked almost…self-assured?

"Serafina, monsters and humans are not alike. They have a narrow scope of personalities, and their innate instincts often take precedence. In other words, monsters are programmed to attack humans and other monsters by design."

"But Ludo hasn't touched a single hair on my head." My gaze fell to the ground as Sirius watched me silently. His lack of response probably signaled that I was creating a lot of headaches for him, and this realization brought on a deep sense of remorse.

When he originally let the black fenrir escape, Sirius and I made a promise that it was only a one-time deal. He had his own position and principles to consider, so it wasn't possible for him to simply cater to my selfish desires. Despite fully understanding that, *I* was the one who let the black fenrir stick around when it followed us back to the castle grounds. Since it was my fault that it ended up back in Sirius's proximity, I needed to get Ludo back to the forest to avoid any bloodshed.

Having settled on a plan of action, I lifted my gaze from the floor. But what I saw was Sirius reaching out in my direction, and, before I knew it, he startled tousling my hair. I wasn't expecting him to do that at all, so I sat there blinking in surprise. When he started speaking, it almost sounded like he was trying to reassure himself.

"So…that monster has been in the castle long enough for you to give it a name. Still, there have been no recent reports of individuals being attacked by a beast or unexpectedly disappearing. Putting two

and two together, that means it hasn't shown any aggression toward anyone here, including you."

"Sirius?" I asked, not quite sure what he was getting at, but he just shrugged resignedly.

"It's my mistake for not noticing before you became so attached to that monster."

"Huh? No, it's my fault. I—"

Sirius cut me off before I could finish. "After the black fenrir was released back into the forest, I also did my own research on black monsters. It seems that it is unknown if the black monsters called the 'Two Great Beasts' ever directly caused harm to humankind. Both monsters live in remote areas, and as such, they don't interact with humans in the first place. What's more, reports suggest that black monsters exert control over other monsters, and it has even been theorized that people are safer from monster attacks in areas under their control compared to other regions."

I was truly grateful that Sirius had looked into the matter, but most of the words he was using were so difficult that I was having a hard time following. However, I didn't want to tell him that I had no idea what he was saying, so I just nodded along.

"That confirms the effectiveness of having such a creature around. Recently, the knights have been allocating significant resources to subdue monsters such as fenrirs in the woodlands and mountains that surround Starfall Forest, where their numbers have proliferated. If indeed a monster exists that could keep the fenrirs in

check—either by controlling them or thinning out their numbers—it could potentially reduce the energies we need to exert."

This time, I didn't understand at least half of what he was saying, but I still bobbed my head up and down.

"How about we verify that theory? We could temporarily keep the black fenrir protected here until it's capable of surviving on its own. One winter should suffice, I believe. When next spring arrives, we'll return it to the forest."

This time, I understood everything: Sirius was giving me permission to keep the black fenrir for over half a year.

"Sirius!" I joyfully sprung off the sofa, and he crouched down so that we were at eye level with each other. His face turned serious, and once again, the next thing he said sounded more like he was trying to reassure himself.

"While the black fenrir stays at the castle, we cannot afford to let it have even the slightest opportunity to attack anyone. Not only would that tarnish your name, but it would lead to the circumstance you most wish to avoid. Therefore, we will completely seal off access to your garden and station members of the royal guard on the premise at all times. Additionally, whenever you decide to spend time there, you must be accompanied by at least three knights."

"Thank you so much, Sirius!!" I thanked him with all my might. I felt immense joy that he had taken so many factors into account to do this for me. But he merely laughed dryly in response, as if he had no other choice.

"I heard you only kept one of those jade-shell accessories for yourself. Everything else you gave to your family or the departed residents of Scheat's village. So seeing that one accessory attached to the black fenrir's collar, it was clear how much that creature meant to you."

Wow. I was fairly certain Sirius hadn't gotten a very close look at Ludo, yet he had noticed such a small detail.

My surprise prompted me to ask, "Did you change your mind because I care about Ludo?"

Sirius gave me a brief glance before casually affirming my question. "…Maybe a little."

Hearing this, Canopus—who was typically stoic—appeared to be shocked, as his eyes flew open wide with astonishment. So I guess that was kind of a big deal?

"Sirius! Thank you for doing this all for my sake! I love you soooo much!!" I threw my arms around him and hugged him tightly, but for some reason, it made him grimace.

"…Who taught you to speak like that? You're terrifying enough at a scant six years old. I get the feeling I'll be no match for you once you come of age."

"Don't worry, Sirius. Even when I grow up, I'm sure you'll still be stronger than me."

"That's…not what I meant."

Sirius sighed theatrically, then grinned as he said, "When I hear your silly misunderstandings, it does reassure me that you're at least

behaving like a six-year-old."

Canopus, who had been behind us silently observing our conversation, also let out a sigh of relief. Upon hearing it, I felt sorry that I had worried him as well. It was also for his peace of mind that I was glad Sirius was giving Ludo another chance.

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Sometime later, the knights and I were sharing stories of the most terrifying experiences of our lives. I recalled this episode and performed my version of Sirius pressing me for information in a terrifying voice. My exaggerated expressions and tone seemed to pack a considerable punch, as the knights trembled in fear and their large bodies visibly shrank.

"What?! Vice-Commander Sirius interrogated you?"

"And one-on-one at that?!"

"Plus, it was up close and personal?!"

I nodded vigorously to the knights, their faces taut as they absorbed every word.

"That's right. He even ordered Canopus to stop breathing. It was intense beyond belief!"

"Eeeeeek!!"

The knights staggered backward as they listened to my story and gazed at me with pale faces. They tried to say something, but their mouths gaped open and shut with no words coming out. Finding it too difficult to speak, they settled for silence instead. However, they seemed to be continuing the story in their imaginations, and the blood

slowly drained from their faces. It got to the point where they were so terrified that they all begged me to stop as they writhed on the floor in despair.

"P-Princess! That's enough! If you say any more, I won't be able to sleep tonight!!"

"I-I don't think I'll be able to even go to the bathroom on my own… Please, not another word!!"

"Really?" I smiled, "but I was just about to get to the good part where I mustered all my courage and confronted him!" I gave them a little preview of where the story was going, but the knights recoiled and continued to cling to the floor.

"Gaaaaah! No more!!"

Seeing them weep like that, I had no choice but to wrap up before I'd even reached the end. Still, there was a silver lining! Everyone agreed unanimously that my story got first prize out of all the terrifying experiences.

Filled with pride, I stuck my chest out and declared to the knights with a giggle, "From now on, you can leave all the scary stories to me!"

Point of View: Scheat
A Royal Guard's Pride

"WHAT WAS THAT?!" I bellowed.

An empty bottle spun at my feet. I gave it a strong kick, sending it soaring through the air before it smashed spectacularly against a wall.

"Scheat, you're being too hotheaded!" Miaplacidus chided as he grabbed my shoulder, but I swiftly shrugged off his hand. I continued to roar as he gave me an admonishing look.

"How can you say that?! If this doesn't get your blood boiling, then your entire body must be cold as ice!"

"…No one said that I wasn't upset," he murmured quietly. From his place beside me, he cast a stern glance at the members of the First Knight Brigade lined up before us.

Oh, that's right, I recalled. *The angrier Miaplacidus is, the calmer he seems on the surface.* I followed his lead and faced the knights in front of us with a seething glare.

***

Truthfully speaking, I'd been given prior warning. One of my former colleagues from the First Knight Brigade had advised me to be cautious.

It all started a few days earlier when I'd shown up at the training grounds.

One of the knights from my former brigade was there, and he casually called out to me. “Scheat! How have you been lately?”

We started to chat, and after observing my attitude as the conversation progressed, he shook his head in apparent dismay and said, “You’ve really changed, you know. Back when you were in the First Knight Brigade, you were known as the ‘super quiet, super serious’ one, but now you’re so chill. It’s like you’re a completely different person! I’m guessing this is who you are deep down inside though. Is the Royal Red Shield really so lax that they tolerate the unfortunate aspects of your personality that you’ve been hiding?”

“Unfortunate…? Could you not just slip blatant insults in there? But you have a point; it would’ve been impossible to show this side of myself in a unit as regimented as the First Knight Brigade. And it’s not that the royal guard I’m in now is undisciplined—more like our focus is on protecting Princess Serafina, so there’s more willingness to overlook everything else.”

In response to my candid opinion, the other knight muttered, “Hmph, must be nice,” in a tone dripping with jealousy.

But I honestly thought that the Royal Red Shield was a wonderful unit to be assigned to, so I nodded in agreement before providing an additional explanation. “I mean, the person we’re watching over is too valuable and moves so erratically. If we’re hyper-focused on rigid discipline, we won’t be able to protect the princess. Plus, she’s still a child, so part of our job is acting as her playmates. That’s why I can get by with my natural personality.”

The other knight nodded like what I was saying made sense, but then he threw a startling twist into the conversation. "I see. So the princess is indeed getting special treatment as the rumors suggest. Now—this is just between you and me—but there's something wrong with her, right?"

"Excuse me? Who the hell is saying that?" My voice came out deeper than usual as anger clouded my vision. I could see that my reaction had taken him aback.

"Relax! There's no need to unleash your fury! You ask who's saying that, but it's everyone in the First Knight Brigade… I mean, *I'm* not the one who came up with it, so stop shooting daggers at me! Sheesh, you've become no different from a common thug!"

"My bad," I said sulkily.

The knight leaned in and started talking in a hushed whisper like he was discussing a big secret. "Still, the second princess was sent to live in the countryside practically as soon as she was born. She has four older siblings, but none of them were sent away from the castle in their infancy. Given that, one would logically conclude that she's not a normal young member of the royal family."

I chewed on my lip in frustration. He made a valid point, leaving me with no response.

"That's why, as the rumors say, there must have been something *really* wrong with the second princess if they made the choice not to raise her at the castle. Even the three princes don't refute the rumors when they hear them during their rare appearances at the brigade."

What was I supposed to say to that? Since I had no words of rebuttal, I was left with no choice but to stay silent. Everyone knew Princess Serafina had indeed been living away from the castle in a villa until only about two months prior. The princess's existence was basically forgotten, and no one even talked about her until Vice-Commander Sirius went and brought her back.

Once Princess Serafina returned to the castle, everyone suddenly took great interest in her, and rumors started flying both about both her past and current standing. The stories varied, but they generally boiled down to: Something about Princess Serafina was so problematic that the king and queen—who were known for doting on their children—sent her to live away from the castle.

I didn't know if there was any truth to that, but the rumors suggesting she was inferior in any way or form were completely bogus. All I could do was clench my fists in frustration as the knight spoke up once more. "Hm, taking our history together into consideration, it does feel like the information in the First Knight Brigade is subtly being manipulated."

When I jerked my head up in surprise, he leaned even closer in and said in a low voice, "I know you're aware of the faction within the brigade that disliked you and Miaplacidus from way back—the ones who frequently criticized your high ranks, saying you got them fraudulently or through favoritism."

I was indeed aware of them. It was a group centered around the fourth-ranked knight, Lukbar Haynes, that occasionally took shots at Miaplacidus and me. Initially, I wondered if he simply had a distaste

for anyone of higher rank than himself, but he didn't seem to care about the second-ranked knight. It was clear that he just had a deep-seated hatred for me, the third-ranked knight, and Miaplacidus, the first-ranked knight.

"Since all of the high-ranking knights were transferred to the princess's royal guard recently, that group has been flexing their muscle a lot more within the First Knight Brigade. Not only that, but they've been belittling the Royal Red Shield."

"I see…"

"They take every opportunity to talk trash about your unit, and part of that is speaking ill of the second princess. Of course, there's no way a knight of the kingdom could directly badmouth a princess, so they've cleverly expressed those sentiments through rumors and hearsay."

Due to the recent transfers, the three highest-ranked members of the First Knight Brigade were now part of the Royal Red Shield. It wasn't surprising to learn that the power structure of those who'd remained was different than before, but still…

"They've been whispering in the shadows about Miaplacidus and me even when we were all in the same brigade. Now that we're both out of the picture, I'm sure the slander has only intensified." My tone and expression remained icy. "That's their prerogative, but I can't ignore the fact that they're even going so far as to disparage the princess we're sworn to protect."

The other knight looked flustered as he blurted out, "Come now, these are other knights we're talking about. Our comrades! There's no

need to get so worked up. But a word of caution—Lukbar Haynes, the knight who was most antagonistic to you, is now the top-ranked knight in the First Knight Brigade. I don't think he's so stupid to directly try and stir up trouble, but you never know."

"Hah!" I said, my voice heating up, "I'd welcome a bit of trouble! It would be the perfect chance for me to get my revenge!"

The other knight shook his head, panic filling his eyes. Oops. Here I was, making him anxious when he'd gone out of his way to kindly offer me all this information. I quickly softened my stern expression and gave him a hearty pat on the back.

"I'm just messing around! I wouldn't do anything that would give you cause for concern," I spoke again, this time in an even more cheerful tone. "Still, it's true that I'm frustrated. I must need to let it out! Hey, spar with me for just one round!!"

I smiled when I saw the other knight relax and let out a sigh of relief. With that, I readied my sword once more.

***

The reason I became a knight in the first place was to provide financially for my little sister. However, since my family was killed by monsters, I became consumed with the desire to annihilate them all. My first assignment was with the Sixth Knight Brigade, which focused mainly on monster eradication, and this led me to become fully absorbed in that work.

I prioritized killing monsters even in reckless situations, which worried those around me. This led to my transfer to the First Knight Brigade. Rather than taking pride in being a member of the elite unit

that guarded members of the royal family, I desperately wanted to return to my previous position where I could slay monsters.

It was Princess Serafina alone who changed my values, freeing me from the shackles of my past that had me obsessively focused on revenge. Before, I had only been looking behind, but she showed me a new path that faced forward, teaching me along the way that even I could make progress toward the future. I was truly honored to be in a position where I could protect such a princess. I could proudly shout from the rooftops that I was a knight of the Royal Red Shield, whose sole purpose was to keep Princess Serafina safe.

After all, I was protecting the most precious and gentle saint in the entire country.

That evening, Miaplacidus and I were drinking together at a tavern near the castle. The main reason I'd wanted to go out with him was to share what I'd learned at the training grounds, and after I explained what had come to pass, he was sitting there silently with a grim expression.

Seeing that he wasn't going to respond, I started to speak again. Or to be accurate, it was more like talking to myself. "I know the princess is wonderful—but that's all I got. She might be dealing with a problem, but I have no idea what it could be. The lack of info is extremely frustrating. Even when he said, 'The second princess was sent to a remote place soon after she was born because something was so wrong that she couldn't live at the castle,' I didn't have a comeback. That's basically the same as passively confirming it!!"

I was starting to get worked up. Miaplacidus rested a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it in an attempt to comfort me.

"Calm down! This is exactly when the 'prestige boost' comes in!!" The way he said it sounded like this concept was common knowledge, but I'd never heard that term before.

"What's that?" I asked, obviously confused.

In response, Miaplacidus raised one eyebrow in exaggerated surprise. "You haven't heard? Just as you said, gossip about something being wrong with Princess Serafina is ubiquitous. However, there's even more to the rumors. It's being said that all of us, Vice-Commander Sirius and the knights of the Royal Red Shield, are like high-value accessories to the princess, brushing her 'problem' under the carpet and improving her image. That's where the term 'prestige boost' comes from."

He ended his statement with a flourish, pointing at himself as if to brag about it. The sight made me wince.

"So you're saying you're some sort of accessory? You—the guy who can't even find one woman to date him no matter how desperate he is? All you're going to do is diminish her value!"

"Now, now. You're being disrespectful to one of the princess's exquisite jewels." Ignoring his easy-breezy comeback, I buried my face in my hands.

"Must be nice to be so happy-go-lucky. Even if we knew what the princess's issue might be, it's not guaranteed we could do

anything to solve it, so I guess it doesn't matter if we're in the dark or not…"

"Exactly! The best thing we can do is keep our noses clean and be respectable. That way, we can let the world know that Princess Serafina is worthy of being under the protection of the honorable Royal Red Shield." He downed his drink in one go and proudly pounded his chest.

After looking at him for a few moments, I finally said, "Who knew you could be so insightful? You're absolutely right! I want to be the best human accessory I can be!"

"Ha ha ha! That's the spirit! Neither you nor I need to be the brains of it all. Negotiating with external parties and concocting devious schemes and all that is Fackt's territory. I mean, unlike you, he's our 'official point of contact,' with outside parties, you know."

"Well excuse me for being 'unofficial'!" I pouted, even though I knew what he'd said was right as soon as that man was brought up. *That's right, we have* him*.*

Fackt Jie, affectionately known as the "Ambassador of Sarcasm," was an extremely capable knight who had previously ranked number two in the First Knight Brigade. As a knight, he obviously wasn't an "official point of contact" involved in any kind of public relations; it was just another nickname the other knights casually referred to him by.

Still, even to a group of knights where brawn was prioritized over clever banter, Fackt's incredible talent for verbal sparring was recognized by all of his peers. If any of the knights got into an

argument, someone would always call for Fackt. It had been that way ever since he was in the First Knight Brigade.

"Oh! Speak of the devil!" Miaplacidus's cheerful cry interrupted my musings. "I thought something like this might happen, so I invited him to join us tonight. Fackt, over here!"

The tall, slender knight skillfully navigated the crowded tavern, a grimace plastered on his face due to the loudness of Miaplacidus's voice. He approached our table, his lilac hair flowing behind him. Taking a seat next to Miaplacidus, Fackt studied the empty mugs that littered the top of the table suspiciously.

"I show up right on time, only to find you two already several drinks deep." His eyebrows raised in displeasure as he slid his glasses up with his index finger. I felt a smile begin to creep onto my face as both Miaplacidus and I started to chuckle.

"Ha ha ha! Classic! Serving up snarky comments before he even gets around to saying hello!"

"Heck yeah! That's straight 'Fackts'!"

Fackt looked entirely unamused as we started playfully teasing him. "Oh yes, it's such wonderful manners to invite someone out and then talk smack about him as soon as he shows up. And I wasn't being sarcastic, I merely stated the truth. If you interpreted it any other way, you're rather dim."

"Thanks for telling it like it is! We greatly appreciate you taking the time to eat with simpletons like us!"

"Our brains are so smooth, in fact, that we've lost all sight of justice. We need the candid opinions of someone as straight-shooting as yourself. That's why we invited you out here today."

Our bantering now out of the way, Miaplacidus and I started to explain what was going on with Princess Serafina.

Fackt listened quietly as we spoke, but he only had a single remark once we were finished. "The solution is obvious: You need to bury the hatchet with Lukbar Haynes!"

It was a perfectly sound recommendation, but…I would have done that ages ago if it were a feasible option.

"Your advice is spot-on, but he's the one who's always starting things. He provokes me, and I have to stand my ground."

Fackt huffed at my response. "And why do you have to do that? As your standing rises, so do the expectations placed on you. Haven't you heard of 'dignity' and 'composure'? There's no need to stoop to his level. Be poised enough to let it slide."

"You're absolutely right. But…"

"No 'buts'! Let. It. Slide. Have I made myself clear?!"

"…Yes." The only way to respond to his question was to agree.

Hearing this, Fackt nodded his head approvingly before turning to face his next opponent—Miaplacidus.

"Miaplacidus?"

At the sound of his name, Miaplacidus seemed to be worried that he'd be getting an earful, so he went in for a preemptive strike.

"It was crystal clear to me from the get-go! I was just backing Scheat up because he always gets so hotheaded! If he's willing to let it go, then there's no reason for me to even get involved."

This guy… He's surprisingly quick on the uptake.

Infuriating as it was, a conclusion of sorts had been reached, so at least we were free to resume enjoying our night out. Still, Fackt sure was impressive. At least I could rest assured that we had a plan of action…

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However, plans can unravel quickly.

The mood was high as we left the tavern, until we coincidentally crossed paths with the people we had just been discussing—Lukbar and his friends. Although I cursed my bad luck, Fackt's advice rang through my head. I let out a deep breath, trying to calm my mind in order to exude dignity and composure from every inch of my body.

"Well, well. If it isn't the waste of space knights."

Lukbar's provocation was a serious threat to all the efforts I was making to keep my cool. Behind him were about six or seven members of the First Knight Brigade, all smirking and standing in a way that blocked the narrow path. They were in the way on purpose, but since we were on the only small road that led away from the tavern, there was nowhere to turn.

"Waste of space?" Miaplacidus repeated, almost like he'd never heard that term before. This prompted Lukbar and his cronies to burst out in crude laughter.

"Uh-huh. That's exactly what the Royal Red Shield is! The ones entrusted with protecting members of the royal family are the members of the First Knight Brigade!!"

"Your unit was established solely to protect someone who can't even be bothered to appear in front of the majority of the knights, right? You're nothing but a collection of sycophants and panderers!!"

"The Royal Red Shield was only created to be a prestige boost. Sure, it may hold name value, but it's worth absolutely nothing!!"

Dignity and composure, dignity and composure. I was repeating the words in my head like I was trying to memorize a mantra, but that all went up in smoke as soon as he insulted Princess Serafina. In their place came a flood of anger that seemed to erupt from deep within me.

"What was that?!" I bellowed.

An empty bottle spun at my feet. I gave it a strong kick, sending it soaring through the air before it smashed spectacularly against a wall.

"Scheat, you're being too hotheaded!" Miaplacidus chided as he grabbed my shoulder, but I swiftly shrugged off his hand. I continued to roar as he gave me an admonishing look.

"How can you say that?! If this doesn't get your blood boiling, then your entire body must be cold as ice!"

"…No one said that I wasn't upset," he murmured quietly. From his place beside me, he cast a stern glance at the members of the First Knights Brigade lined up before us.

Oh, that's right, I recalled. *The angrier Miaplacidus is, the calmer he seems on the surface.* I followed his lead and faced the knights in front of us with a seething glare.

That's when a voice that was far more even-keeled than anyone else's cut through the air. A voice without even the slightest hint of urgency, like a bureaucrat tolling away at their office job.

"Hold on, Lukbar. We've never so much as butted heads before. So surely you're not including me among those 'waste of space knights' you mentioned earlier? Yet now you're also glaring at me?"

Although Lukbar had copped an attitude with Miaplacidus and me countless times, he'd never been dismissive toward Fackt. Being on the receiving end of this hostility seemed to rattle the lilac-haired knight, but Lukbar didn't care one bit. In fact, he started yelling again.

"Shut the hell up! I only left you alone 'cause I had no reason to pick a fight with you, not because I respected you or anything! I've always thought you were annoying as hell because of how you always blather on like you think you're so smart!!"

Fackt was stunned for a few moments as he took in the unexpected insults. "I see," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "So that's how you feel. Apologies for not realizing that earlier. However, it seems that you haven't grasped my true intentions. If you were aware of the kindness and compassion that lie at the heart of my words, I'm sure you wouldn't have said what you just did."

He heaved a sigh and waved one hand as if to say, *There's nothing I can do about that.*

"Well, that's fine. For the time being, why don't you hear me out so that you're able to calm down?" He coolly approached Lukbar as he spoke.

Despite Fackt getting closer, Lukbar didn't even assume a defensive stance and instead mockingly stared directly at him. "Hmph. You wanna negotiate at a time like this? What a prime example of chicken behavior! I can't think of a more fitting strategy for the spineless cowards assigned to protect the defective princess!!"

Maybe being with a group that was twice as big as ours got to Lukbar's head, because he seemed to lose all sense of inhibition, cackling loudly as he ridiculed us. With such a visibly arrogant demeanor, it didn't look like he'd listen to a single word anyone said. I was worried that even Fackt wouldn't be able to make him see reason at this rate, but he lightly waved off my concerns.

"Let me handle this." His voice was perfectly calm. I, on the other hand, was seething with rage over the "defective princess" comment. I knew that anything I said would be far from composed, so I simply clamped my lips shut and waited, watching in silence.

Strangely, now that my anger had surpassed its boiling point, it felt like I was observing the situation with a newfound clarity. This meant I distinctly saw Fackt remove his glasses and place them in his breast pocket when he was about one meter away from Lukbar.

"Huh?" I was immediately confused as to why he would've done something like that. There were only two times when Fackt took off his glasses: when he was taking a bath or wielding his sword. I was

still pondering the meaning when he quickly closed the distance between Lukbar and himself.

In a flash, Fackt raised his fist and drove it into Lukbar's cheek. A resounding thud rang out as the man immediately dropped to the ground like a load of bricks.

