
A Tale of the
Secret Saint
NOVEL
8
WRITTEN BY
Touya
ILLUSTRATED BY
chibi

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE STORY THUS FAR

FIA, ONCE THE GREAT SAINT in her past life, now hides her saintly powers and leads a new life as an ordinary knight—albeit a life fraught with its own challenges. But despite her best efforts, she has failed to completely hide her true capabilities and drawn the attention of many knights and captains.

With Saviz and Cyril in attendance, Fia is scheduled to meet with the king so he can get to know her as an incoming member of the First Knight Brigade. With Cyril's encouragement, she vows to give the meeting her best effort.

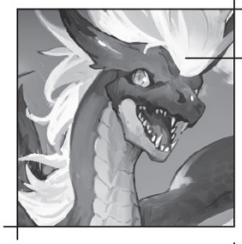
During the meeting, the king's favorite jester makes many probing remarks toward her, then challenges her to a game. Fia deduces the true purpose of the game, outs the jester as the real king, and even sees through his curse from the Spirit Lord.

Náv Kingdom
CHARACTER LIST



FIA RUUD

Youngest daughter of the Ruud knight family. A princess and the Great Saint in her past life. Currently hiding the fact that she is a saint, she lives as a knight...or is trying to, at least.



ZAVILIA

Fia's familiar. The only black dragon in the world. One of the Three Great Beasts of the continent.



SAVIZ NÁV

Commander of the Náv Black Dragon Knights. The younger brother of the king and, as such, the heir apparent.



CYRIL SUTHERLAND

Captain of the First Knight Brigade. Head of the most prominent duke family and second in line to the throne. Also known as the "Dragon of Náv." Knight Brigade's strongest swordsman.



KURTIS BANNISTER

Captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade. Now works with the First Knight Brigade while keeping his captain rank.



CERULEAN

Court jester. Actually Laurence, the king of Náv.

300 Years Ago



SERAFINA NÁV

Fia's past life. Second princess of the Náv Kingdom. World's only Great Saint.



SIRIUS ULYSSES

Said to be the strongest knight in the Kingdom of his time. Captain of the Royal Guard. A handsome man with gray hair and silver eyes.

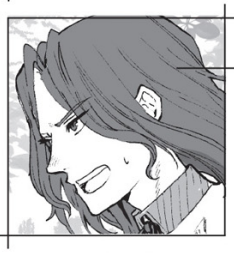




DOLLY (LLOYD ALCOTT)

Court jester. Actually Lloyd Alcott, one of the Three Great Dukes.





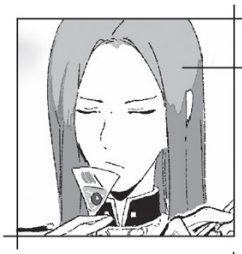
LEON (NOEL BALFOUR)

Court jester. Actually Noel Balfour, one of the Three Great Dukes.



DESMOND RONAN

Captain of the Second Knight Brigade and commandant of the military police. Head of an earl family. Also known as the "Tiger of Náv." A sarcastic but hardworking man.



ENOCH

Captain of the Third Mage Knight Brigade. Generally a reticent man, he becomes talkative when it comes to magic.



QUENTIN AGUTTER

Captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade. Can judge one's strength through an aura he alone can see. Worships Fia and Zavilia.



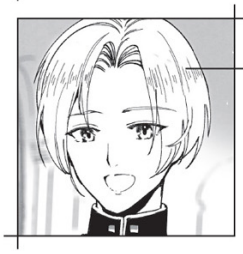
CLARISSA ABERNETHY

Captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade. A glamorous woman who handles all things pertaining to the royal capital's security.



ZACKARY TOWNSEND

Captain of the Sixth Knight Brigade. Well liked by his subordinates. Chivalrous and caring.



FABIAN WYNER

Fia's fellow knight. A handsome, youthful man and the heir to a marquess family.



CHARLOTTE

A young saint who has become friends with Fia.

Náv Black Dragon Knight Brigade

COMMANDER: SAVIZ NÁV

	Captain	Vice-Captain	Knight
First Knight Brigade ROYAL FAMILY GUARDS	Cyril Sutherland		Fia Ruud, Fabian Wyner
Second Knight Brigade ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Desmond Ronan		
Third Mage Knight Brigade MAGES	Enoch		
Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade MONSTER TAMERS	Quentin Agutter	Gideon Oakes	
Fifth Knight Brigade ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Clarissa Abernethy		
Sixth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY Seventh Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, NORTH Eighth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, EAST Ninth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, SOUTH Tenth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, WEST	Zackary Townsend		
Eleventh Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR NORTH Twelfth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR EAST Thirteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR SOUTH Fourteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR WEST	Guy Osbern Kurtis Bannister	 Cody Dolph Ruud	Oria Ruud
Fifteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL Sixteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL Seventeenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL Eighteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL Nineteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL Twentieth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			

Knight Brigades (300 Years Ago)

THE NÁV KINGDOM KNIGHT BRIGADES

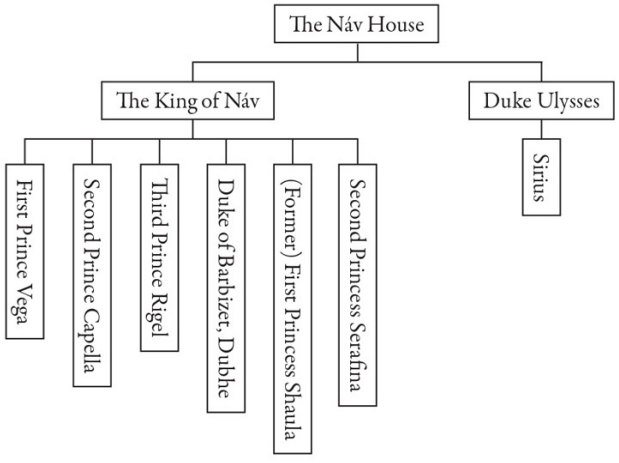
Knight Brigade Commander	Wezen
Second Knight Brigade Captain ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Hadar Bononi
Third Mage Knight Brigade Captain MAGES	Tsih Brando
Fifth Knight Brigade Captain ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Alnair Calandra
Sixth Knight Brigade Captain MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY	Elnath Cafaro

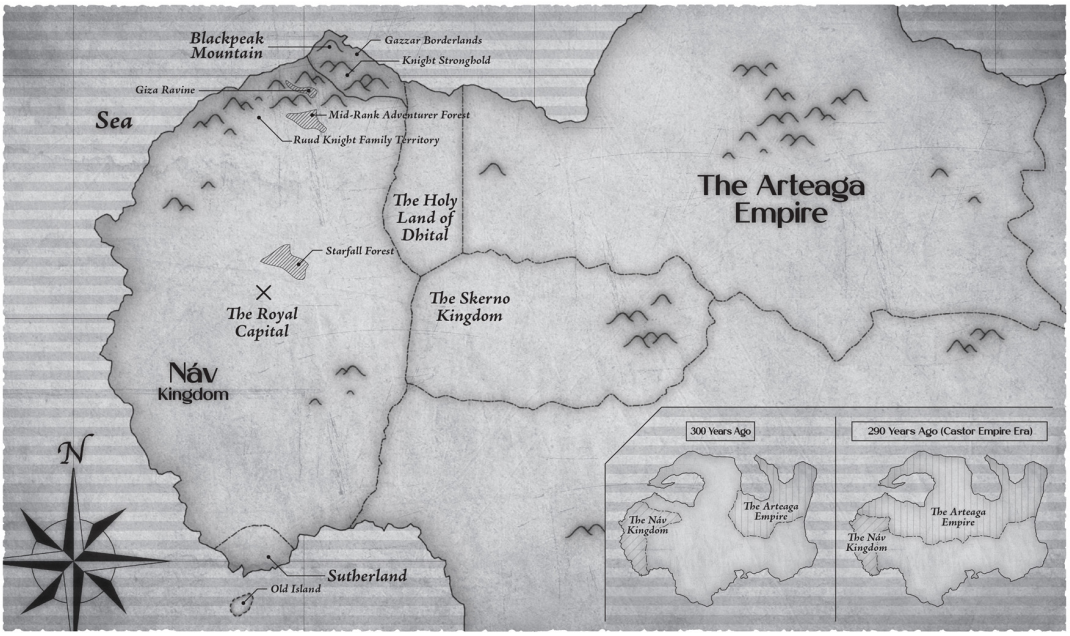
THE ROYAL RED SHIELD

Captain	Sirius Ulysses
Serafina's Personal Knight	Canopus Blazej

Náv Kingdom Royal Family Tree

(300 YEARS AGO)




Blackpeak Mountain
Gazzar Borderlands
Knight Stronghold
Giza Ravine
Mid-Rank Adventurer Forest
Ruud Knight Family Territory
Sea
The Holy Land of Dhital
The Arteaga Empire
Starfall Forest
The Royal Capital
The Skerno Kingdom
Náv Kingdom
N
Sutherland
Old Island
300 Years Ago
290 Years Ago (Castor Empire Era)
The Náv Kingdom
The Arteaga Empire
The Arteaga Empire
The Náv Kingdom

——Náv Kingdom Royal Castle——

KING



Laurence
BODY DOUBLE

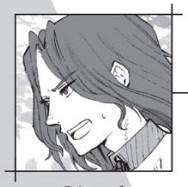
THE THREE GREAT DUKES



Cyril Sutherland
CAPTAIN OF THE FIRST KNIGHT BRIGADE



Lloyd Alcott
CIVIL OFFICIAL



Noel Balfour
CIVIL OFFICIAL

COURT JESTERS



Cerulean
THE REAL KING, DESPITE LOOKING NINE YEARS OLD



Leon



Dolly

SAME PERSON

Chapter 45:
Visit to the Duke's Manor Part 2

"WELCOME, WELCOME. Thank you for coming all this way."

Duke Alcott himself greeted us at the entrance to his home. I thought someone important like him would be off lounging in the back while his servants welcomed his guests, but it appeared that Duke Alcott could handle such a task himself.

Though the move took me by surprise, Cyril didn't seem to think anything of it. Perhaps Duke Alcott was always like this?

With his usual bright smile, Cyril replied, "Not at all. Thank *you* for your invitation, Lloyd."

Duke Alcott grimaced, which was understandable given his invitation *hadn't* included Cyril. But ever the gentleman, Duke Alcott made no mention of that fact and led us gracefully into the parlor.

Everything about the estate—the distance from the gate, the sheer size and lavishness of the home, the softness of the carpet lining the hallway, the way the faces in the paintings seemed almost to shine—was a testament to Duke Alcott's wealth.

Whew. That's a duke for you, I thought with admiration.

We soon reached the parlor. Sunlight streamed in through a large window. Despite the size and lush furnishings, the room was surprisingly ordinary—I'd expected it to match the Duke's own quirkiness in some way.

I gawked at the room, eventually noticing the beautiful girl sitting on one of the dark-green sofas, with dark-pink hair that spilled down to her waist. She looked just a little older than me.

"Allow me to introduce you all. This is Priscilla, my adoptive daughter," Duke Alcott said.

Even after hearing her name, Priscilla didn't stand to greet everyone.

"…She's a saint," Duke Alcott added.

Only then did Priscilla deign to stand, though she remained silent.

Cyril smiled brightly and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Saint Priscilla. I am Cyril Sutherland, captain of the First Knight Brigade. And this is Desmond Ronan, captain of the Second Knight Brigade."

Though she didn't say a word, her gaze flicked from Cyril to Desmond, suggesting her silence was not mere disinterest.

"These two are knights from my First Knight Brigade, Fabian Wyner and Fia Ruud," Cyril went on. "Lastly, this is Saint Charlotte, who works for the royal castle."

At Charlotte's introduction, Priscilla's gaze sharpened. She appraised Charlotte from head to toe.

Squirming under the scrutiny, Charlotte murmured, "N-nice to meet you."

Priscilla's eyes narrowed as they landed on Charlotte's orange hair.

"Ah ha ha. It would seem my daughter is feeling quite shy," Duke Alcott said. "Please forgive her."

I found it hard to believe she was feeling shy given how she stared at all of us…but the Duke would know her best, so he must've been right.

Duke Alcott gestured for us to sit. As he did, a servant brought in fragrant black tea and a big strawberry tart. For some reason, only my plate had three slices of the treat.

"Huh?" Confused, I looked around and met the duke's eyes.

He covered his mouth with a hand, leaned toward me, and whispered, "I had some extra slices prepared for you alone, my *dear friend*. I hope you enjoy them."

Despite speaking in a whisper, his voice was loud enough for everyone to hear. I was perplexed, but I soon learned what this was all about.