"Fackt?! What are you doing?!" I gaped in surprise at the unexpected turn of events.

He replied with an icy expression, "Negotiations only work if the other party can comprehend spoken language. I've deemed that anyone who can't understand Princess Serafina's worth is impossible to reason with."

Oh crap. I hadn't realized it because of his unwaveringly calm demeanor and tone of voice, but Fackt was absolutely livid.

"Whoa! That's a rather sloppy argument coming from you!" Miaplacidus, who was just as furious as Fackt, seemed to be on the same wavelength as he enthusiastically interjected his own comment.

While assigned to the First Knight Brigade, I might have been known as the super quiet, super serious one, but during my time with the Sixth Knight Brigade, I earned the nickname "mad dog" due to my habit of recklessly charging into battles with monsters. But Fackt and Miaplacidus were so enraged that I somehow seemed like the calm one.

"Aww, I missed out by trying to keep myself in check," I sighed. "I'm impressed, though, Fackt. A direct showdown is a pretty good decision coming from you."

"All right, you lot!" I screamed out, turning my attention to Lukbar's lackeys. "Brace yourselves! Don't you dare think you've got a chance just 'cause the numbers are on your side!!"

It felt like a load had been lifted off my shoulders as I charged toward one of the knights and struck him square in the gut. Not a moment later, I sent the man next to him flying with a sweeping kick.

Oh boy. We're definitely getting punished for fighting with other knights off castle grounds.

No sooner had the thought occurred to me when Fackt, who was holding another of the knights in a choke hold, muttered under his breath, "A punishment is inevitable at this point, so we might as well utterly destroy them and make it worth it."

And they called *me* a mad dog. Although, perhaps "calculated mad dog" was more appropriate for Fackt. He was *much* more ruthless than the original moniker suggested. Still, it was good to know that we were on the same page.

"Ha ha! You said it, buddy! Time to bring the heat—no mercy!!"

Now in full agreement that we were going to crush our foes, I readied myself to strike at them once more.

Serafina Visits Mirach's Village

ONE DAY OUT OF NOWHERE, Scheat, Fackt, and Miaplacidus were taken off my protection duty. When I asked Canopus about it, he said they'd gotten into a fight with some knights from another brigade and were given an intense training regime as a punishment. Apparently, the three of them would be staying together at the training grounds and doing exercises all day.

Canopus didn't tell me the reason for their fight, but he did expressly tell me that "just the three of them took down a group of eight other knights," and he seemed pretty happy that they'd won.

Hearing that they'd been up against a group more than twice their size, I was sure they must've gotten badly hurt. However, when I went to the training grounds to sneak a peek at them, they were drenched in sweat but still smiling happily. Though they seemed to be doing better than I expected, I could easily see various cuts and bruises marring their faces and bodies.

As a saint, I was overwhelmed with a desire to heal them. However, seeing that they *hadn't been healed at all* made me stop myself. It seemed strange to me that no healing magic was used on them despite their injuries. Maybe there was an ironclad rule in the brigades that said something like "wounds sustained from battles between fellow knights will not be healed."

I was clenching my fists in order to keep myself from healing them when Fackt noticed and called out to me as though he read my

mind. “The use of healing magic is forbidden on wounds that result from personal quarrels.”

Yeah, I’d figured as much. I nodded as Scheat tapped on his bruised right shoulder as if to indicate there was nothing wrong.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he said reassuringly. “A wound like this will heal up in two, three days tops. More importantly, what brings you here, Princess Serafina?”

“Oh, uh, I was wondering how you three were doing.” I hadn’t been expecting to be asked about the reason for my visit, and Scheat smirked at my response.

“As you can see, we’ve been given one week of intense training! Actually, I’ve been wanting to work on my quads for a while, so this is a great opportunity for some natural gains!”

“Really? But I think your physique is already amazing as is, Scheat, so don’t push yourself too much, okay?”

I breathed an internal sigh of relief. I thought he might be down in the dumps, but Scheat seemed cheerful enough. I turned my gaze to Fackt and Miaplacidus, and they both struck poses that emphasized their arm and stomach muscles.

“I’ve been wanting to work on my triceps.”

“It’s going to be all abdominals for me.”

The names of the muscles themselves didn’t seem like information that would be especially useful to me, so I just let that part go in one ear and out the other.

"Oh, that's nice." They both seemed a little sad that I wasn't more excited, but I wanted to get off the topic because it was honestly kind of boring. I got the feeling the three of them wanted to continue with the muscle talk, so after a slight moment of hesitation, I decided to change the subject.

"By the way, I heard that you got in a fight with some other knights. So, um, if you wanted to make up with them but find it hard to apologize on your own, I can go with you and help you say you're sorry."

I guess they weren't expecting me to say that, because their eyes grew huge and their jaws nearly hit the floor. They were still in those macho poses, so it was an odd sight to say the least.

"Heh heh! You all look so funny, flexing with your eyes and mouths wide open. Was what I said that surprising?" I was talking more to myself than them, but they seemed to regain their composure in the blink of an eye.

"Oh, uh, yes. That was definitely a peculiar remark!" Scheat blurted out.

Fackt and Miaplacidus seemed to be in agreement with him. "I'm deeply ashamed to admit it, but we initiated that brawl with the other knights due to our immaturity. There's absolutely no need for you to clean up after our mess, Princess," Miaplacidus said.

"*Haahh…* Your idea was so unexpected that I couldn't even comprehend what you were saying at first! The more impressive you are, the more embarrassment we feel about our own actions, so please, spare us from any further remarks," Fackt added.

So, piecing together everything they'd said, did that mean they could sort things out with the other knights on their own?

"Okay, I think I get it. Well, I'll be looking forward to when you return to duty!" With that, Canopus (who I'd brought with me) and I started to head toward the exit. But then, I suddenly remembered there was something that I'd nearly forgotten to ask and quickly spun back around.

"Oh, right! Is there anything you want me to tell the other knights?" Since they'd been removed from guard duty so suddenly, I thought they might have requests for the others.

After a moment, Scheat said, "Well…"

"Mirach, I have a message for you from Scheat. He wanted me to tell you, 'I'm really sorry about the change in shifts.' Actually, Fackt and Miaplacidus said the same thing." I diligently passed on the message the three of them had given me at the training grounds, but I was a little puzzled to be honest. There were a lot of knights in the royal guard; why would they only want to apologize to Mirach specifically?

But my question was soon answered. "Thank you for the message," Mirach said with a hint of a wry smile. "But I'm guessing they didn't ask you to tell me that of their own volition. Those guys aren't the type to sweat the small stuff. You probably asked if there was anything they wanted to pass along, right? And what they're apologizing for is trivial. Since they were removed from your

protection duty and the shifts were adjusted, I ended up missing the leave I had planned."

"What? That's a huge deal! Was there something you needed to do?"

In response to my surprised reaction, Mirach shook his head like it was no big deal. "I come from Galle Village, which neighbors the royal capital. Since it's so close, I try to go back and visit twice a month or so."

"You do? When were you planning to take your leave this time?"

"Today, actually. But it's not like I had any urgent business there. I already canceled my plans, so it's not a problem. Honestly, rather than going back to my hometown, I'm happier that I have an extra day to look after you, Princess." He smiled at me like everything was okay, but I wasn't sure if he meant it. I glanced over at Canopus, who affirmed what Mirach said with an enthusiastic nod. Okay, he probably wasn't the right person to turn to for confirmation. For some reason, Canopus seemed to think I could do no wrong, so he wouldn't be much help in times like these.

But since Mirach had to cancel his visit so abruptly, wouldn't the people in his hometown be worried when he didn't show up? The thoughts swirled around in my mind when, suddenly, I stumbled onto a great idea.

"I've got it!" I announced triumphantly. "I don't have any plans today since my tutor has a day off, so how about I make a visit to your village? That way you can come with me as a bodyguard."

Mirach was quick to pour cold water on my plan. "If a member of the royal family like the princess were to visit, they'd need some time to prepare to receive them. That would probably require about a month or so."

"Huh? They'd need that much time? Hmm… Then I won't visit as a princess. I want to familiarize myself with the village customs, so I'll pretend to be a normal townsperson. That would be okay, right?"

"We've been told to accommodate your wishes as long as they don't interfere with your study schedule, so going there is definitely a possibility. But I know that this 'visit' you're planning is entirely for me. You're my liege, so there's no need for you to do that for my sake."

"We were on the west coast for a long time, so you haven't been able to visit everyone for quite a while, right? I'm sure they must be dying to see you. Besides, if you don't let them know in advance that you won't be coming, they'll likely be worried about you. But most of all, I *want* to see your village. Can't we go?" I looked straight up, giving him my best puppy-dog eyes. He shifted uncomfortably under my gaze.

"I didn't even ask this of you… You're far too kind, Princess."

"So is that a yes?"

Mirach's response was another question. "You'll be spending one of your precious days on me. Is that really okay with you, Princess?"

"Of course! I want to go and check it out!" I replied with a huge grin. For some reason, Mirach's cheeks started to turn bright red. He

clasped his hands over the lower half of his face, so his voice came out muffled when he spoke.

"Oof. What are you trying to do to me, Princess? A-anyway, I'll need to run this plan by the vice-commander just in case."

Right. Sirius would need to okay any spontaneous excursion.

"Sorry for making work for you when you're already so busy," I said apologetically.

"It's no trouble at all. If anything, I'm grateful you've made plans to go out on my account. Besides, the amount of work I have doesn't hold a candle to how much Vice-Commander Sirius has on his plate. Commander Wezen barely touched any of the paperwork that accumulated while we were visiting the west coast, so all the outstanding documents were transferred straight to the vice-commander's desk."

"Ooh! That sounds really tough!"

But despite that conversation, when Mirach returned after a short while, the "incredibly busy" Sirius was right there with him.

"If you're planning an excursion where you'll be concealing your identity, you'll need a sizable group of knights to accompany you. Since we're short on manpower right now, I'll be joining as a reinforcement."

"Huh?!"

In addition to showing up unexpectedly, Sirius coolly announced that he'd be accompanying me for the entire day. I'd had a bad feeling, since I noticed he'd changed into plain clothes, but his

declaration still came as a big surprise. The blood drained from the faces of the other royal guard knights behind him. They were likely concerned that many others would be inconvenienced by his sudden actions, considering how much of a workload he had piled up.

"Aren't you really busy, Sirius?"

I was trying to hint at whether his work would be okay, but Sirius simply shrugged noncommittally.

"I'm currently dealing with tasks that have been left unattended for upward of twenty days. I doubt putting them off for one more makes much of a difference at this point."

Is that really how it works?

Something felt a little off about that statement, but since it was Sirius who was being saddled with all of Commander Wezen's paperwork, I felt like it wasn't my place to say anything. They must have some sort of agreement for that to be the case, and since I wasn't familiar with the rules, I decided to stay quiet.

I recalled a time when the ministers were upset with Father for slacking off. At that time, he had explained that delays in work weren't due to laziness but rather because of *deep considerations* involved. At the time, he'd told me in secret that this was all a part of "complex negotiations" between him and the ministers.

Well, if that's how things were, it was probably best to let Sirius handle his own workload as he saw fit. But just as I mentally resolved that question, another one sprang to mind.

Sirius said he was coming along to protect me, but wasn't he the famous vice-commander of all the knights? Everyone knew who *he* was—wouldn't that pose some sort of issue? Even if he was out of uniform, would it even be possible for me to blend in if he was tagging along?

I was still mulling this over while it was decided that Sirius, Canopus, and Mirach would be the ones to accompany me on my visit. In addition, Seven decided to add himself into the mix. My little friend had come over to see what all the fuss was about, and once he heard we were planning to go on an excursion, he declared he'd come along as well. However, Seven would keep his appearance hidden from everyone except me, like he always did, so I wouldn't have to worry about people making a big deal about a child spirit being around.

Once everyone had completed their travel preparations, we climbed into a horse-drawn carriage and set out for Galle Village.

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Once the carriage was on its way, Mirach started telling us a little more about his hometown. "Galle Village is a village bordering the royal capital that is well known for its natural beauty. Our specialty is medicinal herbs. Peddlers frequently come to the village to purchase the herbs since they're so renowned. However, it's a very tight-knit community. Everyone knows each other, and the bonds between the villagers are strong, so they tend not to like outsiders very much."

"Oh, really?"

Did that mean Sirius, Canopus, and I might not even be let in?

But when I posed my worried question, Mirach gave me a reassuring smile. “There’s no need to fret. The villagers are usually accepting if you’re acquainted with a resident. That’s why I’ll introduce Vice-Commander Sirius as a senior knight and Canopus as a colleague. The position of vice-commander is far too elite, so I’d like to tell everyone he’s the vice-captain of my brigade. Would that be acceptable?”

“I see no problem with that,” Sirius expressed his approval of the plan.

Mirach turned back to me. “The problem is how to explain *your* presence, Princess Serafina. I was thinking of saying you’re a relative of the vice-commander’s, if that’s all right with you. I’ll tell them that the vice-commander comes from a somewhat well-to-do family, so it will seem natural for us to address you with respectful language.”

Sirius’s nod seemed to indicate he didn’t think this was a bad idea at all. It looked like the plan was coming together well, but before that could happen, I hurriedly interjected.

“About that, I kind of wanted to take this chance to try out a rural dialect.”

“Huh? A rural dialect?”

I shook my head emphatically as Mirach’s eyes popped open like he’d never heard that phrase before. I’d recently read a picture book about a young mouse called *The Country Mouse*. All the words that the titular character used seemed so unique and fun, and I was dying to try them out for myself.

I mean, my brothers were always going on and on about how I was some country girl, and given that I grew up far from the royal capital, it was only natural that I'd speak with a rural accent.

"Consider this," I said, addressing something that had been on my mind ever since I'd brought up the idea of going on an official visit. "What if I'm so graceful and fancy that everyone can tell I'm really a princess?"

But Sirius promptly nipped that line of thought in the bud. "That won't be a problem, since it's completely outside the realm of possibility."

"Oh, Sirius! You're that confident in my acting ability? But my innate elegance may rear its head at any time, so it'll be hard to hide it."

I was sure Sirius was just being extra nice to me, so I repeated my concern once more, and this time it was Canopus who swooped in to deny my claim.

"No, Princess Serafina. At your level, I'm confident you can easily conceal all traces of elegance and grace."

"Come on, Canopus. You're always so sweet to me! But think about it—I've never done anything to keep my charm in check before, so I'm sure that some of it is going to leak out. A princess wouldn't use a rural dialect, which is why I need to do just that to prevent the villagers from thinking, 'Such a sophisticated little girl must be a princess!' Don't you agree?"

All three of them fell silent. Maybe they were that impressed by my lofty aspirations? Their faces clouded over with what almost

looked like defeat, and they sighed deeply in unison.

I'm not sure exactly why, but Seven was looking at the three of them with the biggest smirk.

Mirach's hometown, Galle Village, was a lush, green place that was made up mostly of fields. As I glanced around the village curiously, I was met with the wary stares of residents who were watching me.

"Howdy!" I called out to them in a loud voice, but they still kept their distance. No one offered a reply or tried to approach us at all. But as soon as Mirach walked over with a large sack and announced, "I brought gifts!" they all came rushing over. I guess everyone in the village was eager to get one.

"Oh dear, I messed up big time!" I moaned. "If I'd known how much they loved presents, I would've brought a whole bunch with me!!"

But it was too late for that. All the villagers had flocked around Mirach, smiling with delight as he distributed small paper bags to everyone in the crowd. I stared at them curiously, wondering what on earth could be inside, when Mirach also passed one to me.

He's such a good person, I thought to myself as I pulled the bag open, revealing some green seaweed inside.

"Oh! This is from the west coast!" That was Mirach for you. Even on vacation, he thought about the people from his village and

diligently brought home some souvenirs for them. He was just so darn nice.

Hoping to find another person that shared my sentiment, I smiled at a man as he took one of Mirach's bags…but the villager hurriedly distanced himself from me. I guess what Mirach said was true—these people really didn't like outsiders.

Once the crowd around Mirach had dissipated, he gave us a tour of his village. All the while he called me "Seraphi," the fake name I used whenever I was doing something sneaky. And the whole time, he didn't seem nervous or hesitant at all! If anything, he was smiling like he was completely relaxed. He was totally natural!

Yep, Mirach was definitely the type who could pull off covert espionage activities. I'd need to keep him in mind if I ever had any off-the-record requests in the future.

"Is something the matter, Lady Seraphi? Is there something on my face? You've been staring and smirking at me for a while. If it's not too much trouble, could you focus your attention on the fields instead? This is where we grow the medicinal herbs."

It was only then that I realized the plants in the fields weren't vegetables but medicinal herbs. "Huh? I thought medicinal herbs were native to forests and places like that. I didn't know they could be grown in fields like vegetables!"

When I lived in the villa, medicinal herbs had to be gathered from the Forest of Lent if I needed them. Because of that, I'd always thought medicinal herbs were something you picked in a forest—the concept of growing them in a field had never occurred to me.

"What a great idea!" I exclaimed. "When picking medicinal herbs in a forest, you often have to wander long distances to find what you need. But if they're all growing in fields like this, it's like having them right at your fingertips. I never knew this was even possible!"

"You're completely right, Lady Seraphi. There are lots of benefits to cultivating herbs in fields, but it's not surprising you've never heard of it before. The cultivation methods are very complex and only a handful of regions have been successful. Including Galle Village, there are only five places in the entire country that grow herbs like this."

"Oh, really?"

Wow. This village's medicinal herb cultivation methods must be incredible, then. Well, color me impressed! My eyes sparkled with delight.

However, Mirach's expression quickly turned apologetic. "I'm sorry for getting your hopes up, but there are still some problems that have not been resolved. The types of medicinal herbs that can be cultivated vary by region, but no single village has managed to grow more than five varieties. Here in Galle, we can only grow four. Also, the potency of cultivated medicinal herbs is not as strong as that of those found in the wild."

"Hm, sounds like there are a lot of hurdles to clear," I said, scrunching up my face.

"Mirach!" A pair of happy voices rang out from behind us. I spun around to see what was happening and saw two girls a bit older than me dashing toward us. They seemed to be running as fast as the

wind, and they both flung themselves at Mirach without a second thought.

"Mirach!"

"What took you so long?!"

Even though the girls had appeared out of nowhere and were now clinging to his waist, Mirach didn't seem fazed at all. When he spoke to them, his demeanor was just as it always was.

"Enif, Mizar, it's good to see you." With that, he picked a girl up in each arm and turned back to us. "Do you think you can introduce yourselves to my companions? These are a couple of knights I work with and a young lady."

"I'm Enif Quark, age ten and single!"

"I'm Mizar Quark, age ten, also single!"

Their introductions coaxed a wry smile out of Mirach before he added, "These are my twin little sisters. They live here in this village with our parents."

What a surprise! I looked back at the girls once more. Now that he mentioned it, they shared the same light pink hair and had facial features somewhat similar to their brother's. Wow, Mirach had twin sisters all this time?! It was amazing how they could introduce themselves so well, even though they were just kids! I was super impressed.

I took a step forward, rubbing both hands over my cheeks. I'd wanted to try copying what I'd seen in *The Country Mouse*. The

mouse in the story always stroked back his whiskers before he introduced himself.

"I'm Seraphi, and I'm six. I've got one hundred friend-a-donkity-donks." *Including all the spirits and knights, that is.*

"O-one hundred?"

"Righty-righty-roo!" I chimed.

"Wow, one hundred friends? That's so cool!!"

"Righty-right-roo! A-donkity-donk-donk!"

I was so excited about their compliments that I made an extra effort to reply in my "rural dialect" to keep my identity as a princess concealed. But I could see Sirius frowning out of the corner of my eyes.

"Canopus, whatever is she saying?"

"Th-the princess has recently been enjoying a picture book series called *Travels of the Country Mouse.* I believe she's trying to mimic the speaking style of the titular character."

"Huh? That's what she's trying to emulate? If you mean the stories about the mouse who was born in the countryside but ends up growing up in a town, I've read them to her myself—and I know the character doesn't talk like that."

"It seems the princess has…made some of her own modifications."

"This is way beyond the scope of modification. She may think she's speaking in a 'rural dialect,' but she's most certainly using 'Serafinian Gibberish' instead."

Gibberish? Now *that* sounded like fun. Using even more of it would be a hoot!

"Boinkity-boink-boink! Zippity-zappity-zoo!"

I was having so much fun repeating those words over and over again. Seven seemed to love them too, so much so that he started dancing through the sky. Seeing him, I realized just how much power my words carried. *Wow! I have to add being able to make spirits dance to the amazing things that "Serafinian Gibberish" can do!* I thought. It was in that moment I knew I'd completely mastered it.

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Shortly after, I grabbed Enif's and Mizar's hands—we'd become fast friends—and started making our way to the "special field" they told me about. Sirius, Mirach, and Canopus trailed behind us.

"Twin-twin-bo-bin! A-din-din-din!"

"Serafina."

"Oh! Right!"

The reprimanding tone of Sirius's voice reminded me of the promise we'd made, and I quickly clamped my mouth shut. Sirius had forbidden me from using Serafinian Gibberish because it was so complicated that no one else could understand what I was saying.

"Mirach's twin sisters are really great!" I piped up again, this time translating what I'd just said into words everyone could understand.

I'd only gotten to use my special dialect for five minutes before it got banned. I was probably a genius or something for creating a

language that was so difficult only I could master it. The thought got me so fired up that I clenched both of my hands and looked up at Sirius as I proudly stated, "If I can't make it as a great saint, I'm going to become a linguist!"

What was the point of having talent if you didn't wield it? I thought it was a pretty good goal, but Sirius had the look of someone who'd already made up his mind.

"I'll do everything in my power to help you become a successful saint."

Oh, Sirius. I guess he reeeally wanted me to be a saint rather than a linguist. I'd only suggested that as an alternative if it turned out becoming a distinguished saint wasn't in the cards for me. In my heart of hearts, I was truly hoping to become a great saint for Sirius, so I was beyond thrilled to hear him say that.

I beamed up at Mirach's twin sisters as my heart overflowed with joy and happiness.

"Tee hee hee! Sirius is going to help me become an amazing saint!"

However, my buoyant mood didn't seem to be contagious, as the twins gave me concerned looks.

"You want to be a saint, Seraphi?" Enif asked.

"In order to become one, you have to form a pact with a spirit. That means the power in your body will get weaker," said Mizar.

"Huh?"

I was so befuddled by what Mizar had just said that I came to a complete stop.

"The power in your body gets weaker if you form a pact with a spirit?" Whatever could she mean? I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Lady Seraphi…" Mirach looked a little uncomfortable as he started to speak. "In the kingdom, people have always respected natural phenomenon, such as the light and wind. As a remnant of that tradition, my village tries to live in harmony with nature, and the people here don't use healing magic in their everyday lives."

"Oh, okay."

Well, that was a surprise. I'd never heard of anything like that before. I gazed up at Sirius and Canopus with wide eyes. "He said people here don't use magic to heal themselves!"

I'd been hoping to share my astonishment with them, but neither of their blank expressions showed even the slightest twinge of emotion. It made me feel like what Mirach had just said wasn't so uncommon after all. However, I quickly snapped back to my senses and realized I shouldn't take their reactions as the standard. They rarely showed surprise, and since they were so knowledgeable, it took much more to catch them off guard compared to most people.

"Ngh…" I groaned. "I brought the wrong guys with me. When I'm with these two, I never know if I did something bad or just normal. I really need Scheat and Miaplacidus around at times like these." I shot Sirius and Canopus a slightly resentful look. Scheat and Miaplacidus were much better at giving me an idea of what everyday people thought.

My musings were interrupted as Mirach launched into a further explanation about his hometown. “In this kingdom, we live very closely with spirits. So much so that around half of the women form pacts with them and become saints. But conversely, the other half don’t. This is due to various factors such as lacking magic altogether or having only a small amount, or even if they do have magic, they might not have the aptitude for it. However, none of the women in my village choose to form pacts with spirits.”

Now this was another big surprise! I parroted back Mirach’s statement just to make sure I’d heard him correctly.

“No one here forms pacts with spirits?”

Mirach nodded emphatically like this was a well-known fact. “That’s right. Whenever my parents and grandparents are sick or injured, they recover slowly over time instead of using healing magic. The only external aid they rely on is medicinal herbs. Our elders believe that illness indicates the body is tired, so the proper way to recover is by getting plenty of rest. This has always been the stance of our village.”

“So they don’t use healing magic and just take it easy to get better instead…”

I was still marveling that such a way of life could exist as Mirach continued his explanation. “As children raised by our parents and grandparents in this village, we naturally grow accustomed to a life without healing magic. However, those of us who leave the village to become knights, like myself, often face grave danger and come to rely on the healing magic provided by saints. In contrast, those who stay

in the village remain devoted to the old ways and refuse to accept anything other than medicinal herbs."

At that, he stopped and looked over at his little sisters. "As part of that belief system, the people of this village think that there's something unnatural about binding oneself to a spirit—that relying on the strength of another entity will diminish the power that resides within the individual. That's why none of the women born here form pacts with them."

"I see…"

Well, everyone had their own way of living life. I nodded in understanding as Seven approached me, his lips sticking out in a clear pout.

"That's the most stubborn and clueless thing I've ever heard. They'd realize just how amazing we are if they bothered forming a single pact with us."

"Of course they would. You're an amazing spirit, Seven!" I wholeheartedly agreed. I mean, my spirit was absolutely wonderful.

At that point, we stopped at a secluded spot where Mirach had led us. It seemed we had arrived at our destination. He turned back to look at me with a mischievous expression.

"I'm going to show you some of this village's most prized medicinal herbs." He gestured at the field that spread out in front of him. Looking out in that direction, I saw two species of plants growing there that were just about my height. One of them had blue leaves, the other had red. These had to be the medicinal herbs he was talking about.

"As I mentioned before, only five places in this country have successfully cultivated medicinal herbs," Mirach continued. "Four of them hold similar beliefs to this village and live without healing magic. Since we have no choice but to rely on medicinal herbs, we've worked incredibly hard to secure a sufficient supply and develop cultivation methods."

"I can see that! It reminds me of the expression 'playfulness plants the seeds of mischief.'"

"…I'm guessing you mean 'necessity is the mother of invention.' That's very impressive, Lady Seraphi. I can tell you've been studying hard."

I'd tried my best to recall a phrase that suited the occasion, so I was pleased as punch by Mirach's praise.

"Anyway, that's why we were driven to successfully cultivate these new species of medicinal herbs. Since we can't rely on healing magic, we figured out how to create the medicinal herbs we need to escape the hardships of injury and illness. That's why these blue and red herbs are so important to the people in this village." Mirach proudly pointed to the field.

I moved in closer and examined the plants. I'd never seen either of these species before.

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I thought I'd memorized all the entries of the *Comprehensive Guide to Medicinal Herbs*, but I'd never seen the plants that were growing in front of me. Seven also flew into the middle of the field, grabbing at the medicinal herbs and shaking his head in disbelief. I

guess he felt the same way as me—they were definitely a new species.

"Wow! It's amazing that the people in this village created these brand-new herbs!" I exclaimed excitedly, making Mirach's sisters smile with delight.

"Isn't it?!" Enif beamed. "These leaves help us in so many ways, but there used to be an even more incredible one! A medicinal herb with golden leaves!!"

"Yeah, but a bad person stole it over twenty years ago!!" added Mizar.

"What?!"

I couldn't believe my ears. There was an even better medicinal herb—but it was stolen? I quickly glanced over at Mirach, but his disappointed expression seemed to confirm what his sisters had said.

"They're right. I mentioned how this village sells our medicinal herbs, but that's regulated to only one type—a versatile species that's readily available. On the other hand, the new herbs here are only used within the village and aren't distributed anywhere else."

"Is that because you can only grow a small amount?" I asked. "You only have enough for the villagers here, and there isn't any more to go around?"

"Exactly. That's why they're used very carefully within the village, but…" Mirach trailed off, almost wincing as his eyes fixed on the blue and red leaves of the medicinal herbs. "This happened over twenty years ago. A young man was once sheltered and cared for by

this village after he was injured. He lived here for a while, but after his wounds were healed, he stole the medicinal herb with golden leaves—roots and all—and fled."

"Oh no! That really happened?!"

"Yes, it did. According to those who were around at the time, the thief was a good-natured young man. Perhaps he just succumbed to greed. But ever since that incident, the villagers began to dislike outsiders and refused to accept them."

"I suppose that's only natural…" I mused. Still, to think that young man would steal the village's precious herb after they'd nursed him back to health. He was a very bad person indeed. "Hmm, I can see why they wouldn't like strangers after that. Now I understand why they were keeping their distance earlier." Honestly, I felt we should be grateful they didn't run us out of the village on sight.

I turned my gaze back to the field, my eyes falling on a spot that was glaringly empty. My heart fell into my stomach as I gazed at it. Why did I want to bet that I was looking at the former home of the medicinal herb with golden leaves? I was just too darn observant.

Did the empty space mean that even though it was stolen all those years ago, they hadn't planted anything else there in all this time? Curious, I pointed in the direction of the vacant space and asked Mirach, "Is that spot over there empty because the people are waiting for the herb with golden leaves to come back?"

"Correct."

Oh dear, my bad hunch had turned out to be correct.

"I can tell that it's really important to the villagers. I hope it'll be returned someday." I said dejectedly, shifting my gaze back to the other two species that were growing in the field. The herbs with red and blue leaves were right in front of me. While I could likely determine their effects if I took a closer look, the missing golden-leaved herb remained a mystery. I wondered what sort of things it was able to do.

Almost as if he could read my thoughts, Mirach launched into an explanation of the properties of all three herbs. "Sorry, I haven't given you much information on the herbs, have I? They've each been named after the village and the color of their leaves. They're called the Galle Red Leaf, the Galle Blue Leaf, and Galle Gold Leaf, respectively."

That made sense. Combining the village's name and the herb's leaf color seemed perfectly reasonable to me.

"As for the herbs themselves, Galle Blue Leaf is used to lower fevers and soothe sore throats, Galle Red Leaf aids in reducing bleeding from injuries and promotes faster wound closure, and Galle Gold Leaf has preventative effects—in other words, it makes you less susceptible to various diseases."

"Sounds like they all are all pretty useful! They seem to have a lot of benefits, but can a single herb really do all those things?"

I highly doubted that could be the case, but I still asked anyway.

"It sure can." He promptly confirmed my question.

"What? Really? I've never heard anything like that before!" I was so taken aback that my voice came out several times louder than

usual. What Mirach had just told me was completely contrary to what I understood as common sense.

In my experience, each herb had just a singular function. In some cases, it was necessary to combine several to achieve one purpose, but the herbs in this village could cover multiple problems at once!

Mirach gently smiled at my wide-eyed look of astonishment.

"In order to make medicinal herbs into potions, you have to infuse them with magic. The villagers don't accept the direct application of healing magic on the body, but they do allow the herbs to be magically infused during the potion production process. However, they want to make sure they incorporate as little magic as possible, so they prefer to reduce the number of herbs that are used to create them."

It was just as he said. When creating a potion with multiple ingredients, you had to consider the combination and compatibility of all the herbs involved. This process demanded more magic than creating a potion with just one herb. Thus, reducing the number of herbs directly impacted the amount of magic that would be required. From a saint's perspective, having medicinal herbs with multiple properties would be immensely beneficial. It would reduce the amount of magic required when crafting potions, making the process more efficient.

"Wow! Whoever came up with these medicinal herbs must be a genius!" I was so excited at this point that I could hardly keep myself

from leaping with enthusiasm. Sirius was trying to stifle his laughter to my side, but a chuckle slipped out.

"Ha ha! Oh, Seraphi, it's remarkable how hyper-focused you get when it comes to the things you love. Yes, coming to this village was certainly worth it."

Huh? Was I being hyper-focused? Maybe I was…

"C'mon! These are brand-new herbs that aren't even in my encyclopedia! Anyone would be over the moon to make a discovery like this."

"Over the moon, indeed. Especially if they're like you and have a vested interest in the subject."

I wondered how Sirius knew how much I loved studying medicinal herbs, since I'd never told him that before. His powers of deduction were simply uncanny. Sirius might have thought he knew everything about me, but I wasn't so simple that he could merely read me like a book!

"I like medicinal herbs, that much is true. They're just one of my many favorite things. But I have pleeeenty of other interests too."

When it came to my preferences, Sirius only knew the tip of the iceberg. I scrunched up my face, but Sirius continued with an amused expression.

"All right then, shall I take a guess at some of the other things you like? Saints, healing magic, medicinal herbs. Does that sound about right?"

Grrr. Every single one of those guesses was right on the money. I liked each and every one of those things. But he'd left out something very important. Yep, I was a complex lady. There were still many aspects of me that Sirius had no clue about.

"Aw, too bad! You left out one thing that I absolutely *love*! You can't say you know all of my preferences now, can you?!" I chirped smugly, prompting Sirius to questioningly raise an eyebrow.

"Is there something else you're just as passionate about? If that's the case, I must have overlooked it."

His tone was so confident and relaxed that it didn't sound like he meant it at all. Annoyed, I shot back at him with everything I had.

"You forgot one *very* important thing! What I love most of all is you, Sirius!!"

Sirius's eyes widened in surprise, but after noticing my self-satisfied expression, he swiftly turned to the side and covered the upper half of his face with his hand. I could only assume he was embarrassed for not fully understanding what I like, especially after boasting so confidently that he knew everything about me.

Yippee! I won! I thought to myself triumphantly, but noticing that Sirius was remaining silently still, I started to wonder if he was all right.

"Sirius, are you okay?"

"…Not at all. Your words have taken a deep toll on me. I beg of you, please show me a little more consideration."

"G-got it!"

His voice was trembling. Wow, it seemed my words had a greater impact than I expected. Sirius wasn't wrong—he did know a *ton* about me. Maybe he'd feel better if I told him there was nothing to be ashamed of.

"You know, you actually did know most of the things I like. There's nothing to be embarrassed about, okay? You just missed a very important one, that's all." Still, my attempt at consoling Sirius didn't seem to have any effect. He came closer to me and buried his face in my neck as if he couldn't bear for me to see it.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Mirach and Canopus giving him sympathetic looks. They started to whisper about him, but being the dutiful knights they were, they faithfully adhered to their promise to keep his identity secret and continued to refer to him as their vice-captain.

"You can't really fault the vice…vice-captain for his behavior."

"Agreed, he had zero means of defense."

Hm, judging from what they were saying, I'd probably crossed the line. In that case, it was my responsibility to make things better. Suddenly, I was struck with a fabulous idea of how to do just that.

"To make sure you don't make the same mistake again in the future, I'm going to list out everything I like about you, okay, Sirius? First off, you're really, really nice. You always stroke my head when I'm sleeping. That makes me so happy."

"Serafina! I mean, *Seraphi—not* another word!"

Sirius shouted out my real name reflexively before quickly trying to cover it up. It wasn't like him to blow our cover and it didn't make sense for him to be spouting off lines like that. Just where had the calm and collected Sirius I knew gone?

Clutching both hands to his face, he seemed extremely regretful. "Seraphi," he said breathlessly, "please, no more. I know you're doing your best to help me, but the harder you try, the more it hurts."

He quickly turned back to Mirach as if he was dying to change the subject.

"Mirach."

Hearing Sirius's dignified tone, Mirach immediately straightened up and responded with a clear "Yes, Vice-Captain!"

This seemed to snap Sirius back to his usual self, as when he spoke again, he sounded more collected.

"Seraphi has expressed an interest in these Galle herbs. I'd like to take a few samples back home for her if it's possible."

"Understood!"

Mirach quickly approved Sirius's request, but instead of appearing pleased, Sirius's expression grew somber.

"What I hope to take back are samples with the roots still attached so that Seraphi can plant and experiment with them at home. Of course, it would be for personal use only, with no plans for distribution. However, given that the risk can't be entirely ruled out, I assume that taking this new herb out of the village is prohibited as a precaution?"

As soon as I'd heard his question, my eyes widened in admiration. Sirius was simply incredible; that's all there was to it. I hadn't even told him I wanted them, but I'd been thinking about how amazing it would be to try working with those unique medicinal herbs. It's almost like he'd read my mind. But if the samples I obtained had roots, it's possible they could be cultivated and sold.

There was nothing deceptive about Sirius's request. He'd been completely upfront with Mirach about what he wanted and also addressed the risks. *Sirius is the true definition of a knight*. The thought filled me with glee as I watched the scene unfold.

"Usually I'd agree with that assessment," Mirach replied, "but just as many knights are unable to deny a request given by our vice-captain, neither can I."

Judging by how Sirius cocked his eyebrow questioningly, Mirach's response seemed to come as a surprise. But Mirach just gazed back at him respectfully. "I've seen up close how much our vice-captain has done for this country. Because of that, the vice-captain has earned the deep respect and appreciation of all the knights, including me. Wanting to put in our best effort to fulfill any request from someone we hold in such high regard is only natural."

"…That still doesn't mean you need to go so far." Sirius's responded calmly.

But Mirach continued in a sincere tone, "As the members of the Royal Red Shield are tasked with protecting the precious princess, we're subject to thorough background checks. As such, I'm sure you already know this, but my father is this village's chief. As long as he

gives his permission, it shouldn't be a problem for you to take the herbs back with you."

Wow! So Mirach's father was the chief of this village? Since I was the one who wanted the herbs, it would probably be best if I met him and directly made the request. However…

"My father is away at the moment, but I'll inform him later that the royal family has made a request. Additionally, I'll make sure to tell him exactly how I feel about both the vice-captain and the princess. I'm confident that he'll have no objections to my decision. In fact, he'll probably be thrilled and consider the royal family's interest in our village herbs to be a great honor."

Sirius gave Mirach a steady look, as if he was trying to gauge his true intentions, but after a few moments, a grin spread across his face.

"Well, if it's your father, you probably know how to handle him best. I appreciate your efforts. By the time we return, I'd like you to have ten samples of both the Galle Red Leaf and Galle Blue Leaf bundled up and ready to take back with us."

Looks like Sirius didn't think Mirach was being too reckless with his offer.

"As for payment…" Sirius mumbled, pausing for a moment to rummage through his trouser pockets before pulling out a single coin, just as I'd seen him do before. It was a platinum coin, one that was far too expensive to be used in most stores.

"…A platinum coin?"

I could tell that Mirach was choosing his words very carefully because he was talking to Sirius, but that didn't prevent a resigned sigh from escaping his lips. From his exasperated look, it was clear he was mentally figuring out the exact change he'd need to give back.

I'm pretty sure Sirius could read that expression too, because he said, "I didn't just ask for leaves from the Galle medicinal herbs, but whole stocks, roots and all. Since it's a rare plant that's not typically available on the market, please take that into account when considering your asking price."

"Even so, it wouldn't amount to even half of a platinum coin. I'll have to prepare quite a bit of change for—"

"As long as it covers the cost, you can have the whole coin. I saw that you brought back seaweed as a gift for the many people that live here. That type of seaweed is a luxury item enjoyed by the nobility, so the cost of those souvenirs alone must have been quite considerable. Be sure to include that in your calculations as well."

Mirach looked like he wanted to say something, but seeing Sirius's expression, he merely bowed his head.

"Thank you very much. I…never expected you to notice that."

After Mirach expressed his gratitude, he started muttering something else under his breath, but his voice was too quiet for me to pick up what he was saying. Seeing me eyeing him curiously, Mirach flashed a smile and quickly changed the subject, announcing he would take us to his family home.

***

True to his word, we soon arrived at the house where Mirach's family lived. Since Mirach's father was the village chief, it was situated further into the village and was far more impressive than the other houses we had seen.

As we relaxed in the drawing room, Mirach's sisters started to cling to him once more as they peppered him with questions and complaints. These ranged from cute things like asking when he'd be back again, to realistic grievances about a lack of souvenirs. Although he occasionally became flustered, Mirach patiently answered everything they brought up.

Just when it seemed the twins had exhausted their questions, they suddenly came up with one more.

"Hey, Mirach. Is Lukbar not coming back today?"

"Lukbar?" I repeated, puzzled. That was a name I'd never heard before, but what I did notice was Canopus's visible grimace.

"Is Lukbar also from this village?" Canopus asked. There was an urgency to his voice, so I guess he really wanted to know the answer.

Mirach's expression was uncomfortable, but he still nodded and said, "Yes, although we're not that close."

"…I see."

Canopus froze, completely still, as if his brain was the only thing functioning as he processed the information. Seeing him get like that made me even more confused.

Who the heck is this Lukbar?

But without me needing to voice my thoughts, Sirius ruffled my hair gently before giving me an answer.

"Lukbar is a member of the First Knight Brigade. He's also one of the men involved in the incident with Scheat, Miaplacidus, and Fackt. Even before Scheat and Miaplacidus moved to the royal guard, there was apparently bad blood between them."

I'd had no idea something like that was going on. Unable to contain my surprise, I shifted my gaze back to Mirach.

"Does Lukbar dislike Scheat and Miaplacidus?"

"It seems that way. As for the reason, it's because they both have a darker hair color than him."

"What?! He doesn't like them just over the color of their hair?"

"Lukbar himself has light-colored hair. He's very envious of anyone who sports a deeper hue. He just absolutely seethes with jealousy. The reason he's never made much trouble for me or Fackt is because our hair is pale."

"Oh…"

I hadn't given it much thought before, but Scheat's hair was a vibrant red and yellow, while Miaplacidus's was a rich navy blue. On the other hand, Mirach had light pink hair and Fackt's was a pale lavender. It sounded like Lukbar's opinion of people was swayed by their hair color, though there was no reason for him to be envious of something like a darker shade.

Seeing how confused all this was making me, Mirach provided a further explanation.

"As I mentioned before, the Galle Gold Leaf that was stolen had preventative benefits and helped to ward off various diseases. Taking it also made your hair color darker, which led everyone in the village to believe that darker hair meant you were healthier."

Hearing that brought a big smile to my face. "I must be reeeeally healthy then!" My hair was a deep red, after all. According to what Mirach just said, I had to be as fit as a fiddle! I puffed up my chest and grinned proudly.

"Yes, you're the picture of health." Sirius nodded, his tone completely sincere. "Not to mention you have a startling amount of physical stamina. It's almost become a daily routine for me to find ways to curb your energy and mischief."

That was a compliment…right?

I couldn't quite tell so I looked to Canopus and Mirach for confirmation, but they both quickly averted their eyes. Grr… Judging from their reaction, Sirius had been teasing me. I shot him a fierce glare, but he met it with an innocent grin.

"While there is a correlation between taking Galle Gold Leaf and having your hair turn a deeper shade, there's no relationship between hair color and health. If you ask me, it's just a superstition, but it's one that the villagers fully buy into. There have even been cases of people falling ill when their hair shade lightens."

"What? That really happens?!"

I got the impression that Scheat and Miaplacidus weren't healthy due to having vibrant hair shades—in fact, I was sure they'd both be just as lively if they had light-colored hair. By the same token,

although their hair was paler shades, both Mirach and Fackt were perfectly robust.

I didn't think hair color made a difference in terms of health, but if people were genuinely falling ill because of it, that was a situation that couldn't be ignored. As I was pondering that thought, Mirach retrieved one of the paper bags he'd been handing out earlier. He opened it and took out the green seaweed inside.

"This seaweed is considered an expensive delicacy for the nobility, but it has a reputation for making your hair more beautiful. After people eat it, their hair often becomes shinier and darker. But here's the scary part: As soon as the villagers ate the seaweed and their hair color changed, they felt more rejuvenated just because of the placebo effect."

"Really?"

So it was just eating seaweed that made their hair color darker and not continually taking medicinal herbs that made the people in this village feel better?

"Yep. Some of them used to complain about feeling sluggish or tired, or having chills. But as soon as their hair shade darkened, those symptoms completely disappeared. I think it's a classic example of mind over matter, but I still try to get my hands on this seaweed and bring some back for the villagers whenever I visit so that it will make them feel better."

"I thought it was just a special gift since we took a trip to the west coast, but I guess it's something you always bring!"

Since I'd seen the same type of seaweed for sale in stores on the west coast, I'd mistakenly assumed it was a seaside souvenir.

"Well, it's less expensive if you buy it on the west coast, but you can also find this seaweed at stores in the royal capital. That's why I bring it back with me whenever I visit."

"Sirius said that this seaweed's really expensive, but you still buy it every time? Do you have enough money for that?"

I didn't think he was buying some for every single villager, but from what I'd witnessed earlier, I could wager a guess that he was purchasing a large amount and distributing it to the people he was familiar with. If that were true, he was probably spending about half his salary on these souvenirs.

"I'm single and don't have any expensive hobbies, so it's fine." Mirach shrugged his shoulders like it was no big deal. But I was touched by his kindness; that wasn't something just anyone could do.

"You must really love the people in your village, huh?"

I'd just said the first thing that had popped into my mind, but Mirach looked a little introspective.

"Most of the people stay in this village even after they come of age, but since I left, what happens here is always at the back of my mind."

I gave him a big grin. "Like you said, this village is one of only five places in the Náv Kingdom that cultivates medicinal herbs. I'm guessing you can make a decent living by selling them. But you and Lukbar still wanted to leave and become knights?"

"It's true that I wanted to be a knight, but for the past twenty years, there's been a proactive movement to send young people out of the village so they can search for the Galle Gold Leaf." He gestured to the pommel of the sword at his waist, twisting a section open with a loud click. Peering inside, I saw what looked like some bits of dried plant.

"This is Galle Gold Leaf," he explained. "It's dried and no longer usable, but everyone who leaves the village is given a piece to take with them. We're supposed to use it to verify authenticity if we ever encounter the real thing."

"Ooh, you got something really precious, huh?" I picked up the leaf to examine it, but since it was over twenty years old and the color was faded, I couldn't really tell if it was gold or not.

"Originally, there was only one type of Galle herb. It just so happened to diverge into the three colors we know of today. That's why we've continued to raise the species with blue and red foliage with the hope that someday the gold one will appear again. Unfortunately, we haven't had any luck yet. More of the same keep on growing."

Isn't it weird how sometimes things just don't make any sense? I thought before another question occurred to me.

"Aren't there any notes from when the herbs were first being grown?"

"We checked them many times over, but there wasn't anything that seemed like it would be of use. Our hopes have narrowed down to two options: One, we can continue cultivating the Galle herbs and

hope that gold Leafed ones will miraculously appear again; or two, pray that the stolen Galle Gold Leaf is being cultivated somewhere else, so we might be able to recover it one day."

Ooh! I had a good idea. I clapped both hands together excitedly and exclaimed, "I know! I'm fairly knowledgeable about medicinal herbs, so I can help you look for it."

I expected Mirach to be as thrilled as I was, but instead, he just stared at me in wide-eyed disbelief.

"I wouldn't dream of having you do that! This is something akin to my village's life work. There's no need for you to pay it any mind."

"…Okay!!"

Of course, I had no intentions of giving up on finding the Galle Gold Leaf for Mirach; I just pretended to on the surface because I could tell he was going to be stubborn about it. Unfortunately, my response was so darn cheerful that all three knights looked at me with blatant suspicion.

How could they have doubts about someone as sweet and sincere as me? I wondered, knowing full well they were a hundred percent correct in their assumptions. I gazed up at them with a bright smile. Perhaps looking at it from a different angle would be better; rather than them being skeptical of what a good person I was, I could just chalk it up to them knowing me very well.

But as I continued to beam my hundred-watt smile at them, my magnificent knights looked down at me with exasperation. I could practically hear them thinking, *What are we going to do with her?*

I gave Seven a hug, tightly squeezing him to me. He was the only one who understood my lofty goal of finding the Galle Gold Leaf for the sake of everyone in Galle Village. He looked at me, his eyes bright and shiny, before saying, "*I bet you could pull a fast one on Mirach if you painted some of the leaves of the Galle Blue Leaf you're bringing back with you gold.*"

For crying out loud! Apparently, my noble aspirations were lost on everyone!

Serafina's Hunt for the Galle Gold Leaf

THE DAY AFTER we returned from Galle Village, I immediately planted the Galle Blue Leaf and Galle Red Leaf in my garden. Once that was done, I took a leaf from each plant and thoroughly examined them.

"Hm, I thought as much…" I murmured to myself as I imbued leaves with magic.

Seven floated down next to me. *"Wouldn't it be quicker to grow the gold Leafed one in your garden rather than go on a wild goose chase for it, Fi?"*

Seven seemed to have been thinking what I was thinking.

"But that'll take several months," I protested. "It'll only take an instant if I find it growing in the wild."