"He foolishly believes a cheap bribe will make you see him as a friend and not a stranger," Cyril said.

Oooh. So that's what's going on. Duke Alcott is teasing Captain Cyril!

Cyril understood this, I was sure, but he didn't play along because he was such a strict person.

Goodness. The two of you are such good friends! I thought as I took a massive bite out of a slice of tart.

"Mm, delicious!" I said. "The dough is so crunchy, the cream is soft, and the sourness of the strawberries brings it all together!

Absolutely delish!”

I couldn’t help but gush, and Duke Alcott smiled broadly. However, nobody but me so much as touched their food.

“Why’s nobody eating?” I asked. “It’s really good.”

Desmond grimaced. “Fia, you’ve got serious guts of steel or something! How can you get anything down in this situation?! Don’t you feel tense at all?!”

“Huh?”

…Am I supposed to feel tense? I set my fork down, covered my mouth with a hand, and lowered my gaze. “Pardon my indiscretion. I was so excited by the honor of being invited to the home of a duke that I acted in an unbecoming manner. Yes, I do feel tense. So tense my heart could burst.”

As everyone stared holes into me, I maintained my somber expression. My act wouldn’t be believable if I didn’t keep it up, after all.

Duke Alcott chuckled. “You’re rather amusing, Fia, but you don’t have to put yourself so on guard with me. In fact, I’ve requested that you call me by name a number of times, even though you still only ever address me as ‘Duke Alcott.’ There’s no need to be so formal.” He pouted as he spoke.

Fabian grinned. “Ah, Fia has a tendency to be like that. When we first met, I insisted she call me by my nickname, but she has since ignored that request entirely. Not once has she used my nickname.”

Oh yeah. Come to think of it, something like that happened, didn't it? But why wait until now of all times to bring it up? What's up with that, Fabian?!

I hung my head, trying to look bashful. "I actually try to be as polite as I can with everyone. I don't want to come off as someone who can't read the room."

"…Is that so?" the captain and Desmond muttered the same thing under their breath. I deliberately ignored them.

I picked up my fork again and scanned the room. I needed to focus on the reason for this gathering. Duke Alcott recently adopted a daughter; he invited me over because I was close in age to her, and he wanted us to be friends. Since I'm a saint myself, I kinda wanted to meet her, and thus we arranged this gathering, but…Priscilla herself hadn't said a word since our arrival; she just drank her black tea in silence and didn't seem at all interested in conversation.

Hmm, what should I do… I looked to Charlotte for help, but she was busy fidgeting nervously with her skirt. Next, I turned to Cyril, Desmond, and Fabian, but they all wore passive expressions, as though merely observing the proceedings.

Come to think of it, the three of them had forced their ways into this meeting without receiving a proper invitation. It made sense that they would have some important business that warranted the sudden visit, but if that were the case, why weren't they saying anything?

Just as my mind began to wonder, Duke Alcott spoke up, amused. "You're very expressive, Fia. Just watching you, even in silence, is fascinating. In contrast, my dear daughter is so terribly

expressionless. I was hoping the two of you might get along despite your differences."

Priscilla regarded Duke Alcott coldly and broke her silence at last. "Impossible. We have nothing in common, being saint and knight. What would we even converse about?"

"Well, it's at least worth trying," the duke said. "If you become head saint, you'll have to join the knights on their monster hunting expeditions. There's no reason not to familiarize yourself with them now."

Duke Alcott offered this suggestion with a smile, but Priscilla was having none of it. She reached for her teacup without bothering to reply. As she slouched forward, her hair curtained her face and blocked her line of sight. All of her hair, even her bangs, tumbled loose down to her waist, so it completely concealed her when she leaned forward. It sure seemed like it would get in the way a lot, but I guess she wanted to grow it out because it was such a pretty pink color. She could've tied it back with a ribbon or used a hairpin, but maybe she preferred it this way.

"I noticed you've grown even your bangs out until they reach your waist, Saint Priscilla," I said, taking the opportunity to strike up a conversation. "I suppose if I were you, I'd be hesitant to cut such pretty hair myself."

The moment I spoke, the parlor fell deadly quiet. I worried I might've said something wrong when Priscilla spoke up.

"I see you haven't been made aware."

"Huh?"

Aware of what? I blinked a few times, confused.

Cyril spoke up beside me. "The official Head Saint's Hairstyle dictates the hair will obscure one eye. I believe it's a tradition passed down in order to highlight the beautiful hair of the saints."

Oh really? We didn't have something like that three hundred years ago.

"Many saints grow their hair out like Saint Priscilla in preparation for the head saint selection, on the off chance they're selected. Incidentally, we're holding the next selection in the coming month."

"Oh, I see," I said with a nod.

I snuck a glance at Charlotte. Sure enough, her hair was just as I remembered it—her bangs stopped right above her eyes. I tilted my head as I pondered this. …*Will she be all right? Charlotte's bangs aren't long enough! What if she's chosen to be head saint?*

Charlotte furiously shook her head and said, "I can kinda guess what you're thinking, but that'll *never* happen, so it's fine!"

"Is that so?"

I thought Charlotte was a pretty outstanding saint myself…but yeah, I guess she was still a child, so it wouldn't make sense for her to become head saint. There were probably many saints out there with more experience and training under their belts.

I nodded to myself as everything clicked into place, but Desmond suddenly yelped and dropped his cup. It fell to the soft carpet and split perfectly in two.

My, how unusual for Captain Desmond to blunder like that. And such a bad omen too!

I cocked my head as Desmond hurried to clean up his broken cup.

* * *

"I-I apologize!"

Desmond scooped up the pieces of his dropped cup, but he was so flustered that he cut himself on one of the shards.

Huh. I had no idea he could be so clumsy, I thought.

A slow trickle of blood beaded on his palm. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and sloppily wrapped it around the cut.

"Huh? What're you doing that for? Can't you just have one of the saints here heal that for you?" I said. There were two saints with us in the room, after all.

…Well, there were actually three, if you counted me, but for a small wound like this, I likely wouldn't even need to discreetly lend a hand.

I put on my best I'm-not-a-saint face and looked back and forth between Priscilla and Charlotte. Charlotte snuck a hesitant glance at Priscilla.

Ah, right… Charlotte couldn't steal Priscilla's thunder, since this was her home. What's more, Charlotte was still a bit shy about performing in front of other saints. She came to the church at age

three and grew up surrounded by adult saints, but their superior experience meant they looked down on Charlotte's healing magic, leaving her with a bit of an inferiority complex. She probably felt really hesitant about using her healing magic in front of a saint she'd only just met. That meant Priscilla would have to be the one to help out.

Or so I thought, but she was simply sipping her tea, as though Desmond's cut was none of her business.

That's odd. Does she not want to use her magic for some reason? I wondered.

Duke Alcott, apparently picking up on my confusion, said, "Fia, the populace at large doesn't know this, but there is a tacit agreement among saints to not use healing magic outside of ordained work. It can take several days for mana to recover, so healing too frequently could leave a saint out of commission when we need them the most."

"Oooh, I see."

It only took me a single day to recover emptied-out mana reserves, but I'd have to eat a ton to make up for it. Of course, there were saints out there who couldn't eat very much and would have to wait several days for their magic to recover. That made sense.

"This isn't an ironclad rule, however," the duke said. "Saints often still use their healing magic so long as the amount doesn't interfere with the next day's work. And of course, saints with several days off from their duties can use as much healing magic as they like."

"Ah, I understand."

Come to think of it, Charlotte didn't have any particular restrictions on how she used magic and practiced with me, so it really did seem like it depended on the person.

Seeing my confusion wane, Duke Alcott turned to Priscilla. "I'm aware you're the type who prefers to preserve your mana, but would you mind using some of your power? Desmond is a guest in our home. It would reflect poorly on us if others learned we allowed him to leave injured."

Priscilla stared flatly back at him. "That would be unwise. If we create a precedent for it, then I will have to heal every guest who comes into our home and injures themselves." She shot a withering glance in Desmond's direction. "Besides, it's not as though this knight would spread rumors about *me*, now would he?"

She seemed to be implying that Desmond wouldn't dare make an enemy out of someone powerful enough to become the head saint, but if that were the case…

"I don't get it. If your healing magic is strong enough, and there's no reason you can't do so now, why not just heal him? Don't you feel an urge to heal others?" I asked innocently.

Priscilla raised an eyebrow at me. "Are you genuinely that ignorant? The power we saints wield is nothing less than divine miracle. It is not something to be used so casually. Only a child would think to act on their every urge."

With an apologetic look, Duke Alcott said, "Priscilla is a special saint raised in the Cathedral, where her healing magic was praised as

miraculous and only used after much careful consideration. Hence, she can't help but prefer to preserve her magic."

I see… So Priscilla grew up in an environment where using healing magic freely was frowned upon and had come to adopt similar values herself. She probably never truly experienced the joy of healing others, which was why she acted the way she did.

Desmond waved his handkerchief-wrapped hand, making a show of being fine. "Don't worry about me. This is just a scratch; there's no need to heal it right away."

"Thank you, Desmond," Duke Alcott said apologetically.

It seemed like that would be the end of it, but then, after several deep breaths, Charlotte hesitantly spoke up. "Um… If you'd be all right with me doing it, I could heal your hand for you."

My eyes went wide. *Oh my! Charlotte is offering to use her healing magic in front of another saint!* That was a huge step for her.

She waited for Desmond's reply, balling her hands into fists as she did. Desmond seemed about to decline, however.

What?! How could you say no to her after that?! I thought, mortified. I had to step in.

"Don't be a fool, Captain Desmond! It's because people like you keep turning down such kind offers that saints can't use their healing magic freely! You're hurt, right? You want to be healed? Then just admit it and let her heal you!"

Cyril, who'd remained mostly silent until now, grinned without humor. "So she says, Desmond. She has a way of making everything

seem so simple, doesn't she?"

"Y-yeah…" Desmond stammered. He unwrapped the handkerchief around his hand and half-heartedly offered his palm. Fresh blood seeped steadily from the wound, belying his claim that this was some mere scratch.

Charlotte had once healed Desmond's deaf left ear, so this wound would be nothing for her. He must have wanted to refuse out of politeness, but there was no need for that. It was through the joy of healing others that saints grew.

Nervously, Charlotte stepped closer to Desmond before holding both her hands over his injured palm. She swallowed, then chanted, "Benevolent light of heaven, turn my magic into solace. Heal."

Healing magic poured from Charlotte's hands and enveloped Desmond's palm.

…Five, six, seven seconds passed. Desmond's injury slowly knit itself back together until it vanished entirely.

Well done, Charlotte! That wasn't bad considering you were so nervous being in front of another saint, I thought.

Charlotte heaved a relieved sigh. Desmond wiped the blood off his palm with a wet towel, revealing smooth, unbroken skin in place of the cut. With a sober expression, he balled his fist a few times and shook his head in astonished disbelief. "This is incredible," he said. "The cut is completely gone, and I can move my hand just fine. You really are an amazing saint. Thank you."

Charlotte blushed happily. “N-not at all. I’m simply happy I could help.”

Duke Alcott rose from the sofa to peer closer at Desmond’s palm. “Desmond, could you show me where you were injured?” He stared hard at Desmond’s hand, then turned an admiring gaze on Charlotte. “I couldn’t quite see how severe the injury was originally, but to erase it without a trace is truly impressive. You’re quite capable, Saint Charlotte.”

“N-not at all,” Charlotte said bashfully.

My chest warmed. *Yes, that’s right, everyone! Charlotte is a wonderful saint!* To reward her for her efforts, I pushed my plate her way. There were still two slices of tart left. “You must be hungry after using your magic. I’ll make a special exception and share with you!”

Desmond frowned at this completely reasonable offer and said, “Fia, I know you don’t get it, but what Saint Charlotte just showed us was incredible magic worth way more than your half-eaten slices of tart!”

“Huh?”

The one who doesn’t get it is you, Captain Desmond! Offering tarts is completely valid. And look! I haven’t touched either of these slices! They’re not half-eaten, or any-eaten for that matter!

I was about to protest when Cyril, Fabian, and Duke Alcott added on to what Desmond said.

“Fia, not everyone has your appetite all the time,” Cyril said. “I understand wanting to reward your friend, but let’s distance ourselves

from thoughts of food first."

"I had no idea Saint Charlotte was such a splendid saint," Fabian said. "You're really something as well, Fia, to address her without title all this time. It feels like every one of your acquaintances turns out to be somebody incredible."

"What Fabian says is true," Duke Alcott said. "It seems like everyone you know is a figure of note. Perhaps I could become noteworthy as well if I became your friend? Not that I need any more reason to become friends with you, of course."