"I know you have a tendency to jump in headfirst, Fi, but when are you gonna realize it doesn't always end well?"

"Heh heh! I never run away from a challenge! I'll keep pushing forward until my very last breath!" I declared, thrusting my right hand toward the heavens.

Seven gave me an appalled look and sighed, *"That's not as cool as you think it sounds."*

"Okay, okay," I replied, hoping to placate him before returning my focus to infusing the leaves with magic. "I know I said I'd go

searching for it, but I'll also make sure to have a plan B too. There's no need to worry."

"We'll see."

From his sideways glance, it was clear he didn't buy what I was saying, but I just flashed him a smile in return.

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Now that Scheat, Fackt, and Miaplacidus were temporarily away from the Royal Red Shield, Mirach ended up taking on the duties of protecting me quite often. He was very caring and easily filled the void left by the absence of the other three, but there was one issue: He wasn't very receptive to my noble ambitions of wanting to help out.

"Mirach! I'll help you bring this wooden sword back to where it was!"

I'd spotted a wooden sword that the knights had forgotten resting against a tree in the garden, but the moment I lifted it up, Mirach plucked it out of my hands.

"Though I appreciate your offer, I just so happen to be going to the training grounds, so I'll take it there myself."

I puffed out my cheeks in annoyance as I watched him start to walk away. "I wish he'd let me help him out, even just a little," I said sulkily.

Sirius, who'd been watching the whole thing, chimed in with a chuckle. "Not too long ago, your 'help' resulted in chocolate being spilled all over meat that was being prepared for dinner. As a result,

the knights were forced to eat the very uncommon meal of chocolate-covered steak. His behavior is only natural for someone with a predilection toward learning."

"Sirius!"

Although that *did* happen, a true gentleman would have let it go and avoided bringing up the topic.

"Ha ha ha, I'm just teasing you. Besides, thanks to you, everyone was able to rediscover just how delicious regular food can be. I believe that chocolate steak dinner held some meaningful value."

Was that meant to make me feel better? If so, it clearly missed the mark.

I was clearly conflicted when Sirius plopped one of his hands on top of my head.

"Mirach is the type who prefers to do everything on his own. When it comes to you, his protective feelings amplify that trait, but he's always been one to handle things himself rather than leaving them to someone else."

Now that Sirius mentioned it, I remembered back to when Scheat and Miaplacidus had offered to lend Mirach a hand. He'd refused their offer, but they ended up disregarding what he said and helped him despite his grumbling. I thought they were all okay with working together, but maybe Mirach just wanted to do things by himself.

Seeing that I'd accepted his explanation and was starting to feel better, Sirius gave a little shrug.

"There's only so much that one person can do on their own. Mirach will grow even more when he learns to leave things to others… but that time is still a little way off."

"In that case, I can grow even faster than Mirach does and surpass him!" I declared.

I was in the middle of a growth spurt, after all. But Sirius said nothing and just gave me a sideways glance.

"…I see. I'll be cheering you on from the shadows." He didn't sound like he meant what he was saying at all—which was unusual for Sirius—so I glared at him. Seeing my response, he raised both hands as if to say, *No offense.*

"It isn't a competition to see who can grow the fastest. Just concentrate on doing your best in your own way, Serafina."

Honestly, it sounded like a clichéd remark meant to placate me, but even I had to admit that Sirius occasionally had a way with words. Of course I was going to try my best!

The day after that conversation took place, Mirach was on duty protecting me when I encountered him arguing with a brown-haired knight. I hurriedly rushed over to see what was going on, and found Canopus was trying to calm Mirach down.

"What's the matter?" I asked, glancing between Mirach and Canopus. I was met with an awkward silence.

"Oh, is it something that's hard to say to me?" Realizing I shouldn't press the matter, I started to step back, but Mirach hastily

raised both his hands as if to stop me.

"Princess Serafina, that's not it at all! I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

While Mirach was responding to me, Canopus whispered something to the brown-haired knight. Whatever he said seemed to be acceptable to him, as he nodded in understanding before bowing and walking away.

"Um, that's…Sador, right?" I asked no one in particular as I watched the knight depart. Mirach nodded his head affirmatively.

The royal guard's extensive range of duties necessitated a clear division of roles among the knights. It hadn't taken long before they'd divided up the main duties among themselves, such as guarding me, conducting site inspections, and coordinating with other groups of knights. Since Sador was one of the knights who mainly stuck to site inspections, I didn't have many opportunities to interact with him.

Canopus returned to us after seeing Sador off and exchanged glances with Mirach as if he was confirming something. When Mirach responded with a nod, Canopus lowered his head and bowed to me.

"My apologies that you had to see that. Sador has been late three days in a row, including today, so Mirach was scolding him. Up until now, there have been no problems with his work conduct, and he had a good reputation in his previous position. I was going to ask if there was a reason for his tardiness, but Mirach prevented me from doing so and the two of us subsequently had a disagreement."

I gave Mirach a confused look. "You didn't think it was a good idea to ask Sador why he was late?"

Mirach's expression tensed as he clenched his fists tightly. "The rules are meant to be followed. It's easy to make exceptions, but that doesn't demonstrate dedication to one's work."

That was a reasonable point, but there were many things in the world that were unavoidable, no matter how dedicated you were to your work. I wondered if Sador had found himself in a helpless situation. The criteria for a "helpless situation" differed from person to person, and when provided with the same reason, some would find it permissible, while others would not. Granting one exception could open the door for many new ones, and the whole thing could snowball out of control.

That was likely why Mirach was taking such a firm stance. Since I didn't know any of the details about Sador's situation, there was nothing more I could do or say besides respond with a brief "I see."

Then, after a moment of thought, I added, "I'd rather you didn't look so scary when you're giving a warning."

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Later that afternoon, once I'd finished my lessons with my tutor, Canopus and I went to visit the Fourth Saint Knight Brigade, whose members were the foremost saints active on the front lines. Since it was also the place where the most information about saints was gathered, I hoped that I could learn more about medicinal herbs.

According to the information I got from Canopus, it would be most efficient to ask the Brigade's captain, Adhara, who would likely be found in the Knight Captain's Office at this time of day. When we

went to where he specified, I was indeed greeted by a smiling Captain Adhara.

"Well, well! If it isn't Princess Serafina? It's been a while." Captain Adhara rose to her feet, stepping away from her desk as she walked toward me. Her neatly trimmed collar-length red hair gleamed in the light just like the last time I saw her.

"I'm sorry to bother you during work. There was just something I wanted to ask you."

"And what might that be? I'd be happy to answer any questions within my knowledge." She gazed at me with a warm smile as we both sat down on the sofa she directed me to. Then, she inclined her head in a respectful bow.

"I heard you had a new royal guard established for your personal protection. Congratulations, Princess."

"Thank you. We went to the west coast recently and encountered some Lodrigone Continent monsters while we were there. My knights were so strong, you wouldn't believe it!"

"What's that? Lodrigone Continent monsters? And you…fought them?"

I'd brought up that story to boast about the strength of my royal guard, which quite unexpectedly caused Captain Adhara's mouth to gape wide open.

I was worried the expression might ruin her refined face, but that didn't appear to be the case. She was truly a handsome saint no matter what.

"Yep! They were called ringed demon lions. There were over thirty of them, but the knights slayed them all!"

Captain Adhara turned to look at Canopus, who was standing behind the sofa, like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Canopus seemed to understand her unspoken question and nodded in affirmation before casting a meaningful glance my way. That was all it took for something to seemingly click in Captain Adhara's head. She looked at me again, but this time her expression was one of astonishment.

"…Is that right? They received enough power to destroy over thirty monsters from the Lodrigone Continent? That must've been quite a shock for them."

"Huh? I'm talking about how strong my knights were."

"I understand that. I'm talking about how they received the power that made them that strong."

It felt like those two things weren't exactly the same—but maybe they were? Canopus didn't say otherwise, so that had to be the case.

"Um, anyway, I'm looking for a medicinal herb with gold leaves."

At those words, Canopus retrieved a sample of the Galle Blue Leaf we'd brought. I took it from him and handed it over to Captain Adhara.

"I'm looking for a medicinal herb similar to this, except that the leaves are gold instead of blue."

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm not all that well versed in medicinal herbs…" Captain Adhara trailed off as she shot a glance in the direction of Vice-Captain Mirfak who was standing in a corner of the room. The vice-captain quickly strode over, taking the leaf from Captain Adhara before carefully examining it.

"I'm interested in medicinal herbology and research it as much as time allows. If my assumptions are correct, this is the new species that was developed in Galle Village, isn't it?"

"Huh?!"

How could she have known that?! I looked up at Vice-Captain Mirfak in surprise, but she casually started to explain how she'd reached that conclusion.

"I've memorized all the herbs in the encyclopedia, but this isn't reminiscent of any of them. Additionally, I'd heard rumors that a new type of herb was being cultivated in Galle. According to the rules, they're not allowed to be removed from the village, but I once received the same type of leaf from a knight named Lukbar when he was drunk. Since he hails from that village, I put two and two together."

Lukbar—he was the knight who belonged to the First Knight Brigade who'd quarreled with Scheat and the others. He and Mirach were from the same village, and from the sound of it, he'd snuck a few of the herbs out with him in the past.

"Wow, you're a hundred percent correct! Your powers of deduction are incredible, Vice-Captain Mirfak! Galle Village also used to have a medicinal herb with gold leaves, but it was stolen, roots and

all. I want to try and find it, but honestly, I'm at a loss for clues. If you know anything, please tell me," I asked, my voice filled with hope.

She furrowed her brow apologetically. "While I wish it were the case, we haven't been able to track down every medicinal herb that exists. There are still opportunities to stumble across them in the wild, but I've never heard of a golden medicinal herb."

"Oh…" I hadn't meant to sound as disappointed as I felt.

"However…" Vice-Captain Mirfak spoke hesitatingly, as if she wasn't sure she should keep going. "I have received word that a golden plant was spotted in a certain part of Starfall Forest. However, I haven't been able to confirm if it's legitimate information because the location is near some fenrir dens, making the area dangerous and hard to access."

"Oh!" I practically squealed with excitement.

Vice-Captain Mirfak paused before continuing with even more trepidation in her voice. "If you're interested, I could have a map of the area sent to you later, but…"

I got the feeling she wanted to help with my question but was feeling apprehensive about disclosing information about a dangerous location.

"I definitely want it!" I clapped my hands gleefully. After taking a moment to shake off her doubts, Vice-Captain Mirfak gave a determined nod.

***

A few days later, I entered Starfall Forest with Canopus and Mirach, as well as Scheat, Fackt, and Miaplacidus, who had finally been reinstated on my guard duty. After their time at the training grounds, the three men were in high spirits, excitedly proclaiming that they were "in the best shape of their lives."

"Hey, Mirach. I heard you had to watch over the princess for us while we were gone. Sorry for all the extra trouble."

"Yeah, we may have messed up your plans, but you really saved our butts."

"We'll make sure to cover your shifts from now on, so take off as much time as you like!!"

The three of them were confident and completely at ease as they warmly extended their support to Mirach.

They sure seem plucky today, I thought, a wave of reassurance washing over me. I'd been feeling a little apprehensive because we were planning to venture fairly deep into the forest and would eventually end up in an area that was densely packed with fenrir dens. It was the kind of situation that would make anyone's nerves buzz, but none of them seemed the least bit fazed, walking as calmly as they usually did. That in itself seemed amazing to me. I was so incredibly blessed to be surrounded by the best knights ever.

Honestly speaking, *no one* wanted me going with them on this mission. The area was exceedingly dangerous since it had so many fenrir dens, and everyone requested that I leave the confirmation and collection of the Galle Gold Leaf in the capable hands of the knights.

But when I begged them to go, stating that I desperately wanted to see the place where new herbs were growing in case there was a possibility of encountering even more unknown species, they begrudgingly gave in—albeit with some conditions. Specifically, I was required to promise that if any danger was detected, we would all leave the premises immediately. But that was a standard practice, so I readily agreed. As a result, I was allowed to accompany the knights to Starfall Forest.

We'd been walking through the forest for around a few hours. I was drenched in sweat by the time Canopus informed me that we'd reached the place we were looking for.

"W-we finally made it…" I wobbled my way into a circular clearing that was surrounded by cliffs. Looking down at my feet, I could see a variety of plants growing, their leaves an array of different colors.

Raising my head, I studied the rest of our surroundings. We were enclosed by towering, sheer cliffs on all sides, and the walls were marked by numerous horizontal openings. Those were probably the entrances to the fenrir dens.

I looked around slowly, trying my best not to make any sudden movements that might attract the fenrirs' attention, when I noticed something shimmering out of the corner of my eye.

"Oh, I think I saw some gold over there…" I couldn't tell for sure because it was so far away, but my heart skipped a beat when I caught sight of something golden next to a large stump. My

excitement propelled me to take a step forward, but out of nowhere, I heard a fenrir howl.

"Eep!" I squealed. "What's going on?!"

I whirled around in the direction of the howl and saw five or six people surrounded by about twice the number of fenrirs.

"Huh? Is that…" I wondered, squinting. I could make out some very familiar figures in the group, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine I'd encounter them here. I was so shocked that all I could do was gaze in astonishment—and unfortunately, my surprise led me to shout out the realization I had just come to.

"…M-my brothers?!"

Far ahead in my line of sight, I could see my three brothers—Vega, Capella, and Rigel—along with their knights, panicking as a group of fenrirs encircled them.



SIDE STORIES

A Special Lunch and Mirach's Suffering

WHILE I WAS PRACTICING embroidery in my room, the knights who were on my guard duty began to talk among themselves as they usually did.

"Why do you think women spend so much money on their lunches?"

"No idea. What they do for lunch is the last thing on my mind. And I bet *you* don't have a clue about that kind of stuff either. Stop being so pretentious."

"Actually, I have some insider knowledge about that! The other day I went to a place called Harriot, which is famous for its *special lunches*. All the customers there were ladies. I only eat lunch at the knights' canteen or places where a meal costs just one coin, so it was almost like an entirely different world!"

"Yeah, that's 'cause all your money goes to buying booze."

"You got that right. By the way, I did recognize some saints from the Saint Knight Brigade among the clientele."

"What? Really? Why don't you ever take me to these places?!"

I was absentmindedly chipping away at my embroidery when a certain word caught my attention and my ears perked up.

"Saints from the Saint Knight Brigade…" I said, jerking my head up. Those were exactly the people I wanted to teach me the tips and tricks of being a saint.

I'd gone to visit the Saint Knight Brigade about one month prior. The plan was for me to see how they conducted themselves, but I was snatched away by a griffin. As a result of that mishap, I'd been unable to achieve my goal.

For a while now, I'd been thinking about how much I'd like to go and learn from the members of the Saint Knight Brigade again if the opportunity presented itself. I'd learned direct experience wasn't the only thing that was important—or more accurately, I'd been influenced by eavesdropping on Sirius admonishing the knights.

Learning isn't just about asking to be taught! Sometimes, it's crucial to closely observe others and discreetly pick up their techniques.

…That was sooo cool.

How awesome would it be to steal someone's techniques instead of just having them taught to you?! Sirius would probably be blown away if I stealthily picked up techniques from the saints and became super strong without anyone noticing.

"Heh heh. He might be so surprised that he stumbles over backward."

Just the thought of it tickled me pink. Hearing my laughter, the knights warily turned to look at me.

"Princess, are you thinking of something naughty again?"

"Every single one of us would probably wish we were dead before something makes Vice-Commander Sirius stumble over backward, so please disregard whatever sudden idea you just had."

Sheesh. It felt like their faith in me was getting lower with each passing day. I wasn't pleased about that, but I reminded myself that a fine saint wouldn't be bothered by such trivial things. Putting on the most serious face I could muster, I tried my best to persuade the knights.

"I'm not thinking anything naughty! I just heard you talking and thought it would be nice to go to Harriot and try the special lunch."

"Wait! Whoever accompanies her will be compensated for eating lunch at Harriot, right?! I volunteer to go!"

"No, I'll go!"

"Not so fast! I'll take her there!!!"

I looked hard at each knight in turn as they jumped at the chance to go with me.

"Hmm. But you said all the customers are ladies, didn't you? I'll stick out like a sore thumb if I go with a man. I want to be stealthy." That was the only way I could sit at the table next to the saints and listen in on their conversations.

"What?"

"But there are only men in the Royal Red Shield."

The knights didn't seem to understand what I was getting at, so I proudly informed them, "That's why you'll need to make sure you look like ladies too."

"Oh! That's what you were thinking?! You do have a point that men entering a restaurant that caters to a largely female clientele

would attract a lot of attention, but…isn't asking us to dress up like women too novel of a solution?"

"I can do it! I've been focusing on developing my pecs recently, so I could probably pull it off!!"

"You do realize dressing up like a woman isn't that simple, right? But you never know until you try. Okay, I guess we can visit the head lady-in-waiting and see if there are any outfits for us to borrow!"

But despite the knights boldly preparing themselves…

"Egad, Scheat! That's going too far! I believe I could find enough redeeming qualities in any woman to consider dating her, but even *I* would refuse a woman who looks like you if she crossed my path. No matter how you shake it, there's not a single feminine feature on you!!"

"I *wish* I could say the same to you, Miaplacidus! But the sizes are so off that there's no hiding you're a man!!"

In conclusion, the knights were just too tall and too muscular to pull off the clothes they'd been given. The skirts that should've daintily fell at the ankles exposed their knees and put their muscular calves on full display. No matter what they tried on, everything was too small, tightly clinging to their bodies and further accentuating their rugged muscles.

This is a total bust, I sighed to myself. But the knights seemed determined not to give up. Their eyes practically sparkled, and their voices almost quivered with anticipation.

"All right, men! We've got one last hope!"

"Yes, the one we've been waiting for all along!!"

Well, at least they were still willing to try. I felt a spark of admiration for them as I looked toward the entrance of the dressing room. Suddenly, the door swung open.

"Huh?! Is that…Mirach?"

"N-no way… That can't be him. Mirach, is that really you?!"

Everyone's eyes practically popped out of their heads as the knight in question emerged from the dressing room. From head to toe, Mirach—with his pretty hat and flouncy pink dress—was the spitting image of a girl.

"Y-you're so cuuuute!!"

The knights responded with enthusiastic nods as words tumbled out of them.

"Mirach, too bad you weren't born a woman! If you were, the world would've been your oyster!!"

"Ugh, if Mirach was a girl, I could totally picture a future where I'd be going all out for her. You don't happen to have any sisters, do you?"

Mirach gave the knights a disdainful stare as they tossed out one lighthearted jab after the next. Usually, receiving a look like that would make them apologize right away, but they were so worked up that the comments just kept coming.

"Gah! What a deliciously contemptuous glare! It's sending shivers up my spine. Something might awaken in me if I'm not careful."

"No truer words were ever spoken. For some reason, when he gives me that icy stare, I just want him to scold me even more. Hey, Mirach, call out my name all sassy-like!"

I couldn't comprehend some of the things they were saying, but I could tell that the knights were enjoying themselves. I was gazing at them with wide-eyed interest when one of the ladies-in-waiting led me out of the room.

"Princess Serafina, the knights' words and actions aren't suitable for your moral education, so why don't we have a snack out on the terrace?"

"What? Really?" But everyone seemed to be having such a great time together.

In any case, I was being separated from the knights who were supposed to be protecting me. I'd only taken a few steps down the hall before they realized this and, in a panic, gave chase—even Mirach, new outfit and all.

We passed several men on our way to the terrace, and every single one of them blushed when they saw the beauty that was Mirach. Seeing how expertly he was able to charm men, I decided in my heart that if I was going to be accompanied to the restaurant by a perfect "lady," it would definitely be Mirach!

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After everything that had happened, my heart was soaring with excitement by the time we finally arrived at Harriot. Mirach and I had dressed up as a well-to-do mother and daughter, and seeing the

restaurant staff greet us with smiles, we seemed to have pulled it off flawlessly.

As soon as the large door opened and I took a step through, I looked all around the restaurant. I quickly spotted three saints from the Saint Knight Brigade sitting over by the window.

A wave of relief washed over me. *Today's my lucky day! The saints are here for lunch too!*

"I want to sit over there!" I said, pointing to the table next to theirs.

Mirach grimaced when he noticed the proximity to the saints. Perhaps he didn't want to sit near them since they were all members of the knight brigade, but he quickly suppressed his emotions and nodded in his usual manner.

"All right. Let's ask if that's possible."

I chuckled to myself. I'd never actually met those three saints before, and since I was in disguise, there's no way they'd think I was a princess. Smirking as I walked to my seat, I began to eavesdrop on the saints' conversation the moment I sat down—and what do you know, they started talking about combat tactics!

"By the way, what do you think of Vice-Commander Sirius? His 'eternally icy' demeanor seems to have thawed a little bit. He might actually warm up in a thousand years."

"No way. More like nine thousand, if you ask me. He's just as demanding of us saints as ever. It's easy enough for *him* to say things

like, ‘just take two more steps forward,’ but that’s the difference between us being walloped by a monster or not!”

“Oh, yeah. When it comes to battle, he hasn’t changed a bit. But he seems more open to input now. He used to never care what we were thinking at all, but now he’s softened up to the point where he’ll at least ask.”

Now that I was listening, it seemed they were talking about Sirius rather than how to be a saint. I was so startled that I froze with my juice in hand. I strained my ears even harder to pick up their conversation as they hushed their voices and began to discuss a new topic—me.

“I think it’s all due to the influence of the second princess. Remember how she was living in a secluded villa and the vice-commander was sent to retrieve her? Now, this doesn’t leave our table, but apparently, he made a public proposal to Her Highness at that time. She said yes, and he subsequently brought her back to the castle after that.”

“My goodness! But Her Highness is only six years old! She came by to visit our brigade the other day, and I heard she was small, even for her age. A thirteen-year age gap, huh? Well, I suppose that’s par for the course for an arranged marriage. But, well, if a six-year-old could inspire even a hint of kindness in the vice-commander… Hmm, I suppose we owe her one.”

“Th-that’s not…”

Fearing that they’d completely misunderstood Sirius, I started to protest, but Mirach stopped me. “Princess Serafina, your soup is

getting cold. Also, gossip is not something to be taken seriously. Even the people spreading it only believe about half of what they're saying."

"B-but…" I stammered.

But by then, the saints had already moved on to another topic. *Maybe I'll get some good information this time…* I thought, mentally crossing my fingers, but…

"You've heard of Miaplacidus, right? He's got navy hair and was previously in the First Knight Brigade before being transferred to the newly established Royal Red Shield. You know, the tough-looking one who's always talking about 'wife this, bride that.' Even though he has all the qualities of a great catch, he just can't seem to find a girlfriend. And now I finally know why."

"Are his standards too high or something?"

"No, nothing like that. Apparently, his whole 'wanting a wife' schtick is only a bluff! He's actually got a thing for his royal guard comrade, Scheat."

"Oh! I heard that too! They were both originally in the Sixth Knight Brigade, but not long after Scheat got transferred to the First Knight Brigade, Miaplacidus followed him there. Not to mention the two of them were newly assigned to the Royal Red Shield—that's just going too far! You've got to imagine that Miaplacidus pulled some strings behind the scenes. Still, to think all that wanting a wife talk was just a front… So it's Scheat he's aiming for, is it? Well, he *does* have feminine features."

Uh, no. In fact, based on recent events, I could firmly assert that Scheat didn't look like a woman in the slightest. I was going to

tell them just that when Mirach stopped me once again.

"Look, Princess Serafina, here comes the special meat of your special lunch. It was described as 'melt-in-your-mouth-delicious,' so make sure to eat it while it's still piping hot. Also, even without those rumors, Miaplacidus wouldn't have any luck with the ladies, so you can just let it go."

"B-but…"

"I'm personally relieved to know that those rumors are why Scheat also doesn't have a girlfriend. In any case, gossip isn't meant to verify the truth; rather, it's a form of entertainment."

I pondered his words as I stabbed a piece of meat with my fork and brought it to my mouth.

The women at the table next to us were now exchanging opinions on something else. Okay, this had to be when they would start discussing what it meant to be a saint…

"Still… I heard there's an entirely different reason those two don't have girlfriends."

"Hm? There's something else?"

"There's that pretty boy with pink hair in the royal guard—Mirach, I believe it is. Well, I heard that his hobby is dressing up like a woman."