Everyone's just saying whatever they want, huh? Not a single one of them understands how kind my gesture toward Charlotte was! With a sigh, I gave up and prayed that one day my acts of kindness would reach others.

* * *

…But for now, I would just have to accept the fact that being understood was but a distant dream.

Resigned, I surveyed the four men. They didn't grasp my intentions, but it wasn't worth the trouble of trying to explain it to them.

Fine. I'm openhearted, so I'll overlook all of your gross misunderstandings, I thought as I turned away. I noticed then that Priscilla was giving Charlotte a good, hard stare. *…Oh my. Is she perhaps thinking she should've healed Captain Desmond herself after*

all? What a splendid saint. Heartened, I smiled, causing Priscilla to abruptly glare at me.

"I could've easily managed something like that myself!" she barked. "In fact, I've been going out to town and healing three people a month, and not once have I failed!"

"Oh, wow," I replied. I scanned Priscilla from head to toe. I couldn't tell how strong her magic was without seeing it in action, but if she could heal three randomly selected people back-to-back every month, then she had to be quite the capable saint.

I mean, it checks out. They kept her in the Cathedral until a duke adopted her into his household, so she must be super talented. Good for her. I smiled to myself, but it only earned me another glare.

"Ugh! That red hair is wasted on a knight like you! Like pearls before swine! We once had a servant with red hair at the Cathedral, but she couldn't use magic at all. And yet she had the cheek to think she could tell us saints what to do! Honestly, the gall!"

Confused, I said, "Uhh, are you mad at me for something?" Then it clicked. "Ah! Of course, how could I be so rude?! You're cross with me because I was only sharing my tarts with Charlotte, aren't you? It's okay. I have two slices left, one for each of you!"

"Wh-what?! What about what I've said makes you think I want your tarts?! Are you calling me a glutton?! Are you?!"

Priscilla's face flushed as she shouted down my sincere offer.

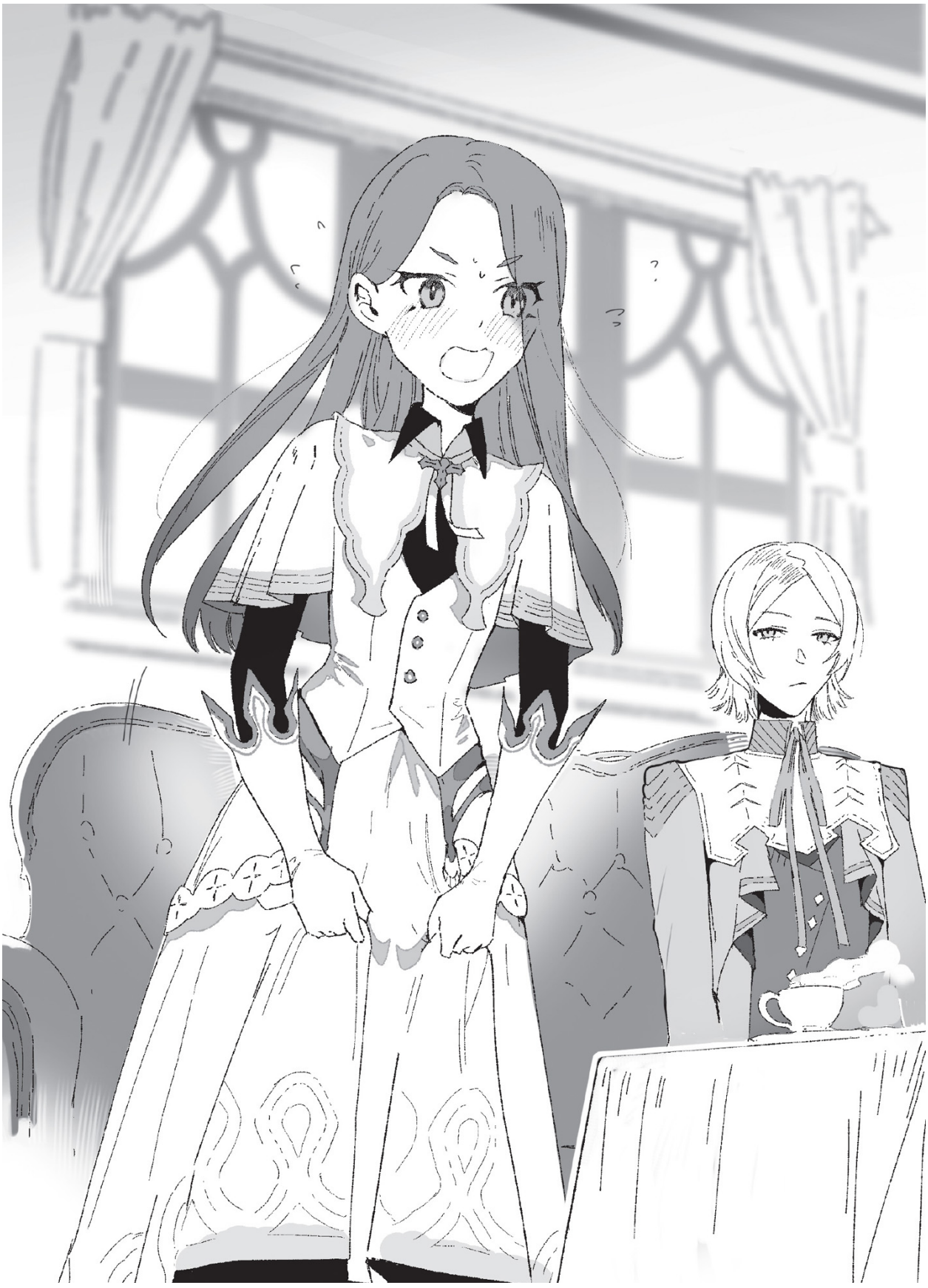
She even stomped her foot, causing Duke Alcott to burst into laughter. She spun around, still red-faced, and glared viciously, but he

paid her no mind as he doubled over with mirth.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! You're absolutely adorable, Priscilla! You always look so cold and distant, but now you seem more your true age. Ha ha ha. Fia, you're incredible. Only you could draw such an expression out of her."

"Huh? You think so?" I said, basking in the praise.

Duke Alcott never got a chance to respond to me, however, as Priscilla cut in sharply.



"There's nothing incredible about her! I was simply trying to talk some sense into a scatterbrained fool! That's all!"

"Is that so?" Duke Alcott said. "But normally, you would've ignored her completely, no matter how scatterbrained she was. Perhaps something about her stirred your protective instincts, hm?"

Priscilla grimaced like she'd swallowed a fly. "You're saying this girl…stirred some *protective* instinct in me?" She sank to the sofa and turned her head away with a huff. "What nonsense! I was only trying to remind her not to get full of herself just because she has red hair!"

Full of myself? Full of myself how? I wondered with a tilt of my head.

Cyril spoke up. "Ah, yes, indeed, Fia does have some wonderful red hair. I find myself captivated by it often as well."

His words immediately put me on guard. *What? No way! Captain Cyril has never once been "captivated" by my hair. What is he talking about?*

He kept a wholesome, faultless smile on his face as I studied him.

"I've been told you're a rather powerful saint, Saint Priscilla," he said. "I was actually hoping a high-ranking saint such as yourself could shed some light on a particular question I had, if that would be all right. How would you feel if a knight with red hair like Fia's came to serve a saint? Hypothetically speaking, of course."

Priscilla narrowed her eyes at Cyril, so Desmond added, "The church holds red hair in high esteem, as I'm sure you're aware. That's

why it's tradition for the head saint to have a red-haired knight assigned to them, per the wishes of the church and saint. However, Fia's red hair is abnormally vibrant, enough so to catch even your eye. I'm told some even compare her to the Great Saint of legend."

Priscilla raised an eyebrow, as though offended. "Such a question is ridiculous. I couldn't care less if my knights had red, black, or any other color hair. A saint can only ever be compared to another saint. Non-saints do not merit a second thought."

"…I see. Thank you for sharing your thoughts." Cyril let the matter drop with a broad smile, but he swiftly changed subjects. "Ah, incidentally, I've been told you've only recently come to the royal capital. If you ever have any trouble, please do let us know. Desmond is the lord of the Ronan Earldom not far from here. He's so familiar with the royal capital, it could be his own garden."

"Gwah?!" Desmond choked.

Cyril raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh dear. Do you have tart stuck in your throat, Desmond? And here I thought you disliked sweets. I guess anything is possible for our kingdom's proud Second Knight Brigade captain."

Desmond laughed wryly. "Ha ha ha. Leave the jokes at that, Cyril. I can't hold a candle to a man of *your* status."

I watched, confused, as Cyril and Desmond tried to out-modest one another. They'd shifted in a blink from questioning Priscilla about my suitability as a saint's knight to aggressively complimenting each other. I couldn't make heads or tails of their goals, but I just wanted to talk about saints with Priscilla.

Amid all this, Duke Alcott addressed Charlotte. “Saint Charlotte, you work in the royal castle, correct? I’m hoping to take Priscilla along and pay a visit sometime. I hope we can meet again then.”

“O-oh, yes. Me too.” Charlotte sat up straighter as she replied.

Priscilla had gone back to drinking her tea and ignoring the entire room, but at this innocent exchange, she cut in. “Come to think of it, there was something I wanted to ask you, Duke.”

“Yes?”

She put a hand under her chin as though in thought. “Who is that girl in that portrait you have in your room? From her clothes, I’d assume she’s a saint, but I haven’t heard of you adopting any children other than me. She had silver-blue hair, so I’d guess her magic was weak, but…”

“…Priscilla, you entered my room?” the duke asked.

She nodded slightly. “Yes, there was something I wanted to ask you, so I went to your room. You were absent, but I spotted the portrait.”

“…I see. You must not have noticed, but my room is a bit dangerous, as I’ve set up a number of theft-deterrent measures. You should avoid entering my room when I’m not around…for your own sake.”

He wore his customary soft smile, yet a thinly veiled threat lurked beneath his words.

“The girl in the portrait is indeed a saint,” the duke went on. “She is not an adoptive daughter of mine, but my…younger sister. She

passed away more than ten years ago."

* * *

I nodded at the duke's revelation. If Priscilla's description was accurate, the girl in the portrait had the same silver-blue hair as Duke Alcott himself, so it was no wonder they were related. He must have kept her portrait in his room to preserve her memory.

"Your little sister?" Priscilla, however, seemed surprised. The duke did not seem to want any of us prying deeper into the matter, but Priscilla apparently didn't notice or didn't care. "How did she pass?"

Duke Alcott cast his gaze at the floor, concealing his expression. "My younger sister was…sickly for a time."

"But wasn't she a saint? Why didn't she simply heal herself?"

Color drained from the duke's face. He looked unsteady for a moment before he stiffened and calmly, though not without a slight tremble in his voice, said, "Priscilla…not every saint is as capable as you are."

Priscilla barreled on, heedless of the duke's condition. "Ah. I understand." She reached for her teacup, as though to make a show of how disappointed she was by his answer.

Everyone fell dead silent when Priscilla allowed this line of questioning to peter out. I glanced around the room, trying to gauge the others' reactions. Cyril and Desmond didn't make a peep and wore

somber expressions. They probably knew something about what had happened, but they certainly weren't about to say it. Nearby, Fabian flashed a dazzling smile.

"Fia, you can have my tart if you're going to give yours away," he said.

"Huh?"

"I actually don't like sweets that much. You'd be doing me a favor by eating it for me."

With that, the tension in the room evaporated. He was really something special in that way.

Fabian was the heir to a high-ranking noble family, so he probably had a decent grasp on the circumstances of the Alcott household. Even if he didn't, he could definitely tell from Duke Alcott's reaction that the duke would rather avoid the subject of his younger sister. Thus, he strategically shifted the topic to something else.

Ho ho… You're quite the tactician, Fabian. Color me impressed.

I took him up on his offer, since *I* was someone who didn't let displays of kindness go to waste. Charlotte accepted my tart, but Priscilla insisted she didn't want one, so I ended up with three slices all for myself. They were good, so no complaints from me.

Priscilla's mood soured, however, and she didn't speak any further. Which was a shame as I wanted to talk about saint stuff with her.

Oh well. She must be the type who takes a while to warm up to others. I'll just have to take my time getting to know her. I'd let the

matter drop for now and try again at a later date.

Duke Alcott, Fabian, Charlotte, and I chatted for a while afterward, but Cyril and Desmond hardly spoke at all. Only when things began to wind down did Cyril thank Duke Alcott for hosting us.

"Thank you for your hospitality today, Lloyd. It was very pleasant talking with everyone."

And with that, we excused ourselves and made to leave.

We exited the room and were partway down the hallway when Duke Alcott beckoned me to him from around a corner.