"Whaaat? Really?!"

Mirach froze in place as soon as the topic of conversation turned to him. I shot him a concerned glance, but the saints at the table next to us didn't seem to care and excitedly continued their conversation.

"It's true! He was strutting around in a flowy dress the other day, walking through the castle like he owned the place! All the knights of the royal guard were surrounding him, blushing like schoolgirls!"

"Are you serious?!" The two other saints spluttered incredulously.

"I sure am. And what's more, *Princess* Mirach is the type who loves when men fawn over him. He's got the entire royal guard in the palm of his hand. That's why *none* of them have girlfriends, even though they're such high-caliber men. At least, that's what the rumors say."

"Ah, now it all makes sense."

"I always wondered why they were all single, but I get it now."

I was alarmed to see Mirach cutting his meat into tiny little pieces. I probably needed to say something, and quick. "M-Mirach, the meat isn't going to look like meat anymore if you keep cutting it that small. Um, you said gossip was only a form of entertainment, remember?"

"This is clearly slander! I'd easily win if I pursued legal action!!"

"R-right. But we're incognito today, so we should try to keep a low profile. Besides, if the saints see you in that adorable outfit, it'll make the rumors about your hobby carry even more weight, right?"

Mirach gritted his teeth but said nothing more, apparently resigning himself to the situation.

Meanwhile, the saints finished up their meal and left the restaurant. In the end, I hadn't learned anything useful about what it took to be a saint.

"…Why did I even come to Harriot?" I murmured to myself, and Mirach answered matter-of-factly.

"To eat the special lunch, of course. That's what you said yourself, didn't you?"



"O-oh, that's right."

Well, there's nothing that can be done now. I just have to write it off as trying out the lunch. That's what I told myself, but to be honest, I couldn't really tell if the meal I'd shared with Mirach was very good or not.

Not only was I disappointed over not being able to eavesdrop on the saint's techniques so I could steal them for myself, but I'd been given an information overload on Sirius, Miaplacidus, Scheat, and Mirach. The rumors were bouncing around in my head and making it difficult for me to concentrate on the taste of the special lunch.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and looked up at Mirach. "Mirach, I'd like you to come back to this restaurant with me again in your normal clothes. We can bring Miaplacidus, Scheat, and the others along as well." Next time I wouldn't try to listen in on anyone else's conversation. I just wanted to enjoy the food.

"Good idea. Being straightforward and honest is always the best approach." Mirach agreed with my suggestion. Then we both looked at each other and sighed, feeling utterly exhausted.

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After we returned to the castle, the knights were waiting with bated breath to hear about our lunch at Harriot.

"Well, it was delicious, like nothing I'd ever eaten before, but I couldn't quite figure out the flavor." When I answered truthfully, the knights looked puzzled. What I was saying didn't seem to make sense to them, so they asked Mirach the same thing.

"Yeah, I don't recommend cutting the meat too small. It's difficult to eat that way." Mirach's answer was just as cryptic as mine, causing the knights to frown. I'd need to rephrase my explanation to make it easier for them to understand.

"I'm just saying, a restaurant full of women is seriously intimidating. I'm completely drained just from eating lunch."

The knights' large frames began to tremble, perhaps because Mirach and I were behaving so unusually.

"…Is that true? Does a restaurant with only female customers serve as a 'Don't come here!' warning to men?"

"We have the knights' canteen, after all! We don't need to go to Harriot!"

"A restaurant patronized by only women is a place that's just for them!!"

The knights seemed satisfied with the conclusion they came to, but they still agreed to join me—in their usual uniforms—when I asked them to eat lunch at Harriot's a month later.

As expected, there weren't any other men at the restaurant, so their appearance automatically garnered some attention. The female customers glanced at the knights and began whispering among themselves. Despite their efforts to be discreet, their murmurs were still clearly audible.

Even though I was curious about what they were saying, I'd already made the decision not to listen to any rumors, so I just concentrated on my meal.

"Yeah! This is super yummy!" The food was just as delicious as the restaurant's reputation suggested. In contrast to my satisfaction, the knights—who were experiencing a baptism by fire coming to a restaurant with so many women for the first time—seemed to have overheard more than they bargained for and appeared weighed down by the heavy atmosphere. They'd probably been privy to a lot of rumors they wished they hadn't heard.

"Um, I heard that gossip is just a form of entertainment." I tried to comfort the knights, but they shook their heads vehemently.

"It's nothing as sweet and innocent as that! Those assertions are tantamount to slander!"

That sounded just like what Mirach said. I found it a little amusing that the knights were all on the same page; the thought made me smile.

"Maybe everyone has a different best place for them to eat. I'm sure that's the knights' canteen for all of you."

"It definitely is!!!" they chorused.

We returned to the castle afterward, but the knights complained, "It doesn't feel like we ate at all," so they headed straight to the canteen for another meal.

"Dining at the knights' canteen is second to none!"

"Indeed! There's no other establishment with such delicious food and such big portions!!"

"Since the only other patrons are knights, you never hear any unwanted chatter!!"

The unusual praise from everyone seemed to really move the chefs. As a result, they prepared an exceptionally lavish spread for the knights the following week, further winning their hearts with the meals.

"I'll never set foot in a fancy royal capital restaurant again! I'll be dining at the knights' canteen for the rest of my days!"

"Hear, hear!!"

As a result, the knights' use of the canteen skyrocketed, with Mirach being one of the most frequent customers.

Interlude:
The Royal Guard Risk Their Lives to Read the *Handsome Chief Duke* Aloud

THIS IS THE STORY of a time when Canopus asked Serafina what she wanted.

With the holiday known as Children's Day coming up the following week, the knights of the Royal Red Shield pooled their money together so they could buy Princess Serafina something her heart desired. Canopus, her personal knight, was charged with gathering this information.

Serafina's eyes positively sparkled as she made her request.

"I want a book!"

"A book?" Canopus furrowed his brow. If the princess was specifically asking for a book, that meant it would probably be difficult to obtain.

"That's right! It's a bestseller, so it's sold out at all the book shops."

"There's a book shop I frequent, I should be able to get it there if I ask."

Canopus's worry subsided. A rare or foreign book might be difficult to get ahold of, but obtaining a bestseller that was widely available domestically shouldn't pose much of an issue. But his relief was short-lived as Serafina turned to him with an innocent smile and

said, “Yaaay! I’ve been wanting to read *An Elegant Day in the Life of the Handsome Chief Duke* forever!”

The blood drained from Canopus’s face, and he was at a loss for words. He’d just been asked to acquire the book that was *the* most challenging for the knights to obtain. He glanced out the open door looking for any kind of assistance, but the royal knights who were lined up outside shook their heads wildly, and he could almost hear the protests from their hearts.

“We can’t, Canopus! That’s the knights’ ultimate forbidden tome! You already know that Vice-Commander Sirius confiscated our copies of it the other day!!”

“Not to mention what a bad mood reading that book put the vice-commander in! And you want to give it his cherished jewel, the princess?! Even in the best possible scenario, it goes without saying that it’ll irritate him big time.”

The more the knights thought about it, the more vehemently they shook their heads from side to side. But…they’d also been the ones to delegate full responsibility to Canopus before he spoke with the princess.

“Canopus!” they’d told him. “Ask what the princess *really* wants. Even if it’s a little expensive or hard to come by, we’ll make it work somehow!! You must find out what she wants at all costs and promise to obtain it!!”

Seeing the knights, pale-faced and shakily nodding their heads in acknowledgment that the request hadn’t been retracted, the conclusion that Canopus reached was that the Royal Red Shield was

so sweet on Princess Serafina, they would do anything to fulfill her wishes. He turned to the princess and gave her a firm nod.

"Understood."

At that moment, the sounds of people collapsing and cries of anguish could be heard coming from outside the door, but the damage had been done.

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"You've got to be kidding me!!! I thought you were the most sensible of all the knights, Canopus, but the lack of common sense you've just shown is unparalleled!! The fate of the knight brigade rests entirely in the hands of Vice-Commander Sirius!! Directly facing off with him is utter lunacy!"

"It wasn't all that long ago that he confiscated our copies of the *Handsome Chief Duke* in a voice that could instantly freeze over even the strongest knight!! That book is contraband! It's forbidden among all the knights!!"

The knights were kicking up a huge fuss as though they'd completely lost their minds, but Canopus remained calm. "I was just following your orders. Did I miss something? I don't remember the request being changed."

"Ack! Well, it wasn't *changed*, per se. I'm just saying…that order plays second fiddle to our lives," Miaplacidus retorted sharply, but Canopus had a point.

"Besides, Princess Serafina was delighted," Canopus added, reiterating the obvious.

At that, everyone grew silent. Of course they valued their lives, but all the knights were thinking the same thing: They wanted to make the princess happy.

"All right! We can't do allow anything to dim Princess Serafina's bright smile! Let's do it!!"

"Indeed! We'll risk our lives!!"

"Putting your life on the line for your liege is the true aspiration of a knight, after all!!"

Their words may have sounded valiant, but at the end of the day, all they were doing was buying a book. Even so, when the knights set out to purchase the book, they approached the bookstore with the same trepidation as entering a danger zone, Sirius's terrifying reputation looming in their minds.

But when the book that the knights had obtained was presented to Serafina, her face lit up and she hugged it to her chest with both hands.

"Thank you, everyone!! I've been wanting to read this book for so long! I'm amazed you managed to find it when Sirius never seemed able to!!"

An awkward silence hung in the air.

The knight's faces collectively twitched at the knowledge Vice-Commander Sirius had refused to let Princess Serafina get her hands on this book—and even actively avoided her request.

"…We're happy you like it," Scheat managed to reply. His face was still twitching as he continued to speak. "You know, Princess, if

the vice-commander learns that we were able to find you a book he couldn't, it will likely hurt his pride. Would it be possible for you to keep it somewhere he won't come across it?"

Miaplacidus jumped in right away to support Scheat's unusually clever suggestion. "And it's also important not to read it in his presence either!"

A look of admiration brightened Serafina's face. "You're so perceptive! And here I was, about to show my new book to Sirius because I wasn't thinking about his feelings."

"Eep! I-I-If you even so much as show it to him, we may never get a chance to see you ever again!"

"What?! So you're saying his pride would be wounded that badly?" Serafina looked alarmed as she sat down on the sofa and opened the book, but her expression soon shifted to one of consternation.

"…The words are much more difficult than those in my picture books. I think it might be too hard for me to read this; will you read it aloud for me?"

There was an audible gulp from everyone in the room. The knights' legs buckled, and they slumped to the ground. From that position they scrambled to the door on their hands and knees, trying to be the first to make their exit.

"You know, there are so many of us here that we'll just get in the way! The rest of us will head out and leave the task to the knights assigned to your guard today! We hope you spend this holiday celebrating your splendid growth, Princess!"

"Happy Children's Day!"

"Happy Children's Day!" the rest of the knights parroted as they quickly left the room. In the end, the only four left behind were Canopus, Mirach, Scheat, and Miaplacidus.

"…I feel nothing but an overwhelming sense of despair," Scheat mumbled under his breath, his face as pale as a sheet.

"Yes, we will certainly meet our end here," Miaplacidus agreed. "How pitiful it is to have one foot in the grave and still be woefully single."

"I should've worked out my triceps more before being laid to rest. Ahh, I wanted to meet my maker with a perfect body."

Without sparing a glance for his mumbling companions, Mirach sat down next to Serafina and took the book from her hands.

"I'll read it to you if that's what you desire, Princess Serafina. Please feel free to ask me if there are any words or scenarios that you don't understand."

With that, he held the book at an angle so that she could see the pictures and started to read from the very beginning.

"*An Elegant Day in the Life of the Handsome Chief Duke*. This is the tale of the Chief Duke: a handsome man in the highest-ranking position, the leading knight in the brigade, and an advisor to the king —a figure envied by all."

Just hearing the first line of the book made Scheat wince.

"Now that I'm hearing it again, I can understand why it would put the vice-commander in such a foul mood. All those descriptions fit

him to a tee! As I recall from reading it before, the handsome chief duke is portrayed as a character who comes off as overly pretentious and flashy. If someone wrote about me like that, I'd break out in hives all over my body!!" Scheat shuddered.

But Miaplacidus offered a counter argument. "But women make up ninety-nine percent of the people who purchase this book, and they all seem to describe the depiction of the handsome chief duke as that of their ideal man, so I was inspired to imitate the words and deeds of this character to get on the quickest path to marriage."

"…I now fully understand why you're single."

Despite the bantering between Miaplacidus and Scheat in the background, the story of the handsome chief duke's day started with taking his bath. And what's more, the bathtub he used was made of pure gold that positively sparkled.

Serafina cocked her head as she listened. *One of the ladies-in-waiting told me this book was about Sirius. Does that mean his bathtub is made of pure gold?*

Snippets of Miaplacidus and Scheat's quarreling drifted into her ears as she was deep in thought.

"In any case, you're trying too hard to imitate the handsome chief duke! Just acquiring the same bathtub as him is going to set you back a lifetime's worth of paydays!"

"Ack! How much do you think it would cost to get your hands on one? The chief duke sure is loaded!"

"Didn't you see what the vice-commander was wearing when we went to the beach? Every single piece was handmade by tailors! He's got money coming out his ears!!"

"Gah! If *he's* single, then I'll never ever see my wedding day!!"

Something they said seemed to have bothered Serafina. She turned around to look at them. "Scheat, Miaplacidus, money can't come out of your ears. Some coins may be small enough to fit in there, but that's dangerous and something you should never ever try!"

Irritated by the disruption, Mirach shot the other two knights a sharp look, and they quickly clamped their mouths shut. He refocused on the page he'd been reading, but what he saw next made his face tense and his lips press together. According to the book, a beautiful lady paid a visit to the duke in the morning with the goal of seducing him. This was not something that would benefit Princess Serafina's moral education. He was at a loss of what to do when Canopus—who'd sensed his inner turmoil—continued "reading" the book for him.

"The handsome chief duke ate breakfast. He had meat. It was delicious."

Canopus completely bypassed the scene with the beautiful woman to insert his own plot development, but unfortunately, he lacked any literary talent.

"The handsome chief duke asked for seconds. He ate a lot. He was full."

This is horrible. Scheat and Miaplacidus grimaced as they listened to Canopus "read." But in a stroke of good luck, it seemed that the princess was also getting bored, as evidenced by her

fidgeting legs. Seeing this, Mirach tried to take advantage of the situation.



"Princess Serafina, this is a book that was written for adults; it's not something that can be read all in one go. How about we wrap up here for today?"

"Huh? Oh, right. It would be a waste to read it in just one sitting. The words will start to lose their impact."

The words lost their impact and came across as childish because of Canopus's lack of literary finesse. All the knights present shared the same thought, but they fervently kept their lips sealed.

Soon after that, Serafina said, "I'd like to visit the gardens," and Canopus accompanied her to her favorite one.

Once she was gone, Mirach, Miaplacidus, and Scheat—who'd remained behind—exchanged glances.

"I know you haven't read the book, Mirach, but it just gets worse from here."

Mirach gave Scheat a curious look. "Oh? Could you mean the scene where the vice-commander is sitting on a sofa, drinking wine as he does a cool flourish with his hair? Or perhaps, when he's in his gown after getting out of the bath, stroking something soft and fluffy on his knee?"

He'd apparently remembered the poses Scheat and Miaplacidus had used during the game of "Sirius Tag" the other day and began mimicking them perfectly.

"H-hey! Don't say it's about the vice-commander directly! Although you're right…"

"Those are scenes that come up in the book, but a majority of the pages are devoted to beautiful women approaching the vice-commander and being casually rejected. What even is this? Do female readers enjoy the thrill of the vice-commander mercilessly dismissing every beautiful woman who approaches him?"

Scheat and Miaplacidus squabbled back and forth, but in the end all three men were at a loss of what to do.

"I know it's too late now, but this is most certainly not a book for children. The vice-commander was being rash when he confiscated our copies, but he was astute in his judgment to withhold it from Princess Serafina."

"I guess what we can do is gloss over the parts that are unsuitable for children as we read it to her. Canopus was positively ghastly, but I don't think I'd be much better."

"I don't have a creative bone in my body."

As a result of the three of them hemming and hawing over various ideas, they all reached the same conclusion.

"…So we're in agreement that the vice-commander's directive was correct?"

"Yes. The risk of us reading this book to Princess Serafina is too great. …Let's pretend there was a monster! We could say that a bird-type one snatched it away!!"

"I have reservations about that kind of dishonesty, but…I choose not to comment."

With that, the three knights hid the book in the very back of the bookshelf and, with heavy hearts, recounted to a hugely disappointed Serafina how they'd been confronted by a bird-type monster that had stolen it.

A few days later, the knights of the Royal Red Shield bought another present to celebrate the special holiday. Thanks to the ever-changing whims of children, she was now gazing happily at a cake from the trendiest bakery in the royal capital.

The knights collectively sighed in relief. This time, they could purchase a gift that wouldn't induce any heart palpitations. Under their careful watch, Serafina picked up her fork and began to eat the delicious cake. But then she suddenly looked up, as if she'd remembered something.

"I was thinking of asking Sirius if I can visit his quarters soon. If I can get him to invite me over, I'm going to see if his bathtub is actually made of sparkling gold!"

Every knight present had read *An Elegant Day in the Life of the Handsome Chief Duke* before, so they immediately knew what Serafina was hinting at. They wore tight-lipped smiles as they silently prayed with unprecedented intensity.

Please forget!

I beg of you, Princess. Forget everything you read in that book!

All I can see is a future where she spills the beans! Princess Serafina, just let it slip from your mind!

It’s unclear whether the knight’s prayers were answered, but do keep in mind that children say the darndest things…

Serafina's Trial of Valor

THAT DAY, I WAS SITTING on a bench in the garden peering into an empty box.

When I'd gone to visit my older sister Shaula's room, the ladies-in-waiting were clearing away some empty plates that had the most amazing smell wafting from them. Curious, I asked about the scent and was told that sweets from a famous patisserie had been served at the tea party that had wrapped up right before my visit. Unfortunately, there were none left, but they still had the box the sweets had come in, so they gave that to me.

"Wow, this smells so sweet." I was sniffing the pleasing aroma to my heart's content when an unfamiliar word I overheard Scheat saying to another knight caught my attention. Peering up from over the box I was holding, I turned to him and asked, "What's *valor*? And why would you have a trial of it?"

I hadn't ever heard that word before, but Scheat responded with a succinct explanation. "A trial of valor is an event that takes place in the dark of night. It tests your courage as you infiltrate a spooky place and endure the horrors that await within."

"It tests your ability to handle scary stuff?" I repeated, my eyes glittering brightly. Now *that* sounded super interesting. Honestly speaking, I thought I was pretty darn brave. Could this be my big chance to prove it to everyone?

"The trial of valor is an event that's organized in the summer, and the knight brigade takes part in it every year. This year, we'll be holding it at a house near the royal capital. You participate in pairs, and duos that return with the 'Coin of Valor' that's hidden within the venue during the allotted time will be recognized as brave by all the knights. There are also special prizes hidden throughout that can be kept by whoever discovers them."

"That sounds like so much fun! I'm going to take part with Sirius, then!"

"Huh?!"

"Gah!"

Miaplacidus and Mirach had been quietly listening in on our conversation until that point, but they both spluttered at my declaration. When Scheat finally responded, his voice sounded shaky with unease.

"P-Princess Serafina, you want to participate? And with Vice-Commander Sirius at that? I'm afraid that's not going to work…"

"Why?" I inquired.

"Wh-why, you ask? Well, it's because we, your garden-variety knights, hide on the premises to try and scare the participants. It goes without saying that we'll be no match for Vice-Commander Sirius! Even if you act as a stumbling block, there's no scenario where he doesn't return with the coin in hand!!"

I puffed out my cheeks in annoyance. "Even if I acted as a stumbling block"? What was *that* supposed to mean? *How dare you*

speak ill of Serafina the Brave! is what I was going to say before Miaplacidus saved Scheat from my scolding by pulling him aside.

They began to discuss something among themselves in hushed whispers.

"Don't you think this is an excellent opportunity for us to find out the vice-commander's weakness? Think about it. No one can be perfect at everything! I'm sure he's hiding it, but Vice-Commander Sirius must have some sort of vulnerability. Maybe he's afraid of the dark, or he doesn't like cats."

"Now that you mention it, we invite him as a formality each year, but he always declines. Wait. What if he *is* afraid of the dark?!"

"We can verify if that's true or not! We'll stash the coin in a location he can't possibly find so that we can assess his weaknesses. And if we *do* discover any vulnerabilities, we can exploit them as a last resort if we ever find ourselves in an impossible spot with the vice-commander."

"You're a genius!"

Scheat and Miaplacidus turned back to me with looks of contentment. "We're looking forward to you and Vice-Commander Sirius joining our trial of valor!"

But wasn't that the opposite of what they'd just told me? I guess that was all well and good, but I still wasn't sure about all this "stumbling block" talk.

"Scheat, you said I would be a stumbling block to Sirius. What did you mean by that?"

"…As you know, the vice-commander has long legs. I thought that perhaps you would cling to them in fear and cause him to trip."

"Ah, that makes sense." I nodded, satisfied with that explanation. The knights were only saying that because they didn't know how brave I was yet. I just flashed them a grin, but in my heart, I was proudly declaring, *I'll show you just how courageous I am!*

***

It was finally the day of the trial of valor.

Sirius and I walked together, hand in hand, to the house where the event was to be held. I glanced up at him with a grin, but he was pressing his fingers against his temples like he had a headache.

"This house is one of the buildings the knights utilize for covert operations. Using it for entertainment purposes certainly takes a lot of nerve."

"Calm down, Sirius. You're not here to give the knights a scolding. Our mission is to obtain the Coin of Valor. Heh heh! 'Serafina' is a synonym for 'bravery,' you know. And everyone's going to see that today!"

"That's the first I've ever heard of such a synonym."

"There are plenty of things in the world that even *you* don't know, Sirius. If you get scared during the trial, feel free to hide behind me, okay?"

"…Very well."

As we approached the entrance, one of the knights straightened up and greeted us before letting us in. The inside of the house was

pitch black, but I was able to pinpoint the exact locations of things. Sirius sounded impressed as he noticed how I was able to maneuver around without running into walls or furniture.

"You're amazing, Serafina," he cooed. "You're avoiding everything like you can see it as clear as day."

"Until just recently I couldn't see at all, so I consider myself pretty good with darkness."

"Urk!"

In contrast to my proud declaration, Sirius leaned forward and groaned as he gave my hand a tight squeeze. Seeing how clingy he was acting, I wondered—somewhat bewildered—if he was afraid of the dark. I was still reeling from the surprise when Sirius seemed to notice something and swooped me up from the ground.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No, parts of the floor have been covered with materials of varying hardness. They probably aimed to create unsettling sensations underfoot to provoke fear."

I gave him a puzzled look. That was a lot of difficult words.

"What I meant is…I wanted to hold you close." Sirius explained in a way that was easier for me to understand.

Yeah, for Sirius to be acting so needy, he must really be afraid of the dark. Well, wasn't that just the most adorable thing? Sirius stopped in his tracks to look around, studying the quiet room before he said, "There's three…no, four of them in total. If they try anything, I'll launch a counterattack."

His words were met with sharp intakes of breath from different corners of the room, followed by a chorus of whispers. However, the room was so quiet that what they were saying was clearly audible.

"H-he warned us that he'll counterattack if we try anything?! This was supposed to be a series of horror scenarios for participants to navigate!"

"Do you think that kind of logic will work on the vice-commander?! He's absolutely going to crush us if we make a move!!"

"…I'm not doing anything."

"Me either."

Silence fell over the room once more as I cocked my head to the side in confusion. I still wasn't exactly clear what a trial of valor was, but it seemed that the knights were supposed to prevent us from finding the coin. However, just one threat from Sirius had caused them all to give up immediately.

"Thanks, Sirius! Now we can find the coin at our own pace," I chirped. "Hmm, it feels like my brave aura is radiating so strongly that I can almost sense exactly where it is." I climbed out of his arms and looked in all the places I could think of.

"If I were a knight, I'd hide it in this hat! …Oh, nothing here." I turned all the hats in the closet upside down, but there were no coins to be found.

"If I were a knight, I'd hide it under this cushion! …Hm, no luck." I picked up all the cushions on the sofa in turn, but still no sign

of the coin. Just like that, I looked in all the places it *had* to be…all three, four, five of them…

"If I were a knight, I'd hide it beneath this carpet! Maybe. Huh?! It's not here either?!"