"Psst, Fia," he called out in a whisper. I neared, confused, and he handed me a cutely wrapped package. "You seemed to really like that tart from earlier, so I prepared a whole one for you to take home."

"Oooh!" I exclaimed. The tart was so big, I had to use both hands to carry it.

The duke was a bit of a prankster and seemed to surround himself with mysteries, but I didn't doubt he was a good guy! My opinion of him was in no way influenced by this gift.

With a bright smile, I said, "Thank you very much, Duke Alcott!"

His grin was sad and wry. "Even with this, you still insist on acting like a stranger? Oh Fia, what must I do to make you call me 'Lloyd'?"

"Huh?"

Wow. He's still hung up on that nonsense? I thought with some exasperation.

He persisted. “There must be something, some condition I could clear for you to accept me as a friend. Please, tell me what this might be.”

“Uhh, right. I suppose if you became a colleague, like Fabian, then maybe…?” It would be a real pain to become friends with someone so influential and powerful, so I presented a condition he absolutely couldn’t fulfill: becoming a knight.

But Duke Alcott immediately turned my words around on me. “I see. So if we shared a goal and strove for it together, you would accept me.”

“That’s quite the liberal interpretation…”

He was smart. By shifting the goalposts, he wouldn’t necessarily have to join the knight brigades to claim he met my conditions.

I scowled, but that only made him laugh. “Ha ha, I’m just playing my cards as best as I can. There’s no way I could ever become a knight.”

“No, of course not.”

Duke Alcott had the right to visit the royal palace whenever he wanted, so he definitely had a high-ranking job that was important to the nation. He couldn’t throw that away and become a knight. That would be unreasonable.

I thought I had come up with the perfect condition to avoid becoming friends with a duke, but apparently not. I felt like kicking myself, but then he threw out something I never expected.

"The reason I could never become a knight is probably not what you're thinking, Fia. It's not because I'm a civil official but because I simply do not want to become a knight. Did Cyril not tell you? I attended knight training school in the past."

"Huh? I had no idea!" I exclaimed. But it did make some sense that he once wanted to be a knight. *No wonder! I thought it was weird that an excellent knight like me couldn't shake his grip!*

"Ten years ago, I wanted to become a knight in order to protect somebody. But they've left this world, so I've lost my motivation. The knight brigades have become nothing but a place that conjures up bad memories for me."

"Oh. I see."

Obviously this person the duke wanted to protect was his sister. Perhaps she had been in a position where he could only protect her by becoming a knight, but what kind of circumstances could lead to that?

As I thought, his expression softened.

"I think your existence is something of a miracle, Fia. You're sharp, bold, and able to reach the truth through your rather unique way of thinking. Most incredible of all is your hair—a vibrant red that not even the highest-ranking saints come close to possessing…and yet you are not a saint."

His words sounded like praise, but his expression said otherwise. I stared, wondering what he was getting at, when his smile turned chilling.

"It's as though your very existence serves to mock them."

I caught a glimmer of something dark behind his smile.

Oh. The duke loathes saints from the bottom of his heart, doesn't he?

Interlude:
The Second Secret Meeting of the Captains

ON THAT NIGHT, for once, all the captains stationed in the royal capital gathered in the senior officer rec room. No one struck up a lively conversation, however, nor did anyone seem to be enjoying themselves. If anything, everyone present looked eager to walk right back out of the room.

Zackary broke the oppressive silence by voicing the question on everyone's mind. "So, what kind of lady was the duke's daughter?"

Cyril and Desmond exchanged a look, holding a silent battle that apparently ended in Desmond's defeat. He set his glass down and spoke.

"I'm glad you asked," Desmond said. "I was just about to explain. Cyril and I paid a visit to Duke Alcott's manor. Fia, Fabian, and Saint Charlotte joined us. We met with Duke Lloyd Alcott himself, as well as his foster daughter, Saint Priscilla."

The listening captains wondered to themselves who this Saint Charlotte was but didn't dare interrupt.

"We were unable to determine the strength of Saint Priscilla's healing magic, but she seemed certain she would be chosen as head saint, so there's a good chance she's got the skill to back up her confidence."

"So we know nothing about how powerful she might be?" Zackary asked.

Desmond nodded. “The populace holds her in high esteem, but we can assume the church is manipulating her performances to look more impressive than they are, so it’s hard to know the truth. That’s why I tried to have her heal me, but she was stingy with her magic and refrained.”

Clarissa, wide-eyed, exclaimed, “Huh?! You mean you injured yourself?”

The other captains raised their eyebrows at Desmond as well, so he spread his arms wide and pontificated. “I did, yes! Why would I do that, you might ask? Because a certain First Knight Brigade captain saw fit to use wind magic to break my teacup straight in half while I was drinking out of it, a clear demand that I use the shards to injure myself and test Saint Priscilla’s healing magic! What choice did I have under his cruel gaze but to obey and cut my own hand?”

Cyril took in Desmond’s dramatics with an exasperated look. Flatly, he said, “I do believe I’ve taken far more grievous injuries on the battlefield for you many times.”

“Indeed you have. I have not forgotten and am sincerely grateful for what you’ve done.” Desmond meekly bowed his head.

Meanwhile, Clarissa grabbed Desmond’s hands and narrowed her eyes. “But your hands seem fine. You visited the duke’s manor today, right? There’s no way you healed that fast.”

“Ah… Yes, well, Saint Charlotte healed my wound for me.”

Everyone cocked their heads and asked, “Saint Charlotte?”

"Oh, right," Desmond said. "She's Fia's saint acquaintance who works for the royal castle. She's the real deal. She was able to quickly heal my wound without leaving any scarring. A saint of her ability is rare. I've met her once before, actually. She made a potion I've never seen before and healed an affliction I had."

"You don't say."

"To think such a kind saint was around!"

The captains murmured their admiration.

Desmond nodded his head deeply, then frowned. "Right… She talks to Fia like a friend, doesn't make her use titles, and doesn't hesitate to use her healing magic. For a saint, she sure doesn't act like one. It's a shame. If she were ten years older, she'd probably be chosen as head saint."

"Oh dear. Truly, what a shame that is, but there's no getting around age," Clarissa said.

"I would expect nothing less from Miss Fia!" Quentin exclaimed. "She always makes friends with larger-than-life figures, like the Black Dragon King!"

Zackary frowned, but as it was nothing new for Quentin to talk up Fia like this, he ignored him and asked Desmond, "Incidentally, what are your thoughts on Saint Priscilla herself?"

"She's about what one would expect from a high-ranking saint—the kind of saint we knights would find *great honor* in pledging our loyalty to," Desmond replied. On the surface, it sounded like a compliment, but his tone belied the praise.

Zackary frowned even harder, and Cyril leaped in to smooth things over. "You can take Desmond's words with a grain of salt, Zackary. He tends to be a bit critical of women. From what I saw, Saint Priscilla pays close attention to doing what is proper, and only what is proper. She still had an outburst of emotion, however. I suspect she'll become a fine saint indeed."

Clarissa looked at Cyril with exasperation. "It's nothing new, but just as Desmond is too critical of women, you're far too soft on saints! There's nothing reliable about your appraisal! You're usually impartial toward everything, but when it comes to saints your standards fall out of whack and you interpret everything positively!"

Cyril's eyes went wide. He dropped his gaze to the glass close to his hand. "…My standards are out of whack, you say? Perhaps you are right. Perhaps the fact Commander Saviz and I have *no choice* but to wed a saint one day has clouded my judgment. No man wishes to hate who he must live with, after all."

Clarissa scrunched up her nose and grumbled, "Can't something be done about that particular royal family custom? I know high-ranking nobles do the same thing, but that's because they want their daughters to have the blood of saints running through them. The royal family only produces males, however, so there's no point, right? If anything, it makes even less sense."

"Unfortunately, Commander Saviz and I are madly in love with saints," Cyril said with a cryptic smile.

"*Cyril, madly in love with* saints?!" Desmond said.

"*Commander Saviz, madly in love with* saints?!" Zackary echoed.

Cyril scowled at both of them. “You two wouldn’t understand love, being without wife or lover. You have no right to tease me.”

Desmond and Zackary wanted to point out that Cyril didn’t have a wife or lover either, but there was something uncharacteristically meek about his voice, so they swallowed their quips.

Quentin took the opportunity to speak up. “They say many a romance begins with faulty impressions and misunderstandings. Cyril isn’t the type to fall in love on his own, so he’s probably trying to trick himself into it. Let’s do the kind thing and pretend we don’t notice.”

At this unlikely olive branch, Cyril forced a smile. For everyone else in the meeting, Cyril’s lack of pushback spoke to his troubled mind.

Of course he was troubled. Just as Saviz had no choice but to marry the head saint, Cyril had no choice but to marry the saint who was next in line. He could assume said saint would be little different from Priscilla. That thought depressed him…though it seemed he himself wasn’t fully aware of the source of his ennui.

Cyril had long held lofty ideals when it came to saints. None could argue against their miraculous ability to heal wounds on the battlefield. As someone who held his comrades and subordinates dear, Cyril naturally held saints in high esteem. Of course, his strict upbringing, as someone connected to the royal bloodline, only exacerbated all this. He learned from an early age that saints were sacred beings, and those teachings took root deep within him, permanently altering his worldview. Clarissa was right when she said

Cyril was unconsciously holding saints to a different standard. He couldn't help but interpret their every action in a positive light.

Cyril was too sharp for his own good. Too observant, too keen. Thus, deep in his heart lived a kernel of doubt that saints were not almighty beings worthy of respect. The disconnect between truth and belief tortured him.

At this uncharacteristic show of vulnerability, the other captains had but one thought:

Cyril is a good man. He deserves to be happy…but that'll probably be impossible if he weds a saint.

A man like Saviz could do what his position demanded of him without involving emotion, but Cyril likely couldn't.

As the mood in the room darkened, Clarissa spoke up cheerfully to clear the air. "When you think about it that way, Commander Saviz really seems amazing, doesn't he? He must hate saints, but he's able to hide that fact and marry one all the same. He has no expectations to begin with, so he won't be disappointed or expect anything from her. He'll treat her with decorum and live a peaceful life with her…on the surface, at least."

Desmond frantically waved his arms. "W-wait, wait, wait! Clarissa, that's all just your imagination! Commander Saviz has never once said anything about hating saints! So don't you dare go any further than that, you hear me?!"

"Clarissa may just be riffing," Zackary said with a shrug. "You wouldn't get so worked up if you didn't think it was true. It won't be a problem either way."

"Of course it won't be a problem!" Desmond said. "I'm just saying it's disrespectful for us to presume to know what Commander Saviz might think, okay?! Love is obviously a low priority for him! He's not the type to throw out a political marriage and marry out of love. He has no problem wedding someone chosen for him. He'll be satisfied so long as the country is functioning and his knights are well."

Desmond noticed then that everyone's glasses stood empty, so he signaled to the bartender at the counter for another round.

Zackary took the opportunity to change the subject. "Moving on… As things stand, the next queen might be from House Alcott. I'm far more interested in that, personally."

"Ah, right," Desmond said. "That's been His Majesty's wish for ten years now. Which means Lloyd must have adopted Saint Priscilla to fulfill his wish."

"Hey! You're presuming others' thoughts too!" Clarissa said. "… Wait! Doesn't that mean all the key figures from ten years ago will gather again? Ugh. I can only hope nothing bad happens…" Clarissa wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

Cyril's cool, distinguished voice reassured her. "Nothing bad will happen. At the very least, we won't allow tragedy to repeat itself."

The captains fell silent at the determination in his eyes.

The tragedies of ten years ago comprised a messy chain of events spurred on by complicated circumstances—and it all started

with the Lament of Sutherland. Cyril had felt responsible for all of it back then, and he still did today.

"So long as I am around, I shall not allow tragedy to repeat," he declared.

Many of the details behind the tragedies of ten years ago were not public, but the captains gathered in that room more or less knew what happened, and so they nodded without another word.

* * *

The mood darkened and the room fell silent after that.

Eventually, Desmond attempted to dispel the pall hanging over them. "Ah, right! I was in the middle of making my report on our visit to Duke Alcott's manor, wasn't I?"

Zackary, eager to clear the air as well, said, "Right, right! Go ahead and continue!"

"Well, Fia ate three pieces of dessert all by herself, if you'll believe it! Then Lloyd gave her even *more* dessert as a present! … Actually this probably isn't worth reporting, huh?"

It really wasn't. Everyone leveled flat looks at Desmond. He cleared his throat to gather himself before continuing.

"Anyway, we inquired about what Saint Priscilla thought of Fia joining her royal guard. She said non-saints weren't worth a second thought, so she didn't care about the color of her knights' hair."

"Ah… Interesting. That's very much an answer I'd expect from a high-ranking saint."