After searching the eighth, ninth, and tenth "It has to be here!" places, I finally screamed out, "I don't know 'cause I'm not a knight!!"

Sirius picked me up again and started walking down the hallway. He lifted his foot slightly and brought his heel down forcefully on a particular spot on the floor. A portion of the wall on the right side opened with a thud, revealing what looked like a small room. The knights, who had been quiet until then, started whispering and talking among themselves once more, and just like before, I could clearly hear what they were saying.

"What in the blazes is going on here? The vice-commander's never even set foot in this house before, right?!"

"I know! But when this house was first purchased, a copy of the blueprints would've been submitted as a reference. The mechanism for opening the secret room would've been listed on it, so maybe he remembered it from there?"

"Is that even possible? That's beyond human capability! The vice-commander is responsible for sorting through the commander's paperwork daily! It would be utterly impossible to read through such a huge mountain of documents and remember every little detail!!"

"Normally I'd agree, but a knight who intimidates the scare actors in a trial of valor and turns the event on its ear could probably pull it off!!"

The groaning continued until the knights fell silent again, seemingly satisfied with their conversation. With that, I stepped into the newly revealed room. Inside, there was a lone table with a single coin sitting on top of it.

"I found it! It's the Coin of Valor!!" I rushed toward the table as Sirius's voice, brimming with admiration, rang out from behind me.

"I wouldn't expect any less from you, Serafina. You truly have a courageous spirit to charge into this pitch-black room without hesitation. There's no doubt you deserve a coin for bravery."

"You really think so? Heh heh! I'm so happy!" I giggled, but just then, a pleasant scent suddenly wafted into my nose.

"Hm?" I sniffed around, trying to find where it was coming from. Following the sweet aroma led me to a small paper box that was resting on the edge of the table. Upon closer inspection, I could make out that the top of the box was decorated with an illustration of chocolate and strawberries.

"Oh! This box is from Strawberry Choco! This must be the special prize they were talking about! Sirius, we found it!!"

"I suspect the special prize was probably the dagger that was lying next to the coin. But since you're not interested in things like that, I doubt it even caught your eye. …And it doesn't seem like you're listening to me."

Sirius was right. I was so captivated by the box I was holding that I didn't hear a word he said. But that's only because this box was from the same shop as the one that smelled of scrumptious sweets

that I'd gotten from Shaula's room the other day. I carefully began to open it as I heard a chorus of whispers for the third time.

"Huh? Wait! I-I waited in line for three hours to buy that!!"

I realized, belatedly, that was Miaplacidus's voice, and the one that responded belong to Scheat.

"Just give up already. It's not like you had any woman to give them to; you'd just end up eating them yourself. I bet those sweets would rather be consumed by an adorable princess than a big, tough guy like yourself."

"You're wrong! I stood in line for two hours to meet with a famous fortune teller, and they told me that my lucky item for the next day would be those sweets! They specifically said that if I was wandering around with a box of them, I would have a fateful encounter!!"

"…Well, then you probably should've been more careful when you hid that box. Then you wouldn't have let destiny slip through your fingers."

"What?! You think this means I'm going to miss my chance with fate?!"

"Exactly. Unless, of course, you can get that box back from our utterly delighted princess."

"I…"

I hadn't been able to follow the entire conversation, but I heard that last part very clearly. They were going to try to take the sweets from me. Hearing that, I quickly hid the box behind my back.

An amused voice rang down from above me. “So, the courageous girl who acquired the Coin of Valor is that afraid of her sweets being taken away?”

“You’ve got that right! That’s the thing I’m most scared of in the world!” I insisted.

Sirius looked bewildered for a moment before he burst into laughter. “Ha ha ha! So that’s how it is, huh? Your trial of valor would be over if someone snatched away your sweets in broad daylight?”

Yep, if someone took the sweets I finally got my hands on, I’d definitely be terrified and heartbroken.

I turned to Sirius and nodded my full agreement. “Exactly! I’m really lucky that a trial of valor means searching for something in the dark and not having my sweets taken away.”

“Talk about missing the point!”

The hidden knights groaned in protest as soon as I’d finished speaking, but I paid them no mind and looked up at Sirius.

“But,” I continued with a triumphant grin, “I’m pretty brave, so I think I could manage even if my sweets were taken away!”

“You never fail to impress me, Serafina. If that’s the case, then you’ve truly got a lion’s heart.”

Sirius’s compliment delighted me, but my face immediately fell as I realized there was one thing that even all the courage in the world couldn’t help me with.

“I just thought of the only situation I couldn’t be brave in. I’d be just devastated if you were ever taken away from me, Sirius.”

Sirius was rendered speechless for a moment, like he'd been shook to the core. He started blinking rapidly, as if trying to shake off a surge of emotion.

"Is that…right?" he finally asked.

"Uh-huh! That's why I'll always stick to you like glue, so no one can catch me off guard and take you away," I said, throwing myself around Sirius's legs.

"You're a clever girl." He patted my head as if praising me, then he picked me up once more.

"You were brave enough to find that coin, Serafina. But there's nothing wrong with having one weakness; in fact, I'm honored if it's me."

"You mean it?"

"Indeed, I do."

Sirius nodded as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and I embraced him tightly, feeling a surge of relief. Still holding me, he turned around and headed for the exit. It appeared that our trial of valor had come to an end. From the comfort of his arms, I called out to the knights who had so graciously hosted us.

"Thanks for making this such a fun experience! Have a good night!"

At that, all the knights popped out of their hiding spots and bowed their heads.

We didn't get a chance to pull off any of the scares we had planned, but…we're happy you're satisfied, Princess. Good night!

Now, I didn't know this was what happened next, but as soon as Sirius and I left the house, the knights lifted their heads and let out a collective groan. Then, they started to utter their grievances.

"The Ultimate Mother Hen strikes again! He's still as soft on the princess as ever, huh?!"

"Not to mention the vice-commander is her weak spot? No one is *ever* going to defeat him, let alone steal him away. Can that even be considered a weakness?!"

"Exactly!"

Miaplacidus heaved a long sigh. "The princess is invincible as long as the vice-commander is her weak spot. And as for his weakness—it's clear that it's the princess. But even considering using her against him would spell your downfall. It turns out the only things we can do are protect the princess with all our might and do our utmost not to get on Vice-Commander Sirius's bad side."

"Hear, hear!!" The knights echoed their agreement.

The trail of valor ended up being yet another instance of the Royal Red Shield recognizing Serafina's true value.

Point of View: Sirius
Serafina's Embroidery

THAT DAY, I found myself in Serafina's private quarters, where she welcomed me with a wide, beaming smile. Her sparkling grin seemed like a portent of unwelcome events, so I remained silent, my expression wary.

Judging from past experience, the sight of Serafina's proud smile brought about a high probability of something undesirable occurring. I readied myself for what she was about to say next, when she brought forth the hand she'd been concealing behind her back and extended it toward me. Dropping my gaze, I saw that she was holding a handkerchief.

"Ta-da! I embroidered this handkerchief with my hopes and dreams, Sirius!" she said, unfolding the cloth and spreading it out. There was a bear dressed in clothes and some sparkling stars embroidered on it. Well, I guessed that it was a bear…but I wouldn't have disagreed if someone told me it was a clothed fox instead.

"What do you think of my embroidery?" she asked with such pride that it would be impossible to deny her. After all, considering my own embroidery prowess, I was hardly one to criticize the work of others. But that being said, even I could tell that her skills with a needle were poor.

However, considering that she was only six years old, I thought it was quite an impressive piece. Knowing it was handmade by her

only made it more endearing. Thus, I was able to tell her my honest thoughts.

"…I think *you're* perfectly adorable."

"Huh? Thanks, but I was talking about my embroidery?"

"As was I. If I can appreciate the flavor of this piece, it must mean I find you utterly charming."

Serafina's eyes boggled at my assessment.

"The flavor, you say? No way… How'd you know I was eating snacks while I worked on it?!"

"Serafina…" I admonished her after a stunned pause, "Didn't your tutor warn you not to eat even a single bite while you were embroidering so that the cloth wouldn't get dirty?" Still, it wasn't reasonable to expect a six-year-old to solely focus on embroidery for long periods of time, so I slightly changed my tune as I continued.

"But if I can accept that part of you as well, it must mean that I find you positively delightful."

It seemed that praising Serafina in this subtle way backfired, as she clapped her hands with joy.

"Gosh, that makes me so happy! I'll tell you something really good as a thank-you!"

As I stared into her glittering eyes, the uneasy feeling I'd had earlier surfaced within me once more. "I feel like not knowing would be better for my mental health…but I suppose I have no choice but to hear you out."

"Sirius, this is super important information! You'll miss out if you don't hear it."

Her urging was so earnest that I gave in and prompted her to continue. "Is that so? Then, allow me to ask: What's this 'really good' thing you wanted to tell me?"

"Well, you see, I was actually planning to use blue thread to embroider the clothes, but I ended up accidentally using white thread. But since the cloth is also white, it was nearly impossible to tell where the part I embroidered was."

"Yes, that would be a problem."

But the bear's clothes were red. Whatever was going on here?

"Anyway, I kept staring at the handkerchief trying to figure out where the clothes were, but then I got tired so I decided to eat some strawberries since they were on my desk. And what do you know, I got some of the juice on my hands! And after that, I touched the threads…and voilà! By a stroke of good luck, the white clothes turned red!"

"…I see." With no other words to say, I simply nodded.

Serafina spread her arms open wide as she continued to pitch the usefulness of the handkerchief. "When you sniff the threads of the red clothes, they smell like strawberries! Which means they should also be strawberry-flavored if you give them a lick! Heh heh! Try it for yourself if you ever get really hungry, okay, Sirius?"

"So, when I'm alone in the middle of the night doing paperwork and I get a little peckish, I should take a handkerchief out of my

pocket and lick the embroidered part, right?”

This was unforgivable behavior for anyone. I was hoping Serafina would chide me for suggesting as much, but that same broad smile returned to her face, and she gave me a big hug.

“Bingo! Aren’t you glad I gave you this handkerchief, Sirius?!”

“…Yes.”

This was a present for me. I hadn’t been aware of that.

“But the real secret of this handkerchief is something else!”

“There’s more?” I asked. Strawberry-stained threads seemed like more than enough.

“Sure is. I heard nobles put a lot of jewels on their belongings.”

“…I’m not sure if that includes handkerchiefs.”

I was just thinking how a jewel-encrusted handkerchief would be pretty useless for wiping one’s hands when my gaze was drawn back to a section of the cloth that had caught my attention earlier. The part where the sparkling stars were embroidered was unnaturally bumpy. I’d originally assumed those bulges were a mass of tangled threads, but had she actually sewn jewels into the cloth?

My guess was so mundane that it didn’t even hold a candle to Serafina’s innovative idea.

“I made sure to sew on a bunch of candies so that you could eat them if you got hungry! If you’re starving, all you need to do is cut the threads of these lumpy parts and take out the candy that’s inside.”

She made a handkerchief with candy sewn into it?! Why hadn’t her embroidery tutor stopped her?!

"Since you went through the trouble of making such a wonderful piece, it seems a shame to cut the threads. Indeed, even if I was dying of starvation, I think I'd keep the candy just as it is. I'm sure I could distract myself from my hunger by gazing at this adorable little bear."

"Bear?" She sounded confused.

I furrowed my brow. "…Or is it a fox?"

"Huh?! No! It's you! I told you that it contained all my hopes and dreams, didn't I? I embroidered you, Sirius—the greatest knight of all!!"

"…Oh?"

This was a child's masterpiece.

I shouldn't be wondering why my belly was so rotund. I shouldn't be wondering why my ears were on the top of my head and not the sides of my face. I shouldn't be wondering why all my limbs were bent in impossible directions.

Every part of it was a product of her hopes and dreams. Not to mention, she had cleverly designed it with the possibility of my hunger in mind.

"Thank you for this one-of-a-kind handkerchief, Serafina." I said, graciously accepting the gift.

"Make sure to use it every day!"

I don't know about that.

In addition to being impractical, the fact that the handkerchief was stained with strawberry meant it could color my hands whenever

I used it. Even if I kept it close to my chest as a memento, it would likely take just one hot and sunny day to leave my pocket a sticky mess of melted candy.

"It's so precious, I think I'd be afraid to use it too much."

"Then how about I make another ten or so for you?"

"…I'll start using it first thing tomorrow."

After suffering a complete and total defeat, the only thing I could do was agree to her wishes.

Interlude:
Commander Wezen and Vice-Commander Sirius

ON A HOT SUMMER DAY, the commander of the Horned Beast Knights bellowed from his office.

"Why do I have to be at my desk on such a hellishly hot day?! I'm the commander of the knights, you know! The big boss!! Why on earth am I sitting in this chair from dawn until dusk slaving over this damn boring paperwork? Especially when the vice-commander is off on a beach vacation? It's utterly ridiculous!"

The knights stationed in the corner of the room watched in silence as Commander Wezen, the man who stood atop the Náv Knight Brigade, complained so emphatically that they feared his words might rip the paper he was holding to shreds.

Despite the commander's ranting, it was well known that Vice-Commander Sirius barely ever took time off and dedicated himself to the brigade's business both day and night, so the knights didn't agree with the commander's rumblings. It was difficult to begrudge the vice-commander for savoring a rare vacation at the beach. Or rather, the vice-commander worked so diligently that his mere presence in the castle significantly increased the workload for the other knights. Honestly, his absence provided a welcome relief.

Vice-Commander Sirius's relentless work ethic was what enabled the commander to shirk his responsibilities. It was almost a fluke that this division of duties had lasted for as long as it had. Considering that

managing paperwork was part of his role, it was only fair that the commander handled it from time to time.

The hearts of all the knights were on the side of Vice-Commander Sirius when one of their brigade members entered the room.

"I have a report, Commander! Vice-Commander Sirius has just returned to the castle. I believe he will be coming by the office shortly."

"What's that?! Sirius is back?! Thank goodness! That means I'm free from this desk work."

Commander Wezen tossed the quill he'd been holding to the side, stretching his arms wide as he rose from his seat. He already had his hand on the doorknob and was about to stride out of the room when the knights called out to him.

"C-Commander Wezen, where are you going?!"

"To greet Sirius, of course."

"Huh? You, the commander? The vice-commander has been away from the castle for almost twenty days; it shouldn't be long until he comes to greet you."

"I'm sure he'll be barraged with distractions before that. The vice-commander is so popular that if I just sit around waiting for him, tomorrow will be here before I know it." Commander Wezen cupped his chin in his hand as if he were pondering something.

"Hm, how about we hold a meeting now instead? Since Sirius was gone for around three weeks, a number of issues must've arisen.

It would be best to solve them in one fell swoop. All right, men! Gather all the brigade captains immediately!”

After giving his orders, the commander quickly rushed out of the room. The remaining knights buried their faces in their hands, as if suddenly struck by headaches, and began to groan.

“Ngh! Commander Wezen really intends to shove all the problems that popped up in the last three weeks onto Vice-Commander Sirius!”

“I mean, I’m sure he would find the quickest and surest solution, but…”

“Vice-Commander Sirius, we’re so sorry we couldn’t stop him!!” The knights apologized in unison. But with nothing else to be done, they dispersed to summon the captains of the various knight brigades.

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“Come to think of it, Sirius has always been put together, even from way back.”

Commander Wezen was reminiscing about the time when he first met Sirius as he strode down the corridor. It was back when he was still a knight brigade captain, and Sirius had been around twelve years old.

The commander muttered under his breath, “Sirius wasn’t fully physically developed at the time, but he used that agility of his to move incredibly fast. I did manage to win when we sparred, but I had a nagging feeling that he might surpass me one day. Still, I never imagined I’d lose to him just three years later. No, no one could’ve

predicted he would become the strongest knight in the brigade at the tender age of fifteen."

The vision of a stunningly handsome boy with silver hair that shone like the moon at night and skin as white as porcelain flashed across his mind.

Hello, I'm Sirius Ulysses.

Commander Wezen recalled the strong impression Sirius had left when they first met. He could never forget that chilling sensation, as if every pore on his body was opening up. This was Sirius Ulysses, the progeny of Duke Ulysses, younger brother of the king.

The day he joined the knight brigade, the grounds were flooded with curious onlooking knights. The three princes—the sons of the king—weren't actual members, but they would sometimes join them for training and were protected by the First Knight Brigade, so their less-than-stellar reputation was already well known among the knights.

Assuming Sirius would be cut from the same cloth as the princes, the knights figured this newcomer would be lazy, prideful, and easily irritated. However, the boy who showed up gave them a completely different impression.

He appeared regal as he surveyed the gathered knights, his back straight and his expression dignified. His impeccable speech emphasized the noble lineage that ran through him. Conversely, he didn't show even a trace of arrogance or self-importance. After a brief self-introduction, he said nothing more.

The gaze and attention of all the knights present were wholly focused on the singular presence of this twelve-year-old boy.

As they all headed to the training grounds, the vice-captain of the First Knight Brigade stepped forward. “Since we have no gauge of your strength, would you mind sparring with me first?”

Given that the knights assessed others based on their strength, his suggestion was only natural. This was quite the formidable opponent for a twelve-year-old boy, but Sirius held the title of duke and was the nephew of the king. To avoid the risk of injury that might arise from assigning a sparring partner who could not properly control their strength, they decided to match the boy against a clearly superior opponent to ensure a safer outcome.

At the same time, although Sirius enjoyed certain privileges due to his rank, this was also intended as a lesson in understanding the brigade’s hierarchy, reinforcing the principle that everyone, regardless of their status, must ultimately obey their superiors.

“Begin!”

At the sound of the start signal, the vice-captain adopted a wait-and-see attitude and stayed his hand. It was a wise decision for him to hold back at the beginning of the battle since it wouldn’t be appropriate to completely overwhelm Sirius.

However, Sirius was not one to let such an opportunity pass him by. In a split second, he closed the distance and unleashed a forceful thrust that knocked the vice-captain’s sword out of his hand.

“Huh?”

"What?"

"No way…"

The knights, who had been watching with their arms folded, ready to crack jokes, found themselves speechless with disbelief. In that moment, everyone realized that the aura of authority emanating from the handsome boy standing before them was the real thing. What's more, despite having defeated the vice-captain of the First Knight Brigade—the pride of the knights—he displayed no signs of triumph or joy. Instead, he scanned the group as if to see who the next challenger would be.

This boy was something else.

"I'm next!" Declared the captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade, only to find himself defeated and on his knees after a few minutes of fighting.

"No way! The captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade lost?!"

"I can't believe it! With that small frame, there's no way he can match the captain's strength, and yet he still won?!"

By that point, all the knights watching were worked up into a fervor. Not a single one of them felt any hostility or spite toward Sirius. As members of a knight brigade that valued physical power, there was no way they could harbor any negative feelings toward a twelve-year-old for acquiring so much strength at such a young age.

Sirius defeated the vice-captain of the Sixth Knight Brigade who challenged him next—but not before the man's sword sliced his cheek. The knights blanched as the vivid cut marred his porcelain skin, but

Sirius didn’t seem to mind and wiped the blood off on the cuff of his sleeve.

“One can’t be a knight if they’re always worried about getting hurt.” As soon as the knights heard that statement, they knew Sirius was one of them.

This boy was the foremost duke in the country. It wasn’t out of the question that he might fly into a rage if he got hurt, and depending on the situation, he could even use his status to demand that the knight responsible be punished. Certainly, there had been many nobles like that in the past. Still, it was clear as day that Sirius wasn’t one of their ilk.

After that, Sirius fought countless battles with the knights. Three of them, including Wezen, emerged victorious, while the rest were defeated.

Sirius’s breath became labored after the consecutive matches, and the moment the mock battles were declared over, the knights erupted into cheers and quickly surrounded him.

“Amazing!”

“Incredible!”

Amid the knight’s raucous applause, Wezen glanced over at the knight brigade commander who was standing next to him.

“What an extraordinary individual. The fact that he wasn’t daunted by the atmosphere of the knight brigade despite it being his first time here is remarkable in itself. But to think he would go on to defeat that many captains and vice-captains… He truly is a beast.”



Sirius had certainly left a strong impression from his very first day with the brigade, but he steadily won the knight's trust as he continued to spend more time with them. This was because he never showed any fear or intimidation.

For example, during a monster hunt when they had the creature surrounded, there was a moment when the knights, intimidated by the monster's ferocity, hesitated and took a step back. Sirius alone stayed his ground, but this effectively meant he was a step ahead of the others, so the monster immediately targeted him.

Once they realized this, the knights rushed to his aid, but Sirius had cut the monster down with a single slash before they could even wield their swords.

The knights tended to prize bravery and strength, and Sirius had both qualities in spades. His unmatched power and the sense of security it instilled, backed by demonstrable strength, quickly captivated the knights.

Additionally, Sirius took the initiative to do the paperwork that everyone despised and deftly handled it without any errors. No one had even seen a knight that excelled so highly in both matters of brawn and brain; everyone said as much. But even though he appeared to be perfection incarnate, Sirius was not without his flaws.

For one, he demanded the same high standards from those around him.

"At the time, we were all somewhat baffled, thinking that Sirius's high abilities were causing him to set standards based on his own exceptional skills. We assumed that—being young—he would

eventually come to understand the typical level of ability among the knights and adjust his ideals accordingly…but we were mistaken."

No matter how much timed passed, Sirius held strong to his idealist standards.

Still, that was acceptable in its own right.

On the day of his coming-of-age celebration, when Commander Wezen shared drinks with Sirius for the first time, the young man quietly spoke about his dreams.

"I'd like to follow in the footsteps of my late father, who wanted to work for this country but was unable to do so because of his illness. If my father had been in good health, I'm sure he would've led the Knight Brigade as their commander. That's why I intend to take on that role in his stead."

Sirius's father, Duke Achernar, had golden hair and blue eyes. With his silver hair and silver eyes, Sirius didn't resemble him in the slightest, and indeed, it had long been rumored that they weren't flesh and blood. Sirius was likely aware of those rumors, but hearing him refer to the former duke as his father and express his intention to continue his ambitions made Wezen surprisingly emotional.

Still, the fact remained that the king had three sons.

Under normal circumstances, one of them would surely take on the mantle of the Náv Knight Brigade commander. However, when compared to Sirius, the differences in martial prowess, bravery, esteem, and polished charisma were strikingly obvious.

"Given that the position of commander would normally go to one of the king's sons, your wish seems unlikely to be fulfilled. However, if you're the one they're up against, I think you just might be able to pull it off," Wezen said, unable to suppress his thoughts. He was truthfully unable to envision anyone else being given the role of commander over Sirius.

"Yes." Sirius nodded in agreement. "I'm going to become the commander of the knight brigade. And then I will dedicate myself to serving the Kingdom of Náv."

While he still had his own reservations, Wezen simply responded, "I see."

Sirius might have had high ambitions, but he was unable to revel in any form of pleasure. Wezen found that to be somewhat of a waste. However, if Sirius could become the commander of the knight brigade, he would likely find satisfaction in life.

"Wanting for anything more would be considered indulgent on his part. I truly believed that at the time." Commander Wezen mused to himself as he met up with Sirius in front of the king's office to join the meeting.

During the meeting, Sirius would be asked to confirm and allocate the backlog of work that had piled up in his twenty-day absence. Of course, he was as competent as ever, calmly giving instructions on each issue that was presented. But he seemed a bit irritated that so much work had accumulated in such a short amount of time.

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As they were walking down the hallway once the meeting had ended, Commander Wezen reached out to Sirius with an invitation.

"Would you like to have a meal after this? I got my hands on some excellent wine."

"In that case, I'll join you tomorrow."

The commander cocked an eyebrow in disbelief. It was exceedingly rare for Sirius to turn down an invitation. *Did traveling back from the west coast fatigue even the infallible Sirius?* he wondered, as a cute voice echoed from the end of the hallway.

"Sirius!"

The moment he heard the voice, Sirius smiled, visibly happy.

"Excellent timing, Serafina. I just finished my work for the day, so let's go to the banquet room together. After that, I'll read those picture books to you as I promised."

"You're prioritizing reading a picture book to the princess over drinking a rare wine, of which only one hundred bottles are produced each year?!"

Commander Wezen broke into a smile as Sirius glared at his involuntary exclamation.