"But, hey, that's one thing we don't have to worry about anymore, right?"

The captains nodded at the news, everyone but Cyril casting a look at Kurtis.

"Good for you, Kurtis! It's looking like a done deal that you and Fia will be part of a saint's royal guard."

Kurtis blinked at this round of congratulations. "Royal guard, huh…"

His mind flashed to the sort of environment he and Fia would work in. If they had to protect the head saint, then they would likely meet with many other saints as well. That was just the sort of place where his Lady Fi should be.

Why, he himself used to serve in a royal guard three hundred years ago, so the idea dredged up sentimental memories.

His thoughts wandered to the captain of that royal guard he'd served in—a man he'd respected greatly, a man second only to his own master. Now that he was slated to become a royal guard captain himself, it only made the deeds and bearing of his old captain all the more impressive to think back on.

"I am not without my own thoughts on the matter, but…I humbly accept my post," Kurtis said.

Desmond lifted an eyebrow. "Huh. I thought you'd put up more of a fight."

Kurtis raised his chin and met Desmond's gaze. "The healing magic saints possess is something truly special. I'm sure those with the gift would come to understand the joy of healing others if only they witnessed the proper path of a saint. Our utter lack of someone capable of demonstrating this path has resulted in the situation we find ourselves in now."

Lady Fi can show them, he thought. *Hence, it is only right that she and I be assigned to the head saint's royal guard.*

"Wow, you're even more of a dreamer when it comes to saints than Cyril!" Desmond said with genuine admiration. "Talk about purehearted. I don't honestly believe that what you hope for will ever come true, but I'll be cheering you on, man!" He then turned to Cyril. "Good for you, eh, Cyril? You've got a fellow saint fan now."

Cyril grimaced but did not reply. Instead, he pointed at the bar. "I've requested a special drink for you all."

A line of glasses sat on the counter, all filled with liquor and decorated with a slice of fruit. The thick-bottomed glasses seldom saw any use.

Confused, Desmond asked, "What's so special about them?"

Cyril smiled. "At yesterday's meeting, I announced we would dispatch some captains to visit the Cathedral. They were to report the appearance of a demon and collect the box it's sealed in. You might recall I also said I would directly confer with those chosen for this task on the following day. Well, it is now the following day."

Everyone suddenly stood up straighter. No one could miss that word Cyril had used—*confer*. That seemed to imply there was room

for negotiation before he announced who would go. In other words, this was their moment to bargain.

The captains mulled over this turn of events before one finally spoke up.

"I don't want to go to the Cathedral, but it beats being sent to receive the current head saint, the Queen Dowager, by a mile! Pick me to go to the Cathedral!" Naturally, it was Quentin who broke the silence, blurting out his intentions with idiotic honestly.

The other captains noted his sincerity and followed suit.

Being of similarly lax character, Zackary spoke next. "My Sixth Knight Brigade has an unusually high ratio of men for some reason. Therefore, I cannot pick up on the subtleties of women. Meanwhile, the Queen Dowager has been living off in her own palace with only women for many years while managing saints and all that. A boorish man like me has no hope of comprehending a delicate lady like her. For everyone's sake, it is better if I'm not sent to receive her."

Though he was roundabout with it, Zackary expressed essentially the same thing Quentin had: "I don't wanna go receive the Queen Dowager!"

Cyril ignored their pleas as he continued. "There are currently seven captains in this room. However, I obviously cannot leave the royal capital, and Kurtis will be busy forming his royal guard…"

Desmond noticed that only five glasses sat on the bar, which matched perfectly with their numbers if they excluded Cyril and Kurtis. That could only mean that Cyril intended to use these glasses to make the choice.

If they could reduce seven down to five, then why shouldn't they reduce five down to four? Thinking fast, Desmond raised his hand and frantically shouted, "Me too! I can't leave the royal capital either! Not only are we picking a new head saint, but we'll be welcoming the Queen Dowager! We'll likely have more people visiting the royal capital than ever, so royal castle security needs to be tight!"

In this instance, his position as the captain in charge of royal castle security offered him some leverage.

"Oh my. It's the same for me. I have a duty to keep the royal capital secure!" Clarissa chimed in.

Enoch, who had been utterly silent up until then, said, "If I really wish to, I can go a whole month without speaking a word to anybody. Do you really think someone as reticent as myself is fit to work with either the Cathedral or the Queen Dowager?"

It was a strange threat, implying he was too antisocial to perform certain duties. The other captains silently agreed that Enoch should at least learn how to socialize like a normal human being.

Cyril sighed at this cacophony of excuses. "…I understand."

Everyone stared at him, holding their breath in anticipation of his next words. With a troubled look, he shook his head.

"*Everyone* present is *equally* important to our country. There's no way I could possibly choose between you all."

That came as no surprise. Of course he would proceed with his plan and ignore their pleas.

"…Desmond, Clarissa, Enoch, Quentin, Zackary. Of you five, two will go to the Cathedral, and three will receive the Queen Dowager. Commander Saviz has entrusted me with the selection of which of our proud captains will go where, but as it seems *impossible* for me to choose, I think it best for you all to choose for yourselves."

Waiters swept in to deliver the glasses at the bar to each of the five captains in question.

Cyril gestured at the glasses. "Go ahead and choose whichever you like. Each glass contains a different fruit. Those without seeds in their fruit will go to the cathedral. Those with seeds in their fruit will receive the Queen Dowager. Oh, and don't worry. I'll have your schedules set up so all five of you will never be out of the capital at once."

The five captains stood up and, with deathly serious expressions, sized up the glasses. Of course, none of them could tell which might contain what. Cyril had prepared these drinks himself, after all. He would not take on such a task carelessly.

"No hard feelings, everyone. The method Cyril prepared is impartial." Zackary selected a glass.

"I like how you assigned more to the Queen Dowager than the Cathedral. You already know which of the two will be more demanding!" Complaining all the while, Clarissa took a glass.

"Please, I'm begging you! I've worked hard for the world! The people! Let me get a lucky break just this once! You know I deserve it!" Pleading, Desmond took a glass.

“Desmond, this all comes down to luck. Your actions so far have no bearing on this whatsoever.” Utterly calm, Quentin made his choice.

“Last but not least. Here’s hoping.” With his head down as though in prayer, Enoch claimed the last glass.

Cyril raised his drink and faced everyone. “All of heaven and earth are with the Náv Black Dragon Knights!”

In unison, everyone but Kurtis replied, “All of heaven and earth are with the Náv Black Dragon Knights!”

They downed their drinks in one go. Not long after, three of them crunched on seeds.



Chapter 46:
Reason for Being Assigned to the First Knight Brigade

A WEEK HAD PASSED since our visit to Duke Alcott's manor. After finishing our morning drills, I called out to Fabian.

"Fabian! It's been a while. That visit to the duke's place was nerve-racking, huh? I was so nervous that my stomach kept me up all night afterward! It looks like Captain Cyril and Captain Desmond drank all night with the other captains after that, though. They sure are built different!"

Fabian tilted his head quizzically. "That stomach pain is likely your own doing, don't you think? You mentioned you ate half of that tart you received from Duke Alcott that same evening, and I recall you ate a full dinner in the dining hall. Chances are you simply ate yourself sick."

My eyes went wide with realization. *Wow. Fabian's really observant of me, huh? And he's quite the sleuth, to boot.*

"You know, you might be right. I thought it was the nerves from visiting the duke's manor, but maybe not."

"If you ask me, you didn't seem the slightest bit nervous when we were visiting the duke…"

"H-huh? Uhh, I didn't? Then, uh…I guess I really did eat too much."

That's strange. It's almost like Fabian understands me better

than I understand myself! Jeez. What does that say about me?

I needed to change the subject before he hit me with any more realizations, so I threw out a question that had been burning in my brain for the past week. "By the way, do you know why Captain Cyril and Captain Desmond both tagged along on our visit? I figured they had something important they wanted to discuss, but they didn't really say anything."

Fabian laughed. "Who knows? Maybe they just wanted to spend some time with you. Or maybe they wanted to keep watch and make sure you didn't get too friendly with the duke."

"Oh, get real, Fabian." I scowled at him. "The fact that you're trying to tease me means you definitely know something. My intuition tells me the duke has something against saints. Do you know anything about that?"

His eyes went wide. "Incredible, Fia. I can't believe you picked up on that in such a short amount of time, especially from such an aloof, unreadable man like the duke. That's impressive."

"Aha! So you *do* know something!"

Fabian treated me like any other friend, but he was actually heir to a high-ranking noble family. As such, he had to know something about Duke Alcott.

Fabian raised his hands in surrender. With a troubled look, he said, "Everything I know is mere speculation, but it's likely that the incident from ten years ago is weighing on the duke's mind. No one involved will speak on the details, and they're all of high station, so the whole matter ended without any meaningful investigation." He

paused there, choosing his next words carefully. “I do not particularly enjoy making claims without concrete proof. It’s no better than spreading rumors.”

“I understand. Please, continue if you can.” I bobbed my head, urging him along.

Fabian sighed and looked up at the sky. With some resignation, he continued. “Right… Let’s see. The duke had a sister by the name of Colette who was one year younger than him. She passed away ten years ago, as you know. The thing is, she was with other saints at the time, so…I assume the duke might believe that they could have saved her.”

“Ah…”

“You remember how we discussed that there are some saints who try to preserve their magic as much as they can, never using it outside of their duties? It’s my belief that Duke Alcott thinks his sister could have been saved if the saints weren’t so unwilling to use their magic. He has likely borne a grudge against saints ever since.”

“Oh my… That’s awful.” Imagining how he must have felt dragged down my mood.

From the duke’s perspective, healing magic’s ability to cure wounds and disease without a trace must have seemed miraculous. In truth, saints weren’t all-capable. There were many things we couldn’t do. Just as I couldn’t do anything about the curse placed on Cerulean, there were some saints who couldn’t heal serious wounds or diseases. In fact, given how much healing magic had deteriorated over the

years, I doubted there were more than a dozen or so saints out there who could heal grave wounds and illnesses.

Dejected, I said, "I wasn't there myself, so I don't know how bad off the duke's sister was, but it's not like saints can heal any and everything."

I trailed off into silence. I was sure the saints tried everything they could to save her. It must have felt terrible when even their best effort was not enough. They didn't deserve to be criticized. But I could still understand Duke Alcott wishing the saints had done more for his sister.

Trying to raise my spirits, Fabian said, "Yeah, you're right. Only those involved know what really happened, and even then, everyone has their own perspective, so we may never know the whole truth. But the duke and Lady Colette were close, so accepting her death must've been hard for him. Perhaps he needs someone to blame it on."

"…Yeah."

…But Duke Alcott seems wise. He doesn't strike me as the type to avert his eyes from reality just because it hurts.

While I was thinking, Fabian addressed my initial question. "As for why Captain Cyril and Captain Desmond came along with us on our visit, it was probably to size up Saint Priscilla."

"Huh? For what?"

"The next head saint will be selected soon. Saint Priscilla is looking like the likeliest candidate, so they probably wanted to see

what kind of person she is."

Ah, so Priscilla really is a strong saint. But if they're picking a new *head saint, then that must mean there's a current one, right?*

"Hey, Fabian, who's the current head saint?" I asked.

His eyebrows climbed up toward his hairline. "Why, Her Majesty the Queen Dowager Hyacinthe, of course, His Majesty the King and Commander Saviz's mother."

"Huh? Oh, r-right!"

Come to think of it, the royal family do all have to marry saints. So that means Cerulean and Commander Saviz's mother is a saint, huh? Wow!

I was still contending with the shock, but meanwhile Fabian wore a dreamy look.

"Minstrels the world over sing of her, Náv's great 'Healing Flower.' Our kingdom's proud saint, adored by all. Beautiful and kind, her healing powers can cure anything."

I see, I see. I wouldn't have guessed it from how twisted our little king is, but…

"No wonder Commander Saviz is so noble and elegant!" I said. "I've always wondered how you raise someone like him, but now it makes sense. He was raised by the 'Healing Flower' herself, huh?"

Talk about a nice title, though. I wonder if I ever received a title like that?

As though reading my mind, Fabian said, "You have a wonderful moniker yourself, Fia. The 'Tubby Savior' sounds far more capable

than the ‘Healing Flower.’”

“Fabiaaaan!” I whined.

He laughed and said, “Sorry, sorry. I couldn’t resist, but I really do think it’s impressive that your fellow knights have taken to calling you ‘Savior.’ You sound far more reliable than some distant, unseen ‘Healing Flower.’” He grinned impishly. “At any rate, I have a feeling you and I will both be serving a new ‘Healing Flower’ soon.”

“Huh?” I tilted my head to one side.