"Oops. I didn't mean to say that out loud. My apologies. Still, including those eye daggers you just shot me, when did you become so *human*?"

It was simply a matter of time before Sirius became commander of the knight brigade, and he would likely be sufficiently satisfied attaining that position.

But the commander was filled with a sense of happiness as he watched the scene unfolding before him. Had Sirius finally started to feel human emotions and experience joy?

"You've finally achieved perfection!"

But the commander's statement was met with a dismayed sigh.

"Commander, you don't have to force yourself to praise me just because I'm taking on all the work you left unfinished these past three weeks."

Sirius's expression was undeniably human, and the warmth in his eyes as he turned to look at Serafina was unmistakable. Seeing this, Commander Wezen laughed jovially.

"Ha ha ha, Sirius! You've finally got it all! All right, go read those picture books to your heart's content tonight. We'll pop open my fine wine tomorrow!!"

"Okay."

After a succinct response, Sirius headed toward Serafina with long strides.

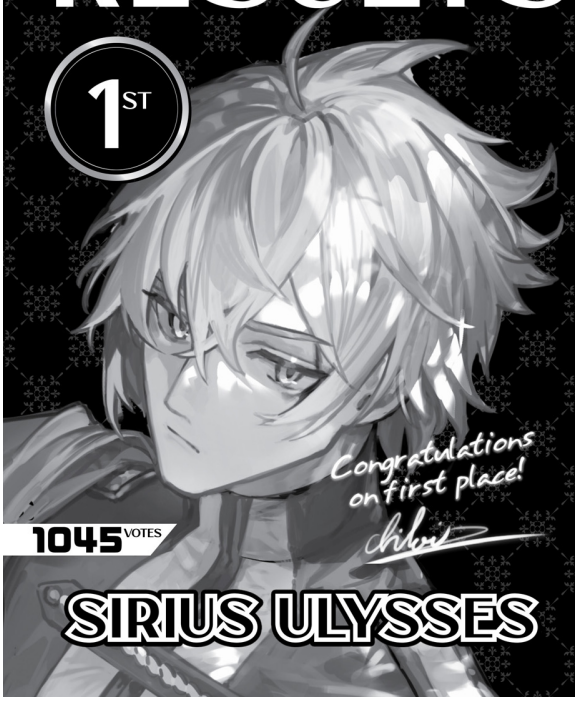
Commander Wezen gazed after him with a mixture of happiness and pride.

SECOND POPULARITY POLL

4633 VOTES

RESULTS

A Tale of the Secret Saint ZERO



2ND	Saviz Náv	*725 Votes*
3RD	Cyril Sutherland	*688 Votes*
4TH	Fia Ruud	*686 Votes*
5TH	Charlotte	*390 Votes*
6TH	Serafina	*153 Votes*
7TH	Quentin Agutter	*150 Votes*
8TH	Kurtis Bannister	*149 Votes*
9TH	Zavilia	*146 Votes*
10TH	Desmond Ronan	*50 Votes*

Point of View: Sirius
Serafina and the Hedgehog's Dilemma

POPULARITY POLL: 1ST - SIRIUS ULYSSES

"THE PRINCESS WAS TURNED into a sky-blue mouse by an evil spell. And then…"

I was reading Serafina her picture books as always when I noticed that she seemed frail. Concerned, I asked, "What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

I'd received a report that Serafina had spent the day outside picking medicinal herbs. I figured it would be better to be cautious since children were prone to falling ill quickly.

"Did you get too much sun this afternoon? You should make sure to drink plenty of water and rest early today," I advised.

Serafina just clung to my arm, her face ghostly pale, and said, "S-Sirius, an evil spell might've been cast on me!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I…I didn't eat all my vegetables at lunch, and I snacked on the cookies that were meant for my teatime tomorrow. I also switched Canopus's left and right boots so they're on the opposite sides."

"That all sounds like typical Serafina behavior."

"But…since I did three naughty things, I just know I'm going to be transformed by an evil spell like the princess in the story."

The fairy tale I'd been reading Serafina was about a young princess, just like her. Since the princess was mischievous and liked to play pranks on everyone in the castle, she was cautioned by a witch: *If you're naughty three times in a row, I'll turn you into an animal.*

However, despite the witch's warning, the princess continued to play pranks, which led to her being transformed into a sky-blue mouse.

But this was merely a story in a picture book. If such minor pranks resulted in being cursed with bad magic, then virtually every child in the world would be cursed.

"I don't think you've done anything that's naughty enough to deserve having a spell cast on you. But if you're concerned about it, I would suggest that you refrain from being mischievous in the future. Don't leave your vegetables, don't sneak snacks, and don't put your personal knight's boots the wrong way. By the way, what animal would you least want to be transformed into?"

I asked for my own future reference, but Serafina's whole body began to tremble.

"A…hedgehog."

A hedgehog? The small animal with quills on its back that's no bigger than a hand? It's not like it could do much to harm her. What would cause her to have such distaste for them? I wondered as Serafina latched on to me with a vise grip. This made me instinctively begin stroking her head as she looked at me with tear-filled eyes.

"Do you not like them?"

"Right?" she whispered.

"What's 'right'?" I asked, not comprehending what she was getting at.

Serafina looked completely dejected as she answered my question. "Hedgehogs have spines on their backs. So if I turned into one, I wouldn't be able to cuddle up with you like this."

"Th-that's absurd! I have high pain tolerance; the quills of a small animal would hardly be worth worrying about. You could stab me as much as you liked!!"

I dismissed what seemed to me like a ridiculous concern with a laugh, but her eyes widened in surprise.

"Huh?"

"Besides, hedgehogs only have quills on their backs, so you can still hold them. Plus, the quills are only dangerous when the hedgehog feels agitated; otherwise, they keep them down, so it doesn't hurt to stroke or cuddle them," I explained in further detail.

Serafina clasped her hands together excitedly. "Is that really true?!"

"Yes. Even if you become a hedgehog, your life won't change much from how it is now," I assured her. Her face flooded with relief, and she hugged me even tighter than before.

After giving her a few more pats on the head, I picked the picture book back up and resumed reading from where I'd left off.

***

When Canopus came to collect Serafina later, my line of sight involuntarily went to his boots.

"…Is something wrong?" he asked, noticing me staring at his feet.

I shook my head from side to side. "It's nothing. I just wanted to make sure you had your boots on the right feet."

"I would never make a mistake like that, but it's curious that you ask. I've found my right and left boots mixed up three times recently."

So Serafina had played the same prank three times. I glanced over at her, but she pretended not to hear and quickly flipped through her picture book.

"That's…too mischievous. Perhaps being transformed into a hedgehog by a witch isn't such a stretch after all," I muttered audibly, prompting Serafina to look up at me.

"Heh heh! I'm not afraid of becoming a hedgehog anymore! Actually, I had a great idea! If I become a hedgehog, you can keep me in your pocket all the time!"

"I'd have to special order my uniform with Serafina-sized pockets if that's the case." I meant it as a joke, but Serafina took that as her invitation to make additional requests.

"Heh heh! Make sure that the pocket always has cookies in it too!"

That statement gave me pause. I was pretty sure that hedgehogs ate bugs and not cookies, but perhaps that was information that was best kept to myself.

Instead, I sighed. “That would make my pocket very sticky.”

Serafina cheerfully giggled at my lament while Canopus, confused as to why the conversation had turned to hedgehogs, looked confused the entire time.

Commander Wezen gave me an earful when the topic happened to come up a few days later.

“Come on, lad. You’re too soft on her! Stories like that are meant to act as lessons and deterrents. You know, like ‘If you do something wrong, you might end up in big trouble like this. That’s why it’s important to always choose the right thing.’ But you went and took the scary factor out of it! Now the princess’s behavior might get even worse.”

I paused to think.

He had a point. I had found my right and left white gloves switched on the table that morning when I was getting ready for the day. Only a limited number of people were free to enter my room, so I was sure it was Serafina’s doing. However, that was information I didn’t need to share with the commander.

“Commander Wezen, think back to all the trouble you got up to as a child. Despite that, now you’ve become respectable enough to hold the position of commander of the knight brigade. Wouldn’t you say that being mischievous is just part of growing up?”

“Ugh! You’re trying to justify her naughtiness? As I said, you’re far too lenient.” He sounded appalled.

"I'd say that falls within my standard behavior," I said with a grin. "However, if I start carrying around a little hedgehog in my pocket, I'll admit that I'm too soft on her."

"Now that would go beyond being indulgent. That kind of behavior would warrant a visit to a specialist," Commander Wezen moaned.

Despite his grumblings, I let my thoughts drift to bringing a hedgehog back for Serafina if I ever came across one in the grass or a field at some point. A small smile crept across my face as I imagined her reaction to seeing one up close…

But Commander Wezen interrupted my musings with a sharp warning. "That's enough, Sirius! The knights would be terrified, and women would shriek if they saw the expression you're making right now. Whatever you're thinking of doing, banish the thought completely!"

"…I'll try my best."

I returned to my neutral expression and got up to leave the office.

"Good grief! You have no intention of obeying that command, do you?!"

Ah, he knew me well. As the commander's shouts echoed behind me, I shut the office door without responding.

I wonder what Serafina's up to? was my next thought as I made my way to her room.

Serafina's Proverbs

POPULARITY POLL: 6TH - SERAFINA NÁV

"SCHEAT, WHAT'S A PROVERB?"

I'd been reading a picture book in the library when I'd come across a word I didn't know.

Scheat had an immediate answer for me. "It's a saying that's been around for a long time. Kind of like the wise words of many people put together."

"Huh?"

Scheat could see from my puzzled expression that I still didn't understand, so he kept explaining.

"Take 'giving wings to a tiger' for example. It means that even though you're already the strongest, you acquire something that makes you even more invincible. So picture Vice-Commander Sirius with a mithril sword facing me while I'm barehanded."

"Oh, Scheat! That's so easy to understand!" I clapped my hands in delight.

Scheat looked somewhat pleased with the praise as he continued with his explanation. "Another example would be 'love is blind.' In other words, this is the reason that the vice-commander gushes over your short legs and lauds the poems you write as the best in the world. Vice-Commander Sirius loves you so much that he thinks everything you do is great."

"…I don't really get this one."

How could Scheat be so skillful at explaining some things and so bad at others?

He made it sound like my poems aren't very good, but Father, Sirius, and Canopus are always praising them, so that can't be the case, right?

I was still pondering this as Miaplacidus chimed in after listening in on our conversation from the side.

"Proverbs aren't always true, though. Like 'you can't judge a book by its cover.' That one means that you can't tell what a person is like or what they're capable of from their appearance, but with Vice-Commander Sirius, he's just as fierce, merciless, and ridiculously strong as he looks."

"He's also kind and a big worrywart!" I said, adding my own traits to the list describing Sirius.

Scheat said nothing in response while Miaplacidus amended his statement.

"…I stand corrected. The proverb is indeed accurate. You really can't judge a book by its cover."

This proverb stuff is more complicated than I thought, I mused.

Scheat provided yet another example. "'*He who chases two rabbits catches neither*,' is another one that's easy to understand. I tried to work out both my biceps and quadriceps at the same time, but in the end, I didn't put on the muscle I hoped to. I should've just focused on one area."

"Ah…"

I didn't know much about muscles, but they were teaching me a lot about proverbs, so it felt like I was finally starting to get the hang of it.

"Scheat, Miaplacidus… I think I understand now! For example…"

I thought for a moment until I stumbled across the perfect proverb in my mind.

"'Napping with Sirius means something is really pleasant," I announced proudly, only to be met with frowns from the two knights.

"…I don't know about that. I'd turn that opportunity down even if I was offered a large sum of money."

"I'm sure that even if I slept next to the vice-commander, I'd feel like I was being watched the whole time and wouldn't get any sleep. I'd be lying flat as a board, unable to move a muscle."

Hmm, this is difficult. Okay, how about I make a proverb about Scheat since he's right there?

"What do you think of 'Scheat's muscles'?" I asked. "It means something obtained through hard work."

Once again Miaplacidus chimed in with a correction. "I'd interpret that proverb as 'that's all one has,' or 'everyone has at least one good quality.'"

Scheat shot Miaplacidus a seething glare.

Oops, I probably need to make a proverb that's a little more fun. With that in mind, I tried another one.

"How about 'Miaplacidus's wife'? It means having a wonderful dream."

Miaplacidus seemed to like that proverb and nodded vigorously, but Scheat just sneered.

"No, no. That means 'waiting for something that won't show up,' or maybe even, 'someone who lives in a fantasy world.'"

Miaplacidus lurched forward and grabbed Scheat by the collar, so I hurriedly said the next proverb that popped into my mind.

"'Scheat and Miaplacidus'!" I yelled out. "That means two people who are the best of friends!! Also, two people I enjoy spending time with!"

The two of them widened their eyes in surprise and then looked away, embarrassed.

After adjusting Scheat's collar, Miaplacidus said something that sounded more like an afterthought. "You had something on your shirt, Scheat. I wanted to tidy it up for you since we get along so well."

Scheat smiled at him in response, "I see. Thanks for always being such a good friend to me."

Then, both of them looked apologetic.

"Sorry, Princess. We were just bantering with each other like usual."

"It's just as you said. There's no bad blood between us, but we do tend to be rough with our behavior. Still, it wasn't right of us to act like that in front of you."

They looked so adorable in that dejected state that I immediately thought up another proverb.

"'Scheplacidus!' That means two people who are so close that it's like they're one and the same!"

I tried combining their names, but judging by their sour expressions, my attempt wasn't well received.

"No way! I refuse to be compared to someone who's always daydreaming about a nonexistent wife!"

"And I certainly don't want to be lumped together with Scheat! He's more concerned about building muscle than interacting with other people! At least my future partner is human!"

Oh dear. They just buried the hatchet, and now we're right back to where we started. They were just supposed to be teaching me about proverbs. How did it all come to this?

Noticing my gloomy expression, Scheat and Miaplacidus exchanged concerned glances.

"…The reason we can squabble like this is *because* we're on such good terms."

"He's right. After all, the two of us have been in the same brigades for as long as we've been knights."

Seeing them, another proverb floated into my mind, but I clasped both hands to my mouth to keep it in. I'd learned my lesson and didn't want history to repeat itself. Thinking it might be best if I didn't say anything at all, I bowed my head to Scheat to express my thanks for his lesson on proverbs.

But Scheat seemed to misunderstand my intent. “Oh? Are we moving on to gestures now?” he asked, his eyes sparkling.

I shook my hands wildly, trying to say, *That’s not it!* But Scheat, who was looking pleased as he crossed his arms, said something completely out of left field.

“Ha ha ha! Your bee impression is spot-on! Let me guess, ‘busy as a bee’? You’re talking about someone who’s very active, right?”

It’s a good thing I wasn’t talking because I had nothing to say to that.

He couldn’t be more off the mark. I mean, it’s not like I’m trying to play a gesture game in the first place!

But Scheat and Miaplacidus seemed to be on board with the idea and enthusiastically exchanged gestures back and forth after that. I learned an important lesson that day: Be careful who you ask for answers when you’re dealing with things you don’t understand.

Point of View: Canopus
What Qualities Are Required of a Personal Knight?

POPULARITY POLL: 12TH - CANOPUS BLAZEJ

"SERAFINA! My sweet little princess seems to be doing well today!"

The door had barely opened a crack before those words rang out. No matter how good one's visual acuity might be, it would be impossible to confirm the princess's condition in the brief moment that the door has been opened. However, I immediately scolded myself for thinking as much; this wasn't a situation where accuracy was crucial.

Perhaps he wasn't speaking of his observations but more of his wishes. I concurred there was no need to take his statement literally as I bowed my head to our visitor—the king.

***

I, Canopus Blazej, was specially selected as the personal knight of the young second princess, Serafina. This was a wonderful event that changed my life, and I was incredibly honored to have been chosen. Therefore, I fully committed myself to serving the princess with complete dedication and worked tirelessly day and night in pursuit of that goal. However, I'd recently realized that prowess with a sword was not the only quality required of a personal knight.

Because Princess Serafina was royalty, practically everyone who came to see her was an individual of high rank. But as it turned out,

they weren't visiting her because she was a *princess* but rather because she was so cute and adorable.

And of course, the king himself was at the very top of that list.

"Serafina, we received gifts from a distant country! Look at all these rare and exotic items!" the king cooed as he entered the room, his arms full of cloth, wood products, and jewelry that he began to haphazardly arrange on the table.

Princess Serafina hurried over next to the king and gazed at each item in turn with intense curiosity. She grabbed a long, brown, string-like object from the pile of goods and asked the king, "Oh my! Father, what's this? It's long and brown and feels rough."

The king chuckled gleefully in response, his face bursting with pride. "Ha ha ha! You're a brave one, Serafina. That's a snakeskin you've got! It's said that keeping it in your wallet will lead to financial prosperity!"

…That was incorrect. The two of them were actually holding a thick cord woven from the bark of a special type of tree. If I had to wager a guess, it was probably used to tie the box together and had somehow gotten mixed in with the gifts. But before I could clear up the misunderstanding, Princess Serafina gazed at the king with an admiring look.

"You're so wise, Father! Would it be okay for me to have a little piece? I'd like to put it in my wallet."

"Serafina, you can have anything that your little heart desires! I doubt we'll ever get our hands on such a massive snakeskin again, so I'll give it to you as a special gift. You can keep the entire thing from head to tail! Ha ha ha! You're very lucky to have a father like me who's able to obtain such a fine specimen!!"

Given the king's jovial demeanor, I decided it would be best to keep my mouth shut.

The king then went on to provide inaccurate descriptions of various items, yet Princess Serafina hung on his every word, her eyes shining with rapt attention.

Princess Serafina might be mortified if she remembers this false information, and if the king repeats the same explanation in public, well, he might end up embarrassing himself as well. These thoughts and more flitted through my mind as I watched the scene unfold, but in the end, I watched the whole thing from start to finish in silence.

That day, I learned that the ability to turn a blind eye to the king's mistakes was one of the qualities required of a personal knight.

As was often the case, the knights took the initiative to greet the princess even on days they weren't assigned to her guard detail. While they might have used business as a pretense, it was clear that their true intention was to find any opportunity to engage in conversation with her.

"Princess Serafina! I'm about to conduct a preliminary check on that medicinal herb shop you plan to stop by tomorrow!" Scheat

cheerfully said to the princess.

"A preliminary check? You even do stuff like that?" The princess's eyes were wide as saucers at this news.

Seeing this, Scheat proudly rapped his chest. "Of course! We always visit all the places you wish to go in advance so that we'll be able to deal with any problems that might pop up! Naturally, we observe the flow of traffic within the store and make sure to identify any escape routes and potential hazards in advance."

"If there's anywhere you'd like to visit besides the herb shop, please let us know," Miaplacidus chimed in. "We'll thoroughly review any potential risks ahead of time. Since you're making the trip into town, why not explore while you're there?"

Princess Serafina's eyes opened even further in wonder. "Really? I can go anywhere I want? *Anywhere?*"

Her face lit up as the knight's gave her an indulgent nod.

"Like, really, really?! In that case, where should I go? Um, um… Give me a moment, okay?"

Princess Serafina scrunched up her face in apparent concentration as the knights gazed at her with doting smiles. Their expressions were so overflowing with warmth that it left no doubt about the knights' deep fondness for the young princess.

Is it really appropriate for proud members of the Royal Red Shield to display such shameless affection in public? I wondered. They must have been unaware of their facial expressions; if they realized how they looked later, they would probably be mortified.

With that in mind, I averted my eyes from the knights and didn't look back at them again.

That day, I learned that the ability to look away from the beaming faces of my colleagues was one of the qualities required of a personal knight.

As I said previously, Princess Serafina entertained many visitors of high status, but none called on her more frequently than Vice-Commander Sirius. Whether there was a purpose for it or not, the vice-commander paid the princess several visits a day.

When he stopped by just prior to the afternoon, Vice-Commander Sirius had a boyish twinkle in his eye. "Serafina! A new foal was just born today! Do you want to come and see it with me?" Judging from his beaming smile, he appeared proud that one of his cherished mares had given birth.

Seemingly captivated by his jubilant expression, Princess Serafina responded with a matching grin.

"What color is it? I hope it's silver, because that's the color of horse I want to ride on!" Her exclamation was met with a wary look from the vice-commander.

"…You want me to be your horse?" he asked, and then after a very long pause he added, "If you're adamant about it, I'll do my utmost to accommodate."

"You? My horse?" Princess Serafina cocked her head like she couldn't quite comprehend what he was saying.

Vice-Commander Sirius crossed his arms and looked at her thoughtfully. "I meant the children's game. The one where an adult gets down on all fours and the child rides on their back."

"Huuuh?"

As it became clear she still didn't understand, the vice-commander sighed in resignation.

"…Do you want to give it a try?" he asked as he knelt down on the carpet.

Chills ran up and down my spine as I looked on. This was Sirius Ulysses, Vice-Commander of our nation's pride, the Náv Horned Beast Knights, the very model for the best-selling *An Elegant Day in the Life of the Handsome Chief Duke*. And here he was, assuming a pose that should never be revealed to others.

We all had a tacit understanding that no additional knights were necessary when Princess Serafina was with the vice-commander. Being well aware of that, I moved as stealthily as possible and silently crept out the door. It went without saying that I never looked back at Vice-Commander Sirius, not even once. Due to this, I remained unaware of the vice-commander's subsequent poses and whatever events followed.

That day, I learned that the ability to preemptively gauge Vice-Commander Sirius's actions and quickly make myself scarce if necessary was one of the qualities required of a personal knight.

I, Canopus Blazej, am exceedingly proud and grateful to have been specially selected as the personal knight of the young second princess, Serafina. I committed myself fully to serving the princess with complete dedication and worked tirelessly day and night in pursuit of that goal. However, as the days went by, I was coming to fully realize that prowess with a sword was not the only quality required of a personal knight.

To put it broadly, what was required of a personal knight was to do everything in his power to ignore the eccentricities of those who visit the princess.

The moral of Canopus's deep (yet very shallow) story is: There are some things you just don't know about being a personal knight until you actually become one.

Point of View: Seven
A Girl Named Serafina

POPULARITY POLL: 13TH - SEVEN

"SHINY WHITE LIGHTS…"

I remember being utterly shocked when the little girl said that as she reached out toward us. That was the first time that we, the child spirits, met Serafina—the girl with the blessing of the Spirit Lord.

***

We were living in a forest that had been designated by the First Spirit Lord as the place where child spirits could grow to adulthood. Since his son became the king, he used his power to decree that only those who belonged to or served the royal family could set foot within it. While members of the royal family did stop by on rare occasions, they couldn't seem to perceive us properly. At best, they seemed to sense that "something" was out there in the forest.

Thanks to the adult spirits' magic, monsters were unable to enter the forest at all. This meant we, the child spirits, were never exposed to any danger and could spend our days in peace. But, well, you'd better believe that when three-year-old Serafina showed up out of nowhere and beelined straight for us, hands stretched out and eyes closed shut, we were beyond astonished.

"Does that mean she can see us?"

"Yeah, right."

"No way!"

At the time, we still thought the young Serafina reaching out in our direction was merely a coincidence. We flew over to surround her and test this theory out, but we were even more startled when she reached out at the exact moments we fluttered around. After a while, we were forced to admit the high level of her perceptiveness.

"I can hardly believe it, but she can *see us."*

"Uh-huh."

"Seems to be the case."

From that point on, Serafina came to visit us in the forest every day. She'd sit on the grass, resting against a big tree, and chat on and on in words we didn't really understand for close to half a day. Then, she started listening to us.

The adult spirits had told us, "The spirit language sounds only like crackling fire or the blowing of the breeze to human ears," but whenever we talked, Serafina would always put a lid on what she was saying and listen closely. It seemed to me that she had the ability to distinguish between the words of the spirits and the sounds of nature.

A year passed by. Serafina continued to visit the forest daily, stretching out her hands to us and talking in her language. By then, all the spirits felt an affinity for her, and when she came to the forest, we would gather around and talk to her about various things.

"The temperature of the spring water has dropped recently. You don't want to catch a cold, so don't dip your feet in it for long periods

of time, okay?"

"The red fruit in the depths of the forest looks delicious, but it's actually very bitter, so you shouldn't eat it."

"Oh! But the adult spirits said that on very rare occasions some are incredibly sweet. I wouldn't mind trying one of those for myself."