He laughed wryly. “Honestly, Fia… There’s such a stark gap between the things that catch your interest and the things that don’t. Have you never once thought about why we were assigned to the First Knight Brigade, despite it traditionally requiring at least ten years of experience to enter?”

“It’s because our performance on the entrance test was just that great, right?” I answered proudly.

He blinked in surprise. “…Ah. What a thought. I wonder how well one would need to perform to match ten years’ worth of experience. You’re really something to believe you did *that* well, Fia.”

* * *

I stared at Fabian, reeling with sudden realization. *Come to think of it, I might not have actually done* that *well on the entrance test.* On the last part of the test in particular, after inflicting paralysis on my brother Ardio, all I did was watch him for three whole minutes.

I found it a bit hard to believe the examiners would grade me highly for standing around. …*Uhh, so why did I think I did so well in the first place?*

"Actually, you know what, Fabian? I think it might not actually be my entrance test that got me into the First Knight Brigade, after all. I mean, was my performance really comparable to a veteran knight of ten years? It's unlikely, right?"

Fabian nodded. "Right. I thought the same. Of course, there's no way I'd have done that well either, which means there has to be a different reason for our assignment to the First Knight Brigade."

I stroked my lips as I mulled it over. Fabian was putting himself on the same level as me, but I could swear someone had told me that Fabian's scores on the entrance tests were the first full marks in years. I'd even heard he graduated top of his class from knight training school. *Wow… To think such an elite person really exists,* I thought with wonder. *And he's…he's standing right next to me!*

"Your ever-changing facial expressions are so fun to watch, Fia. Would you care to share what you're thinking?"

"I heard you got the highest score on the entrance tests," I said. "Wouldn't it make sense for that to be the reason you got assigned to the First Knight Brigade?"

He slumped his shoulders as though disappointed that I knew this about him. "…Yes, that's likely the case. The reasons for my assignment are so banal compared to yours."

"Huh? Banal? What are you talking about? That's incredible! It means you scored high enough to be equal to a knight with ten years

of experience!" I exclaimed.

He laughed. "That'd be impossible. I was selected for my score, yes, and my family background and trustworthiness too, I'm sure. But I wasn't selected specifically for the First Knight Brigade. Rather, I'm a chaperone of sorts for you, or so I believe."

"Huh? My…chaperone?"

"Right. I suspect you were originally the only knight among the recruits assigned to the First Knight Brigade. They must've worried you'd be intimidated, so they picked the recruit who was the least likely to cause a problem, me, to work alongside you. Not once have I seen you look the slightest bit intimidated since joining, however. If anything, you brazenly do whatever you please, causing problems wherever you go. That's why I believe the word 'chaperone' is fitting here."

…That's a terrible thing to say, I thought as I glowered at him.

"Heh, but I haven't once stopped any of your chaos, so I'd say I've failed in my duties as your chaperone," he said.

No, that's…not what I'm mad about.

He couldn't hear my thoughts, of course, and continued to explain. "As Captain Desmond said yesterday at Duke Alcott's manor, the church holds red hair in high esteem. That's why someone with red hair is always assigned to a high-ranking saint. I believe you were allowed into the First Knight Brigade on a special exception because of your uncommon, exceptionally red hair—as well as the fact that you are close in age to the high-ranking saint you'll be serving."

"Wait, do you really think I'll be serving a high-ranking saint?"

"Absolutely," he said. "A high-ranking saint will need knights soon, and I believe you'll be one of those knights because of your hair. You might not have noticed, but the First Knight Brigade has many capable, red-haired knights. However, none of them have hair as vibrantly red as yours."

"Wait, we do? Wow, I didn't notice at all." My eyes shot wide. Though the two of us were working the same job, Fabian was so much more observant. I wondered just how he did it.

Fabian smiled. "Anyway, I believe at this rate, you—and, by extension, me—will be assigned to protect that saint. Of course, there'll be others, many with red hair, I imagine."

"I had no idea. Do you know who this saint will be?" There were probably many high-ranking saints out there—too many for me to narrow it down.

Fabian rolled his eyes. "I thought you would piece things - together by now, but alas… It'll be the newly selected head saint, Fia."

"Oooh, I see!"

Right. He did *just tell me a new head saint would be chosen.*

"You said Saint Priscilla was the likeliest candidate for the position, right?" I said. "Oh, so Captain Cyril and Captain Desmond went with us to check out the future head saint they might have to protect! I get it now."

So that's why those two busy bees made time to come along, huh? What Fabian said about the two of them "sizing up" Priscilla

makes sense now!

"Hee hee," I laughed. "No matter who becomes head saint, I'm looking forward to working security! If the head saint needs her own knights for protection, does that mean she'll be going to dangerous places?"

Fabian grimaced. "Ah… Yeah, I should've expected this, but you really don't get it, huh?"

"Get what?"

He grinned wryly and said, "We are knights of the First Knight Brigade. We protect royalty and royalty alone. Sometimes we protect foreign VIPs, but even then they will usually be royalty of some sort."

"Hm? But aren't the only two members of the royal family right now? His Majesty the King and Commander Saviz?" A flash of insight hit me. "Wait, but we were just talking about their mother, who's still alive… Is Her Majesty the Queen Dowager not part of the royal family?"

Fabian nodded. "That's right. Her Majesty the Queen Dowager has a standing equal to that of the royal family. Similarly, I believe the new head saint will be someone whose status in comparable to the royal family." He paused to consider his next words. "Commander Saviz is still unmarried at twenty-seven. The marriageable age for most noblemen and royalty is from eighteen to twenty-five, so he's quite a bit behind. Moreover, he is the king's younger brother and, as such, is first in line to the throne. The royal family's greatest duty is to continue their line, so it is unusual for him to remain unmarried for so long."

"Ah! Y-you think maybe he has a secret lover from a different social class?!"

Fabian shot that idea down immediately. "While that is a romantic thought, no. Commander Saviz is probably waiting for Saint Priscilla to reach adulthood. It has been tradition for Náv's kings to make the strongest saint of the time their queen, and we found out that Saint Priscilla has exceptional powers more than ten years ago."

"Oooh, I see."

So he's been waiting ten years for a girl. That's romantic enough, I suppose.

I nodded to myself, even as Fabian frowned. He seemed to be holding something back, but continued on anyway. "Saint Priscilla will turn seventeen next year, a marriageable age. If she's selected as the head saint, I presume she'll quickly get an invite to the royal castle and be wed to Commander Saviz. They'll form a new royal guard just for her, and they will likely choose both you and me for that royal guard."

His explanation left me with one final, burning question. "Why does she have to be seventeen to get married? It's not like girls can't get married sooner, right? In fact, many royalty and nobility do."

"Ah, that's a rule imposed by the saints. They don't let their saints marry until they're seventeen. As for why, I don't know, but apparently they decided that three hundred years ago."

"Oh… Captain Cyril mentioned something like that, yeah."

I faintly recalled Cyril talking about something along those lines back when he was telling me about his mother. No such rule existed when I was a saint back in my previous life. They must have established this rule sometime after my death.

"Thank you for filling me in, Fabian. This is exciting! A new royal guard is being formed for the new head saint!"

And I'm going to be part of it? Talk about a load of responsibility!

I balled up my hands to gather my courage. "At any rate, the fact that the commander is marrying is news worthy of celebration!"

After all, this meant the "curse" hanging over the captains and the commander was now broken. Despite being such high earners, *all* of the captains in the knight brigades were single. And since their direct superior, Saviz, was also single, people often joked that the big shots of the knight brigades were all cursed to remain unwed.

Commander Saviz is finally breaking that curse! I thought with a huge grin.

"Indeed," Fabian said. "However, Commander Saviz is terribly popular among women, so if word gets out, women the kingdom over will shed tears. …Though, I'm sure the knights will shed even more tears."

Ah, yeah, they totally would. There was probably nobody who loved Saviz more than the knights of the brigade. Though their excessive adoration might creep me out if I were Saviz…

"Yeah, I'm sure even the manliest of knights would burst into tears!"

I don't wanna see any of that myself. All right, I think I'll stay away from other knights as much as I can around the time the commander gets married!

Ever-blessed with foresight, I started planning ahead.

Chapter 47:
Jester Apprentice

COMMANDER SAVIZ getting married is great news! This calls for celebration! But how should we celebrate with him?

"Oh, of course! This is a job just for me!"

I clapped my hands as a flash of inspiration struck me. Generally, the youngest knights had to provide the entertainment at events. I was fifteen years old, and most of my fellow knights in the First Knight Brigade were veterans with at least a decade of service under their belts, so I was among the youngest by a long shot. Hence, the duty of providing entertainment fell on my shoulders.

I thought deeply before clapping again, having figured out my plan.

Hesitantly, Fabian said, "Fia, may I ask what you're thinking?"

"Of course!" I replied exuberantly. "I've come up with a super great idea! Commander Saviz getting married is big news, right? So there's definitely going to be a massive celebration with all the knight brigades for him!"

"Right."

"And fathere'll be all kinds of entertainments for him!"

"Right."

"It's customary for the youngest knights to put on the entertainment, so I was thinking I would come up with a performance

or something to celebrate his marriage!”

“…I see.” Despite nodding along up until then, Fabian drew his brows together now.

“Brilliant, right? Anyway, do you remember those three court jesters from when you met with His Majesty? Maybe I’ll go ask them to make me their apprentice for this thing!”

“…Is that wise? I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t see that panning out well at all. No, let me be clear. I think you should *absolutely* reconsider.”

Figuring he just wanted me to invite him, I said, “Of course, I was thinking you could join me on this project, Fabian.”

He recoiled. “H-huh?! Oh, um, I am, er, honored you would make that offer but, uh…the one Commander Saviz sparred against during the entrance ceremony was you, right? That means you two share some special bond. I couldn’t possibly intrude on that, so I think I’ll have to skip on becoming the apprentice of those court jesters!”

After spewing all that in a single breath, he claimed he had some urgent business to attend to and scurried away.

I watched him go with exasperation. *Good grief, Fabian. Don’t you want to put on a good show for Saviz?*

The three court jesters were top-tier. The skills I would learn from them would not only be good for Saviz’s celebration but for other aspects of my life. I grinned at my own brilliance.

“Heh, heh, heh. I’ve gotta be careful ’cause there’s no doubt they’ll try to scout me as their fourth member once they get a load of

me! I'm a born entertainer, after all!"

With a broad smile, I made straight for the king's office.

Cerulean had invited me to his office numerous times since my first meeting with the king just ten days ago. I always made up some excuse to decline, assuming the meeting would be a pain, but I had a good reason to make the visit now.

As I approached the king's office, some familiar knights standing guard outside greeted me.

"Oh, Fia! Ha ha, I heard you've become a favorite of the court jesters! We've been told you're allowed to come and go from His Majesty's office as you please—to see the court jesters, that is!"

"You put on a really good show for His Majesty and the jesters during your audience! You even called one of the jesters 'His Majesty,' you madwoman! The jesters really adored your bold joke."

"Everyone watching was all like, 'What is Fia doing?!' at the time, but we get it now! Nicely done!"

…Rude. It seems they've come to some weird conclusions in order to explain away my actions.

I forced a smile, and the knights let me through. I found only Cerulean and Dolly in the room. Leon and the king must have been elsewhere.

Cerulean sat at the king's desk writing something. He looked up when I came in, then grinned sarcastically. "Well, well, well. If it isn't the ever-busy Fia. I've invited you three, four times even, and you've

turned me down every time with a one-word reply: ‘Busy.’ You’ve got some nerve.”

I covered my mouth with a hand, then laughed like a refined lady. “Oho ho ho. What’s so strange about turning down an invitation from a court jester?”

He threw down his pen and rested his chin on his arm, exasperated. “…Honestly, I can’t believe you claimed I’m your ‘beloved monarch’ with an attitude like that.” He sighed. “You cut it close, by the way. If you didn’t show up by noon, I was going to tell Laurence to make you my personal knight.”

“What?! Who do you think you are, the king?!” I exclaimed, shocked by his tyrannical words.

“Yeah?”

Well, I mean, yeah, you are… But you said yourself that you were trying to pass as a court jester! To make sure he couldn’t abuse his authority over me, I said, “Oh, Cerulean, you’re so silly. You’re just a court jester, *remember*?”

“…You’re something incredible, Fia.”

That didn’t seem like a compliment, but I took the words at face value regardless.

“Then maybe you’d be willing to teach my incredible self a few things?” I said.

“Like what?” he replied warily.

“Take me in as your jester apprentice!” I said.

He scrunched up his nose. “Apprentice? Didn’t I say the other day that I would have made you one of us if you weren’t already a favorite of Saviz and Cyril’s? If anything, you should join us as a full-fledged court jester.”

“Respectfully, I decline. Becoming a real jester is too much for me. Make me your apprentice!”

He shot a look at Dolly, who stood up with a grin and headed into the neighboring room. Then Cerulean continued as if nothing had happened.

“Hmph. At any rate, this is good timing. Dolly’s really taken with you and has been making a costume for you to wear. He works fast, so he might even be done already.”

Bug-eyed, I said, “H-huh? What? Why? Wait, don’t tell me you’re going to make me dress in one of *those* costumes?!”

There wasn’t a single teen girl in the world who would be caught dead dressing like a jester. No way would I let that happen.

Cerulean grinned. “Ah, these costumes aren’t so bad. If you’d just wear it once, you’d probably find you quite like it. Just wearing this frees you from any and all status and responsibility. But let’s put that aside for now. The costume we have for you isn’t a jester’s. Dolly was in charge of the design, and he apparently doesn’t see you as much of a jester.”

“Thank goodness! He’s got great sense!” Fortunately, Dolly’s discerning eye saved me from having to wear one of their dreadful jester outfits.

Dolly spoke up as he returned from the other room. “Oh my! You’re too kind. I have a feeling the two of us will get along swimmingly. This here is the costume I made just for you, dear.” He held out a gaudy garment.

“Hwuh? B-but isn’t this…” Overwhelmed, I flailed for words.

Dolly was holding a red-and-white dress accented with tasteful frills. It was cute, but…

“Hee hee. That’s riiiight! This is a saint costume,” he explained. “The saints long to have hair like yours, Fia. That’s why you absolutely must play the role of a saint. You possess vibrant red hair that outshines even the highest-ranked saints, and yet you yourself are not a saint. It’s as though your very existence serves to mock them.”

I blinked a few times as the words echoed in my head, far too familiar.

* * *

“Wait… Duke Alcott?” For some reason, the duke’s name sprang to my mind the moment Dolly spoke. I could swear he’d said the same thing Dolly just did, but the two of them were complete opposites—the length of their hair, their appearances, even their voices were different. I stared hard, trying to sort out what about the effeminate Dolly nagged at me so.

…Hmm, his jester makeup is perfect, so I can’t really discern his face shape, but if he removed his gaudy yellow eye shadow, wiped

away the wing pattern under his eyes, and cut his hair… Huh?! I mentally removed Dolly's makeup and changed his hair, and lo and behold, Duke Alcott stood before me. Shocked, I exclaimed, "W-wait, you're Duke Alcott! What the heck are you doing here?!"

It was absurd, simply absurd, for a high-ranking noble like him to pretend at being a court jester.

Dolly covered his mouth with a hand, but it didn't entirely hide his grimace. "Ooooh my! What's with this reaction? Don't tell me you *really* didn't know it was me?"

He shook his head, exasperated, but how was I supposed to know the duke and the jester were one and the same?! No one in their right mind would think a pillar of the kingdom would dress up as a court jester. And yet, not only was a duke doing just that, so was the king himself. Just what was going on with this country?

"Uh, is this kingdom going to be okay?" My thoughts slipped out before I could contain them.

"The kingdom's fiiiine," Dolly said. "It's not like the world's going to grind to a halt if a few people are absent. A replacement handles my dukely duties while I'm gone, so it's fiiiine."

Uhhh, should one of our kingdom's proud dukes really be so carefree? I looked to Cerulean—the king—for help, but he seemed like he had given up this fight long, long ago. *C-Cerulean?! This is one thing you should not give up on!*

Apparently disinterested, Cerulean moved on. "Anyway, Fia, you clearly don't want to become a court jester, so what makes you want to become a jester apprentice?"

Oh, right! The shock of Dolly actually being Duke Alcott was so great that I almost forgot, but I was here to become a jester apprentice.

I set the Dolly issue aside for the moment. "Well, you said yourself that you were quite up there for court jesters, so—"

"What? I said no such thing. What I said was that *we* court jesters were up there."

"Same thing! You just phrased it differently."

He shook his head. "No, no. I was talking about our positions in the kingdom. All three of us court jesters stand at the top of the kingdom."

"Huh? All *three* of you guys? Including Leon?"

Mind reeling, I frantically recalled Leon's face. In my mind, I removed the cat ears, the stars drawn under his eyes and on his nose, and—*ohhhhhhh!*

"Y-you're kidding?! That serious-looking Duke Balfour?!"

The face left in my mind was that of Duke Balfour, whom I had assumed was just an ordinary person. Quite a reasonable assumption, I might add. In truth, he couldn't be much further from reasonable. He spent most of his time disguised and playing around as a court jester.

Shocked, I covered my mouth with both hands and compared my mental image of the two dukes against their court jester counterparts. Even knowing the truth now, I found it hard to believe they were the same people. The images simply didn't match up. The

dukes completely altered their usual body language and distinguished their tone and speech patterns from their regular selves. It must've taken a lot of work to create such complete disguises, but I couldn't help but feel like a duke would be better off directing that effort into something more meaningful. Putting that aside for now…

"Is this country really all right?! Why are the king and two dukes of one of the continent's greatest nations disguising themselves as court jesters?!"

This is absurd! Just absurd! This can't possibly bode well for the country's stability!

"Aaaah, I see disaster in our kingdom's future!" I exclaimed, clutching my head. *I'm no prophet, but anyone can foresee a ruin this obvious!*

"It's fiiiine. Relax," Cerulean said. "Even if we made a mess of things, Saviz and Cyril would get everything back on track, I'm sure."

"So irresponsible!"

You're no better than Dolly! I knew Saviz and Cyril were the pillars of the Knight Brigades, but to think that they're expected to prop up the kingdom itself as well. Talk about mean.

"Cerulean," I said, "you can't go causing problems for your younger sibling. Though he may be commander of the knight brigades, it was originally *your* duty to protect him as the older brother."

His eyes went wide at that. "Huh?"

"What're you going 'huh' for?!" I said. "You *are* his older brother, right? What's so strange about an older brother looking after his own sibling?"

Surely, most people considered that completely normal. Not that either of my two older brothers ever looked out for me, but I still thought it was a wonderful thing for a family to support one another!

After some thinking, Cerulean nodded. "…Yeah, you might be right."

Had he seriously *only just* grasped this idea? I glared as the suspicion that he'd never done anything brotherly in his entire life crept up on me.

His rush of excuses only served to prove my point.

"It's not what you think, Fia!" he protested. "I've been careful in my own way not to cause problems for Saviz! He's got it together way better than me. With my growth reversing, I've come to rely on him for even the most trivial of things."

"Yeah, Commander Saviz is really reliable," I agreed with a nod.

His expression clouded. "Yeah, but now that I think about it, he wasn't always like that. He used to laugh more, get angry, show emotion. He wasn't the type to try and shoulder everything by himself."

"I'm sure." Saviz projected an image of perfect reliability, but it would be a bit scary if he had been that way as a child too!

"Fia, I… As shameful as it is to admit, when my age first began to reverse, I lost all hope to go on. I came to hate everything and

abandoned my responsibilities. When my head finally cooled, I found my brother had shouldered everything I had tossed aside, but he became a taciturn and solemn man as a result."

It sounded to me like Saviz had changed who he was to grow stronger and support Cerulean. He loved his knights dearly, so surely he loved his brother just as much.

Cerulean's smile was half a grimace. "He must have resolved to protect the kingdom's future in place of his useless brother. Times of sudden crisis reveal one's true nature. I chose to run from my responsibilities, but he chose to take them on."

I dared not interrupt this suddenly serious and somber confession.

He lifted his face and met my gaze. "If I were to run away, the only one who would fill my shoes is Saviz. He's the type of person who can stand strong against anything. I should have known better. I should have known my responsibilities would fall on him. I didn't stop to think back then, and now I've burdened him with so much. …What can I even do for him now?"

Though he didn't say it outright, the responsibilities he mentioned probably had to do with them being royalty. Since he temporarily abandoned those royal duties, Saviz shouldered them for him.

What Cerulean said about Saviz resolving to protect the kingdom's future in his place made it seem like these responsibilities were something even *bigger*. It sounded almost as if Saviz would take over as king for him.

I narrowed my eyes in thought.

Cerulean sighed and said, "Well, that's for me to sort out. I still have time, so I'll try to do something for him before I force everything onto him for good. That said, he has Cyril as his capable right-hand man, so he might be fine already."

Yup. Cyril's amazing, I thought with a nod.

Cerulean began to boast about his own close aides, as though this was some sort of competition. "I have Dolly and Leon, two capable and kind men who became court jesters just to stay with me!"

"Huh? *That's* why they became court jesters?" I said.

"Well, why else would they?" he asked. "The three of us have been friends since we were children. They probably couldn't stand idly by as I started to grow younger."

He said it like it was completely normal, but dukes disguising themselves as court jesters was anything but normal. For them to go to such lengths to be by his side showed just how much they cared for him. *Aww, how sweet!*

Cerulean squirmed and changed the subject. "I rambled a little there, but what I was trying to say is that we royal court jesters consist of the kingdom's own king and dukes. Meaning we are the elite of the elite! Now, what is it that you want from a group as prestigious as us?"

I played along with his attempt to shift the mood away from dour thoughts. "I wish to become your apprentice and polish my performance arts skills! I want to give a performance that'll make

everyone go ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ when we celebrate Commander Saviz’s marriage!”

The shock of learning the truth of the court jesters’ identities wouldn’t sway me from my goal. Yet when I stated my wish, Cerulean and Dolly both raised their eyebrows at me.

“Oh my,” Dolly said. “I didn’t expect an answer like that. Despite being a member of our kingdom’s illustrious knight brigades, you sure come up with some rather *peculiar* ideas, Fia.”

“Yeah. I get that you respect Saviz, but this is quite unexpected. You realize you’re going to be performing in front of many knights, right?”

Beneath the skepticism, Cerulean sounded deeply moved, which gave me an idea: What if he joined me? I mean, Saviz definitely liked his older brother, so seeing Cerulean celebrating his marriage should make him happy.

“Cerulean, how about putting on a performance with me?”

* * *

“Huh? You want me to join you?” His eyes shot wide.

I nodded. “Yeah! You’re Commander Saviz’s older brother! You probably want to congratulate him more than anyone!”

Flustered, he said, “Well, of course! And I intend to! I’ve been gathering rare foreign swords, armor, and magic stones for him for a while now!”

All of that did seem like stuff Saviz would enjoy, but surely Cerulean wanted to do even *more* for his younger brother?

I shook my head. "Things you can simply buy won't reach his heart! Feelings are what's important, Cerulean."

"Feelings?" He fluttered through rapid blinks.

"Swords and armor will one day break, but feelings are forever!" I said. "Put on a wonderful performance with me, and he'll never forget you and what you did for him."

Cerulean went quiet for a moment, clutching at his chest like his heart hurt—I must've struck a chord.

"He'll never forget me?" he murmured to himself.

"That's right!"

He covered his face with his hands, trembling as he sighed. "… You really say the damnedest things, Fia."

"D-do I?" My voice jumped up a pitch.

Cerulean lifted his face and grabbed both of my hands. "Your words have touched me. Let's do it! Let's give Saviz a performance he will never forget! I'll make him remember me forever and ever!"

"Cerulean!" I exclaimed, ecstatic.

From behind me, Dolly laughed. "Ah ha ha. It seems you two have come to an agreement, but you're forgetting something, Fia. I put my heart and soul into making this lovely costume here. Won't you be a dear and try it on for me?" he said while holding the saint costume up.

Cerulean snapped his fingers. “Oh, right! We were just discussing that. Talk about perfect timing. Fia, why don’t you try that on so we can go on a mini-quest?”

“Oooh. Why ‘mini?’” A quest sounded cool, but adding “mini” to it kinda dulled the effect.

With a sweet smile, Cerulean said, “A full-blown quest would take us to another country or even farther afield, right? So a mini-quest around town is just right! Let’s see how folks react to you in those clothes.”

“Sounds like a good idea!” This would be great practice for our performance before it came time for the real deal.

Cerulean handed me the saint costume. “Go ahead and change into this. It’d be weird if a knight and some jesters were walking around, but nobody should question you if you’re wearing this.”

“Right, riiight,” Dolly said. “And my dress will certainly look absolutely adorable on you. Oh, but I’m sure some knights will tag along regardless. I’ll make sure to tell them to keep their distance so they don’t spoil the mood.”

It seemed the pair of jesters wanted to head out immediately. Hurriedly, I tried to stop them. Of course I wanted to go to town with them—just when I had a day off, not today. “Um, hold on. I have to go guard His Majesty for the first time right after this! We’ll have to do this some other time.”

Cerulean and Dolly leveled weary looks at me.