The day after we told her that, Serafina didn't come to the forest. We were worried that something had happened to her, so we all decided to approach the villa. However, the guards patrolling the premises were so intimidating that we had to settle for peering through the window.

However, the next day, Serafina returned to the forest as lively as ever, and my concern turned into a deep frustration that bubbled up inside me.

"Seriously? Did she just get bored of coming here?! Fine, I get it. Young kids have a short attention span."

"It can't be helped, Seven. She can't understand what we're saying. It's not like she can have fun with us."

"That's right. In fact, one day she'll probably stop coming entirely, so we have to enjoy the time we have with her now."

Spirits liked humans, and once they developed an attachment to one, it never faded away. But humans were fickle and prone to changing their minds. That's why, once she inevitably stopped coming to the forest, we'd have to accept it.

I already know that. I mentally retorted as Serafina happily waved the basket she was carrying from side to side.

"That's a new basket, I see? Is the reason you didn't come to the forest yesterday 'cause you were making it?"

Serafina nodded as if she understood what I was saying when I asked the question that had popped into my mind. Then, she wandered deeper into the forest as the rest of us hurriedly flew around her feet to light the path ahead. She walked for a short while before stopping in the area where the tree with red fruit grew.

After a long pause, she reached out and began to gather the bright red fruit. Even though the tree was practically bursting at the seams with them, she carefully selected only a few pieces from each branch. Admittedly, I was a bit confused as I watched her, but I figured it was just her unique way of picking fruit. Before long, the basket was half full.

Serafina smiled with satisfaction before moving to sit in the shade of a large tree. There, she pushed the basket in our direction.

"Are you giving them to us? Well, um, we don't have to eat like humans do."

"Not that eating them would hurt us, but we do have a sense of taste and we can definitely tell how bitter those things are."

"I don't like bitter stuff…"

Everyone's faces were scrunched up at the thought as they responded, but Serafina, who couldn't understand what we were saying, continued to smile and offer us the basket.

Doesn't look like we've got any other choice, I internally sighed as I was the first to put my hand out to grab one.

I reached for the smallest fruit I could find, brought it to my mouth, and bit down hard. However, as soon as I started chewing, my mouth was overwhelmed with an incredibly pleasant flavor.

"Huh? It's sweet??" I exclaimed, my eyes widening. At my reaction, the other spirits began to reach into the basket with skeptical looks. They tentatively bit into the fruit, only for their expressions to shift to astonishment a moment later.

"What? This is positively scrumptious!"

"Whoa! What's going on? It's…good? I've never tasted anything like this before!"

"Ahh! This is sooo yummy!"

We eagerly reached into the basket, popping the red fruits into our mouths one after another. It was so strange. These fruits were supposed to be bitter, but no matter how many we ate, they were all sweet. Once we came back to our senses after demolishing the lot, I glanced over at Serafina, but she was just smiling happily.

One of my friends had mentioned the other day that, very rarely, there could be some exceptionally sweet red fruits mixed in with the rest. But there was no way Serafina heard that and decided to treat us to them, right?

It has to be a coincidence. I mean, it's not like she can understand the spirit language.

But just as I was thinking that, the spirit next to me posed the same question. *"Did you pick the sweet red fruit for us because we were talking about it?"*

I looked at Serafina. She'd stopped moving and was listening intently, like she always did when we talked. I was just thinking that she really did seem to be trying to make out the spirit language when she opened her mouth and made a sound only spirits could produce.

"Umm…yesh. I mean…yes." The moment the words left her mouth, we all keeled over in shock.

"No waaaay!"

"Serafina?!"

"Were you a spirit all this time?!"

At that moment, an unbearable happiness welled up within me. Serafina could speak our language. It was an incredibly moving experience, a joy so profound it made my heart tremble.

But that was precisely why I was also upset with myself all at the same time. You see, lately I'd been able to understand Serafina's words, and I even had a vague idea of what she was talking about. Still, I'd been skeptical if it was even possible to understand human speech, but during that same time, Serafina had been so diligent that she'd progressed to the point of speaking the spirit language fluently. I desperately wanted her to experience the same joy I felt!

Having made up my mind, I pushed myself as hard as possible for the next few months. As a result, after some time, I became the spirit with the best overall understanding of what she was saying.

Everyone was able to say her name, albeit how it was pronounced in the spirit language, because they probably could make it out. That meant their ears were becoming attuned to understanding

her words. That competitive sense of urgency to eventually grasp more things seemed to have fueled my progress as well.

One day, Serafina was trying her best to use the spirit language like always.

"No…green…petals…must…find."

But it appeared she was having a hard time stringing the words together, and she slumped dejectedly after finally getting them out. She looked glum as she spoke once more, but this time she was using human speech.

"Darn it. That was so bad I couldn't even get my point across. I wanted to ask, *'I'm looking for a bush with green petals, do you happen to know where one is?'* but it's just so difficult."

"I'm pretty sure there's one a little further past the tree with the sweet red fruit." I said casually, though my heart was pounding like a drum in my chest. Serafina's jaw dropped in surprise. When she didn't move, I got worried and waved my hand in front of her face, causing her to jolt back in response. What followed after was a barrage of excited questions.

"Huh? You understand what I'm saying? Really? Is something this awesome happening for reals?!"

I'll be honest. She was so worked up and speaking so fast that I didn't actually catch what she was asking, but her excited expression told me everything I needed to know. I nodded at her as if I'd understood it all.

"Of course. From now on, if there's something you find difficult to say in the spirit language, you can use human words."

"Really?!"

The smile that lit up her face was exactly the same as the one I had when she first used the spirit language the other day. Seeing it, my first thought was *Serafina must be experiencing the same joy that I did.* Now *that* was something to be happy about.

I nervously told her one more important piece of information. *"Call me Seven from now on. That's my name."*

"Oh my! I heard that a spirit revealing their name is a sign of ultimate trust!" Serafina sputtered, prompting me to grin.

"Yep! I trust you completely. I'm sure you'll get bored of me one day when you grow up, but let's be friends until then, okay?"

"Um… It's true that I'll grow up one day, but I'll always like you, Seven, and we'll always be friends," she said solemnly. Hearing that, I felt like I'd just obtained the greatest treasure in the world.

Still…human lives were short. That's why they didn't stay attached to the same thing for long and why their attention was constantly drawn to new things one after another. But that's what made them human; they couldn't help it. I'd be prepared to accept it if the day ever came when she left. If she sincerely meant what she said in that moment, it would be my truth as well.

I would never ever forget these invaluable moments and those precious words. As I engraved the memories into my mind, I gave Serafina a broad grin.

"Serafina, may you be blessed by the spirits. Also, I hope you'll continue to be my friend for as long as possible."

The moment I said that, some of the sparkling light I'd created fell on Serafina. She seemed mesmerized by it before turning to me with a bright smile on her face.

"Always and forever! Seven, I love you!"

Now that she'd received the spirit's blessing, Serafina was able to touch me. She reached out and pulled me into her arms for a hug. Her body was really warm, like most children's were, and that warmth made me feel all cozy and happy inside.

"So that's how it's gonna be, huh? I can't wait to find out how long forever is for you," I said, smiling from the very bottom of my heart.



Point of View: Oligor
Married to Luntia

POPULARITY POLL: 16TH - OLIGOR

NOTHING IN THIS WORLD is truly useless, but in the same vein, nothing is truly essential either.

At least, that's how I used to think—until I met her. I was more than satisfied with being by myself because I didn't know the joy of deeply connecting with someone you love. I believed from the bottom of my heart that I alone completed my world.

***

I was born of the light. The first light that pierced a world of only darkness—that was me.

All living things feared the light the first time they saw it, yet they learned to respect and appreciate it. However, as time went on, that the world was full of light began to be taken for granted. As a result, creatures no longer felt particularly grateful or moved by its presence, but I was fine with that. Because the world was always bathed in light, it seemed best if they considered it the norm and took comfort from it.

I loved to ride the breeze as I soared through the sky, gazing down at the creatures below. I enjoyed observing humans in

particular. I never grew tired of watching them experience their emotions, whether happy or sad.

But one of those days, I found myself drawn to a particular human girl. She was about ten years old, with red hair that fell to her shoulders. She dipped her hand into a spring, laughing happily as the water she splashed into the air glittered in the light. In contrast, she watched with a solemn expression as the sun began to set behind the mountains, observing the light gradually fading away, beam by beam.

She was grateful for everything and didn't take any of it for granted. There was something about her that reminded me of when the humans who lived in a world of only darkness saw light for the first time. Her demeanor evoked a sense of nostalgia in me, igniting my curiosity and prompting me to move closer so I could continue observing her.

Still, spirits eluded human sight—that's why I thought getting as close to her as possible wouldn't be an issue. However, one day, when I did exactly that, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Why are you floating in the sky?"

I had no idea what the words she was saying meant, but her eyes had met mine, so I was aware that she was looking at me.

"Huh? You can see me?"

I couldn't contain my surprise, but it appeared she couldn't understand my words either. They probably sounded like beams of light breaking through the sky or the whistle of the breeze, but she watched my lips moving without blinking even once.

I asked her many things, and every time she would stop whatever she was doing and watch my lips.

Ah, I thought, *she can't pick up my words with her ears, but she knows I'm saying something so she's desperately trying to understand it.*

I didn't understand why she could see me, but the fact that she could and was making an effort to understand what I was saying filled me with immense joy.

From then on, I went to see her every day.

I still had no clue what she was saying, but I did glean that her name was Luntia.

"Luntia."

When I attempted to say it myself, her cheeks turned bright pink and she giggled happily. The sight of that smile filled me with a profound warmth, as if the sun had wrapped itself around me. I also wanted her to know my name, so I repeated it, *"Oligor, Oligor,"* over and over. Eventually, after some time, she proudly said, "Oligon."

Of course hearing that alone made me happy, but I wanted her to say my name properly so I shook my head. After that, I continued to just say *"Oligor"* repeatedly. After about the two hundredth time, Luntia's eyes sparkled as she grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

Then, with even more confidence than before, she declared, "Ligon."

Hm?

Oh dear. Her previous attempt, "Oligon," was closer to my actual name. Now she was even further off. Still, considering that the only things she could hear sounded like light and wind, I should've been grateful that she was able to recognize even that much. I didn't want her straying even further from my name, so I decided to accept the moniker of Ligon.

Luntia came to my forest daily to gather medicinal herbs. She had an elderly grandmother, and it seemed that she collected the herbs each day to brew and give to her. She had to explain that to me, gestures included, about ten times before I finally understood.

"You're just simmering the herbs in hot water? Why not use magic to turn them into potions? That would quickly alleviate any ailments she might have due to her advanced age," I asked, confused. But, of course, since she couldn't understand me, Luntia just smiled.

"Thanks for helping me search for herbs again, Ligon. You always help me find so many."

I didn't know back then, but during that time the use of magic was not widely known or practiced. And even for the few people that did know of it, the method of using internal magic to cast spells wasn't very effective.

That's why she continued to brew the medicinal herbs and serve them to her grandmother. And there was nothing I could do to tell her otherwise, as I couldn't communicate with her in detail. At that time, my greatest pleasure was meeting her when she came to gather the

herbs, so I was content with her simply visiting the forest and didn't think much beyond that.

The first time Luntia cried in front of me was when she was fifteen years old.

"My grandmother, she…she might die. What should I do? I've been picking these fresh herbs every day, but it's my fault for not being able to find anything fresher or more potent."

I had a pretty good idea of what was going on as I watched Luntia sob as she clutched her basket filled with medicinal herbs. Each tear that fell from her eyes seemed to shred pieces of my own being.

Oh, Luntia. Please don't cry. Please don't be sad. It pains me deeply.

I racked my brains, desperate to do something—anything.

Then, imitating the characters that Luntia had once shown me in one of her picture books, I got down on the ground on one knee.

"Luntia, marry me. As long as I am a spirit, I'm compelled to be equal to all and cannot lend any special power to you alone. But if we were to become partners as humans do, I'll become yours and you can use my power as you please."

She didn't seem to understand what I was saying, but when I took her hand and kissed it, she recognized that my actions were exactly like those in the scene from her picture book.

"Oh? Are you asking me to marry you? Is it because I'll be all alone if my grandmother is gone? Ligon, that's not a reason to get

married… Oh! No, Ligon, please don't cry. That's not it! I…I always want to be with you!"

Luntia said a bunch of things I didn't understand as she threw her arms around me. Then she nodded enthusiastically several times. "Ligon, I want to be with you! Make me your bride!"

That day, when it was time for the sun to set beyond the distant mountains, Luntia and I held a private wedding for just the two of us. We clad ourselves in special garments, made from the unique thread spun by special insects that fed on the leaves of the special plants I raised.

"Oh my! I've never worn anything so beautiful before!" Luntia's cheeks were a rosy shade of pink as she smiled happily. Seeing her like that made joy well up in my own heart. By the time the last rays of light had disappeared from the sky, the two of us were husband and wife.

From that day forward, various stories about our lives were written and preserved for posterity—some accurate, some embellished.

All of our children took on their mother's lineage and were born human, but they inherited some of my abilities as well. Because Luntia's blood ran through their veins, I loved them dearly and wanted to support them in any way I could, even helping one of them become the king of the country. Since I spoke constantly from the moment

they were born, the children were able to hear most of my words and speak the spirit language to a certain extent.

"Father! That's big much! Even if Mother wants seeing spring flowers, why make them bloom all over middle of winter?!"

"Heh heh."

Seeing my smile, my second son asked suspiciously, *"…Why laughing at that?"*

"I was just thinking how wonderful it is to be able to communicate with my family. Luntia looked so happy when I made those flowers bloom, but I'm sure she said something like 'Are you perhaps showing me a glimpse of the Heavenly Kingdom before I go there?' I just made the flowers bloom because I wanted to see her smile, but she came up with her own unique interpretation because we can't communicate."

I ruffled my second son's hair as he fell silent and nodded in understanding.

"Still, even if we can't communicate, just being with Luntia makes me happy."

I'd always felt that way, but my children taught me that being able to communicate with your family brought an even greater happiness.

When my oldest son was ten years old, he told me in secret, *"On night when Mother married Father, Father made Grandmother's illness better fast and turned big castle into our home. This made*

Mother think Father was a guardian angel. She was very happy and grateful."

The night we married, Luntia's face had blanched when she first glimpsed the castle, and she'd cried many tears when she saw her fully healthy grandmother. I would never have imagined that she was happy.

That's why, when my son told me that, I was utterly shocked.

"Mother loved Father from time they first met. But that night, Mother's love grew even bigger," he added.

See? Because we were able to communicate, my not-so-pleasant memories of that night were rewritten into something beautiful. Communication is undoubtedly a wonderful thing, but…

Luntia happened to pass by just at that moment, and I ran over to pull her into my arms.

"Luntia, I love you the most in the entire world!"

A happy smile lit up her face as her cheeks flushed pink.

"Oh, Ligon. I love you the most in the entire world too."

Even if we couldn't communicate with words, it was still possible for our hearts to understand each other.

I kissed the top of my adorable blushing wife's head and truly felt from the bottom of my heart that Luntia was the most essential part of my world.

Bonus Story:
Serafina's Ideal Shop

"A SHOP?"

Fackt nodded at my question as he pushed his glasses slightly up on his nose.

"That's right. My sister and her husband are planning to start a new business, but they haven't decided on what to do yet, so they asked me for advice. They want it to be something they can run all by themselves, but they don't have any ideas beyond that."

"So you're saying they don't know what kind of shop they want to have?" I asked as I sat on a bench in the castle garden, swinging my feet from side to side.

Fackt wasn't usually assigned to my guard detail, but that day he was there in addition to Canopus, Scheat, and Miaplacidus. When I'd asked him, "Tell me something interesting," he'd brought up the topic of his older sister and her husband. Apparently, she was two years older than him and recently married. The couple wanted to start a new business together, but they seemed at a loss about what to do.

"Hmm. If it were me, I'd want to open a strawberry shop!"

"A strawberry shop? Not a general fruit shop?" Fackt asked with a confused look.

"Yep, that's right!" I affirmed with a nod. "If you don't sell out every day, you get to eat the leftovers. So I'd want to only sell my

favorite fruit!”

“…I think you’d need to consider whether a business could be viable before focusing on your desires. No, no…forget I said that!”

After Fackt mumbled something under his breath and fell silent, Scheat grinned and said, “I think the Princess’s point of view is wonderful! A job is something you do every day, so it’s important to choose something you love! If it were up to me, I’d make a muscle training institute. The pitch would be: ‘We’ll give you muscles anywhere you want!’ Once my client tells me their goals, I’d train them until they collapse!!”

“You’d be drowning in lawsuits if you did that. Or, rather, all your customers would run away.”

“They’d be bringing it on themselves! It’s their fault for thinking that building muscle is easy. How hard do you think I had to work to obtain this muscular body of mine?!” Scheat rambled on as Fackt studied him with an astonished expression.

“You…do realize that business is about empathizing with the customer and doing everything possible to meet their needs and desires, right? If you don’t, you’ll be waving goodbye to your profits.”

“Oh, right! I forgot about the moneymaking part!!” Scheat shot Fackt a sidelong glance, having just realized that he was overlooking one of the most important things.

Next, it was Miaplacidus’s turn to pipe up. “I’d start up a ‘red thread of fate’ shop! The idea is that you tie a red thread around the finger of each person, and if the thread doesn’t snap when you pull them apart, that person would be your true love. But actually, I’d sell

two types of thread—thin and thick—and let the buyer decide which one they wanted to purchase depending on how much they liked their partner. What do you think?"

His smug expression seemed to suggest, *How's that for customer empathy?* But Fackt wrinkled his nose distastefully.

"Just hearing that description screams fraud. That kind of business won't last long," was Fackt's perfectly reasonable response.

Canopus spoke next, his chest puffed out with pride. "I would start a shop called 'Second Princess Memorabilia'! Adoring fans would be able to purchase the princess's pictures, quote collection, and progress reports. I know they'd fly off the shelves like hotcakes!!"

Oh dear. Canopus is saying something strange again, I thought to myself in stunned surprise.

Scheat also looked like he had something on his mind. "Pictures might not be a bad idea, but I'm not sure about the quote collection or progress reports. I don't think you'd want to do anything that would ruin the princess's image."

Something about that didn't sound quite right, but before I even had time to start putting two and two together, Miaplacidus jumped into the conversation.

"He's right. It's better for them to imagine and admire the princess from afar. If they knew the whole story, I'm sure they'd be disillusioned and start saying things like 'This isn't what we signed up for!'"

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

But before I could protest Miaplacidus's statement, Fackt—who'd been listening quietly the whole time—raised his hand and grabbed everyone's attention.

"Apologies for butting in while the mood is so lively, but do you mind if I ask you all a question?"

When we all nodded, Fackt turned to me first.

"Let's start with you, Princess Serafina. Do you actually plan to open a strawberry shop in the future?"

"Huh?! No… I'm planning to be a saint." I answered honestly.

Fackt gave a little nod before turning to Scheat.

"How about you, Scheat? Are you going to open this 'muscle training institute' you spoke of?"

"No. I'm one of the proud knights who guards Princess Serafina! I have no intention of doing anything but that!"

When Fackt asked Miaplacidus and Canopus a similar question, they both replied that they also intended to continue being knights. Hearing this, Fackt's eyes twinkled behind his glasses.

"To sum it up, it seems like all of you, including Princess Serafina, would rather continue doing your current job, or something you're good at, rather than the thing you like."

"Whoa, what an eye-opener!" everyone said, gazing at Fackt like they'd been struck by lightning.

Then, Scheat and Miaplacidus addressed him with an air of admiration.

"Fackt, you're a genius! Since you're so smart, why'd you even bother asking us instead of thinking about it yourself? Wouldn't that be better?"

"Yeah, we gave it our best shot. If you're going to reject our suggestions on the spot, there's not much else we can do."

Fackt's eyes continued to twinkle as he responded to the other two knights.

"I'm smart because of you. You don't use your brains—and when you try to, you come up with inane ideas—so I have to use mine more than anyone else. Thus, the more I use it, the cleverer I get."

Fackt's statement came off a bit sarcastic, but Scheat laughed it off with an easygoing smile.

"Ha ha ha! Who would have thought our daily efforts contributed to the cleverness of Lord Fackt!"

"However," he continued, still grinning, "allow me to say one more thing. While the concept of opening a muscle training institute is appealing to me, the thing I love most of all is being a knight!"

Canopus and Miaplacidus heartily agreed with his declaration, so I made a loud one of my own.

"I also want to be a saint the most!"

"…I see." Fackt reflected calmly. "So that means everyone here is doing or wants to do not only what they're good at but also what they love the most. I'll pass that information along to my sister and her husband."

Now it was my turn to ask *him* a question.

"What do you love the most, Fackt?"

For a moment, he appeared to be at a loss for words. He stayed quiet for a bit longer while Scheat and Miaplacidus smirked and patted him on the back, before finally sighing and reluctantly starting to speak.

"…I like being a knight. I want to continue being one forever."

I didn't know this, but when Fackt first joined the knight brigade, everyone had teased him about not being very good with a sword. Even saying things like "Why did you become a knight in the first place?"

In response, Fackt would always tell them, "Because that's what I wanted to be!"

Apparently, he'd been thinking back on those days when he answered my question. Miaplacidus and Scheat flanked him and peered into his eyes.

"Whoa, what an eye-opener, huh?!" they teased in unison.

Their smug interjection was met with a glare at first, but then Fackt's expression softened into an amused smile.

"Yeah. It's just as you've said. I'll be sure to tell my sister and her husband to do something that they love! If you have the passion to continue, you'll get good at it eventually, even if it doesn't go as planned right away."

"That's excellent advice!!"

After that, the knights started patting each other on the shoulders, and I watched them, admiring how close they all were.

Not long after, Fackt came by to inform me that his sister and her husband were opening a honey shop.

Honey was one of my favorite things, so I broke into a huge grin thinking about how I'd have to pay the shop a visit sometime.

The knights, who seemed to have read my mind perfectly, nudged Fackt as they grumbled among themselves about their increased workload—but that's a whole other story.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for purchasing a copy of this novel! It's because of all of you that this series has reached its third volume!

When I first started working on the ZERO series, I remember asking my editor, "I think it's going to be two volumes, so can I release a part one and part two?" However, around the time I finished working on Volume 1, I had a feeling that I might not be done in two parts and ended up going with numbered volumes. Thankfully, that turned out to be the correct decision.

You may have sensed it while reading, but I feel like there's much more to explore, so the story will continue in Volume 4. I apologize if it seemed like this one ended on a cliff-hanger, but I'm taking some time to thoughtfully develop the next part of the story. I hope you'll stick around for the continuation!!

Speaking of this volume, chibi has once again provided some amazing illustrations! Both the cover and insert illustrations are so stunning that just looking at them gets me all fired up. Thank you so much, chibi, for your fabulous work!

The other day I had the chance to meet with employees of the publishing company. It was a valuable opportunity to spend time with and get to know not only the novel's editor but also the comic book team and sales representatives. It struck home just how important it is to meet with people face-to-face. I was reminded of how much fun

it is to work with a large team to create something together and was truly impressed by everyone's high level of dedication and ambition.

It made me reflect on my tendency to think things like "Ack… I might miss my deadline, but I'm not sure how engaging the next part of the story will be, so I need to spend a bit more time figuring it out. (Still, it's not like anything's going to come to me if I just stay cooped up in my room, so I think I'll go catch a movie for a change of pace.)" I decided to at least *try* and cut back on the part in the parentheses…

This series has come to fruition thanks to many people. And as mentioned in a previous volume, a popularity poll was held for this work. The poll featured characters from both *A Tale of the Secret Saint* and *A Tale of the Secret Saint ZERO*. In an impressive feat, Sirius surpassed even the main series characters to claim first place!! Incredible, huh?!

Despite the short voting period of just half a month, we received a remarkable 4,633 votes. A heartfelt thank-you to everyone who participated! Also, I really appreciated all the comments and requests for stories that were sent in!!

The response was so amazing that I wrote short stories featuring the top five ZERO characters in the poll based on your comments and requests. I hope you enjoy them!

Lastly, thank you so much for sticking with me until the end. I really appreciate everyone who helped bring this story to life and everyone who took the time to read it. I struggled a bit with my writing progress this time, but I still enjoyed the novel creation process! (I tend to wipe the tough parts from my mind.)

I hope you’re all excited for what’s coming next!



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