"If it's a choice between me and Laurence, it should be obvious that you should prioritize guarding me," Cerulean said. "As our jester apprentice, you can guard me up close, Fia."

"Huh? Er, is that what we're doing?" This was starting to get out of hand as they dragged me along on their selfish, impromptu outing.

"It is!" he said with a nod. "Due to your excellence, you've been selected to protect the true king! Oh, and hey, do you remember how Saviz scolded me for embarrassing you, a promising young knight? Well, I've reflected on what I've done and I'm ashamed that you didn't get the recognition you deserve, despite being the best out of all the knights I interviewed."

"Aw, Cerulean." It was so sweet how he went out of his way to care for me, despite being a powerful ruler. What a chum. I had to admit it moved me a little.

He continued. "That's why I'm giving you an important job everyone will hear about. I'm gonna go to Cyril and tell him I've taken an interest in your skills and order you to be my personal guard!"

"Whaaat?!"

No way! I thought. *I'm just a fresh recruit, only starting to build experience. If he assigns me to protect Cerulean half for fun, I'll never improve as a knight! For the sake of my future, I have to shoot him down!*

"Um, Cerulean, I've only just become a full-fledged knight able to protect His Majesty and the commander, so I don't know about—"

"Is that right?" he cut in. "But if you were assigned to me, you'd be able to eat all you want in town and stop at any store you like, all during working hours. We could even sit down right in the middle of the street just to chat! You could do whatever you like! Since it's all in the name of guarding the king, Cyril won't be able to complain one bit!"

"Cerulean! Now that I really think about it, there's nothing more important than your safety! I would love to join you right away!"

But of course. Náv is a monarchy, and in a monarchy, the king's will is absolute! It's my duty to obey his whims. So although it may look *like I'm playing around…I'm simply following orders! Three cheers for the monarchy! I can worry about my self-improvement as a knight later.*

I snatched the dress out of his hands, suddenly eager to get going. "Wait one second. I'll get changed in a jiffy!"

I changed in the neighboring room. The dress looked really lovely—cuter than I could have imagined. Frilly lace decorated most of it, and the skirt billowed out, like something a well-to-do lady would wear. Modern-day saints wore white robes, so this red-and-white dress definitely deviated from the norm while still somehow feeling like something a saint would wear. There was even a hair accessory to top it off.

"The main color is red, huh? Is that all right?" I mused aloud. "I thought red was restricted as the 'Great Saint's color' or something like that… Then again, the red used here does look a bit dark. Maybe Dolly intends to claim it's just a reddish-brown?"

Satisfied with my rationalization, I exited the room to find Dolly waiting eagerly. He immediately showered me in praise.

"Oh my, Fia! You look wonderful! It's the advent of a most adorable saint! Oho ho ho, you're smaller than average and look quite young, so I figured the kind of dress young noble ladies like would suit you. It would seem I was right on the mark!"

Something about what he said irked me, but I set that aside just this once.

Cerulean smiled with satisfaction as well. Giddy, I twirled, spread my arms out, and made a rather saint-like pose.

"Feast your eyes, gentlemen! 'Tis I, the world's greatest saint, here to heal all your wounds with a flick of my wrist!"

Immediately, their expressions clouded over.

"…Yeah, that ain't it."

"Oh dear. She's an obvious sham the instant she opens her mouth. She has the red hair and the golden eyes, though. Perhaps it's better if she simply doesn't speak."

How mean! And you realize you're calling a real *saint a sham, right?! The two of you just don't have an eye for quality, honestly.*

They were already getting ready to leave. Thinking now was as good a time as any, I spoke my mind. "Hey, Cerulean. I've got an idea."

"…Is that right? Something tells me I'm not going to like it, but I'm a fair jester, so I'll hear you out."

There was nothing fair about deciding he wouldn't like something before even hearing it, but I swallowed my complaint and continued. "Well, I was thinking we could create some signals beforehand, in case something happens. Some gestures that mean 'we've got trouble!' or 'help me!'"

"Aren't those two things communicating basically the same thing?" the little nitpicker said, then shook his head. "I doubt you'd remember the signals if we actually ran into trouble."

Hm. Yeah, I wouldn't put that past me.

"Uhh, then how about we add one more thing as a last resort? If we're in real, real trouble, we can just talk in Lua."

This suggestion seemed to catch his attention. His eyes went wide. "…No way. You can't speak Lua, can you?"

Of course I can. I wouldn't have made that suggestion otherwise.

I let out a fancy lady laugh. "Oho ho ho. Of course I can. Lua is but child's play."

Doubtful, he switched to Lua and said, *"Liiiiar. Luuuaa reaaal haaard youuu knooow?"*

I burst out laughing at his ridiculous accent. "Ah ha ha ha! Cerulean, stop it! You're making me laugh!"

That's a jester for you. He really knows how to get a laugh out of someone!

"Whaaachu laughing abouuut? You shouuuld praiiise me for speaaaking this weeell. Wait, youuu understand? Youuu

understaaand, riiiight?"

Since he wouldn't stop even if I asked, I switched to Lua as well. *"'Youuu understaaand, riiiight?' Pfft! Ha ha ha ha! I just tried, but I can't do it with the accent like you! You're incredible, Cerulean!"*

Perhaps satisfied, he returned to speaking normally. "You're kidding. That's the first time I've heard someone speak Lua without an accent…" he muttered to himself as he slumped to the floor. His acting was a bit much, even for a jester.

Or so I thought, but Dolly wore a look of utter disbelief as well. He shook his head and said, "I thought knights were all brawn, but it seems Fia has an actual brain inside her too!"

Dolly is actually Duke Alcott, so he's got to know how smart Captain Cyril and Captain Desmond are, but he still calls us knights stupid? It appeared mocking knights had become second nature for him. As a knight myself, I wondered whether I should really go out with them, but… *Nah. It should be fine!*

* * *

"I can't believe I'm taking a stroll through town during working hours… This feels so immoral!" I murmured to myself as I eyed my surroundings. It had been a while since I'd last been to town.

Cerulean glanced over at me. "You're voicing your true thoughts there, Fia. If only you were so talkative when we were at Cyril's…"

I smiled stiffly. *Yeah right. Why should I risk stirring up the hornet's nest?* I recalled our visit to the First Knight Brigade captain's office only moments ago.

Originally, I was supposed to guard the king—the false king, that is—today, so Cerulean, Dolly, and I headed to Cyril to request a change in duties. For some inexplicable reason, however, Cyril's smile vanished the instant he laid eyes on me.

"Eeek!" Frightened, I leapt back three whole paces. *This man is terrifying… Truly terrifying.*

Cyril was handsome, but when he went all blank like that, he was downright scary. The gap between his smile and his empty-eyed appraisal sent shivers up my spine.

I froze like a frog being stared down by a snake. Cerulean glanced sideways at me, then briskly approached the captain and made his demand. "Cyril, we're heading into town. I'd like Fia to guard us, so change her schedule for me."

That's a real king for you! Without leaving room for Cyril to argue, he selfishly makes his demands. I watched, amazed, but Cyril was less amused. His lips curled.

"…I take it this isn't one of your jester jokes?"

Cerulean ignored Cyril's sarcastic tone and held fast to his demands. "Also, I've taken an interest in your talented and excellent Fia. Make her my personal guard for the time being."

Despite this direct order from the king, Cyril did not capitulate. He instead smirked and said, "You sure love your jokes. How is she supposed to guard you when she's not even wearing her knight uniform? It's almost as though you jesters simply want to play with her. But then again, what do I know?"

Dolly raised one judgmental eyebrow. "Are you saying she can't guard someone if she's not wearing her knight uniform? How absuuuurd. Such inflexible thinking will be your downfall one of these days."

"Perhaps, but not today." Cyril's expression turned unreadable. "Fia is only just starting her official duties. She should be observing the more experienced knights around her. If she spends her time playing with Cerulean instead, she'll miss her opportunity to grow into a fine knight."

What Cyril said was entirely reasonable. It was wonderful, even, that he was thinking about my future this way. I found myself so moved by his thoughtfulness that I staggered toward him without thinking.

But before I could reach him, Dolly grabbed my arm.

I looked at his hand on my arm and said, "H-huh? I feel like we've done this once before…"

When I glanced up, he wore a challenging smile. "Where are you going, Fia? You promised you would escort us through town today. Don't go breaking your promises now. I understand Cyril may be a smooth talker, but is becoming a 'fine knight' what you're really after?"

Dolly's words jolted me back to my senses. *Oh, right. I promised I would guard Cerulean today, which means someone will have to protect the king in my stead. The longer I dilly-dally, the longer it'll take to change around the assignments and the more trouble I'll cause for everyone!* Mostly to convince myself, I also thought, *Besides, I'm not going to town with Cerulean to play! It's to guard him! I'm doing my job!*

I appreciated Cyril's thoughtfulness, though, so I smiled at him with sincere thanks. But maybe I didn't get through to him, because he furrowed his brow in response.

He shook his head as though to collect himself, then looked at Dolly. "Listen carefully, Dolly. I understand you might have some misgivings toward knights, given Lloyd abandoned his dream of becoming one midway through the process, but not everyone loathes becoming a knight like he did. And while we're at it, I believe Fia is meant to be, and will one day become, a fine knight."

Ignoring that mention of his past, Dolly focused on my clothing. "Mm, I wonder about that. Just look at how she's dressed. Isn't she an adorable little saint? Fia's future is full of possibilities. Why should you decide what she'll become?"

"I do believe the fact she's here at all is proof *she's* chosen to be a knight." Cyril turned his gaze on me. "This is just another of Dolly's mean pranks, but I'll admit that the dress looks good on you, Fia. It's a shame I'm merely an ordinary captain with no right to speak against your reassignment, but I'm sure guarding Cerulean will grant you some experience in its own right. Please do your best."

"Y-yes, sir." If I interpreted his words literally, it sounded like he'd just complimented my dress, yet I didn't feel complimented at all.

Cyril, Cerulean, and Dolly were all fairly mild-mannered people on their own, so why was it that the three of them together made the atmosphere freeze over? I had no clue. But I did know that I wanted no part in whatever was going on between them, so I resolved to keep my mouth shut after that, saying only "yes, sir" or "no, sir" when appropriate.

Eventually, we managed to leave the First Knight Brigade captain's office and head into town, which brings us back to the present…

"Do you two and Captain Cyril not get along?" I asked as I walked with Cerulean and Dolly.

The three of us made our way toward the central plaza. My mind wandered as we walked, replaying that scene in Cyril's office.

Cerulean grinned wryly. "I like how you get straight to the point. Everyone in the royal castle hides their true intentions when they talk, always speaking in roundabout ways. It wastes time and makes it hard to grasp what people really want. Your frankness is a breath of fresh air."

"O-oh. Thank you?" I was just being curious, but somehow that earned their praise.

Cerulean saw my confusion and smiled, then hit me with something I never expected. "This is a secret between just you and

me, Fia, but I'm actually stepping down from the throne soon. I'm thinking of having Saviz take over as king."

"Whaaat?!" I actually leaped up in shock.

From what everyone had been saying, I assumed Cerulean would step down some day, but I figured that would be far, far in the future.

He shrugged and said, "I can only use a body double as my stand-in for so long. That's why we're having Saviz become king in my stead, but… Say, do you know what the Three Great Dukes are?"

"Uhh, I'm guessing they're three really great dukes?" I answered.

"Close enough. It's actually what we collectively call the dukes of the kingdom, of which there are only three. Two of them are aligned with me, and the third—Cyril—is aligned with Saviz. Each of our groups are seen as a separate political faction: the king's faction and the prince's. On the surface, our two factions get along fine, but there's actually one big issue we disagree on."

"Oh really?" Before I could ask, Cerulean moved on without elaborating.

"Yeah. We just can't see eye-to-eye on this one thing, and I get the feeling it shows in how we act around each other. Our difference in opinion will probably be apparent one day, and that's why I thought it best to distance our two factions from one another. So if we and Cyril look like we don't get along, it's partially an intentional effort, Fia."

"Wait, so what's going on?" I asked. He kept dancing around the issue with vague language.

"My faction is against something that Saviz's faction is for," he said. "I'm trying to distance our groups to make it clear where we both stand."

Even this rephrasing left me confounded.

"Hmmmm?" Was he leaving things vague to keep me in the dark? Well, at least I understood the bigger picture. "Is this about the saints?"

His eyes flew wide as he exclaimed, "Whaaat?!"

That reaction was answer enough.

"Going off of what you said, your faction is against the saints and Commander Saviz's faction is for them. Am I right?"

Cyril held a deep adoration for saints, though it left him conflicted. I didn't know Saviz that well, but I was sure he was the type who appreciated the selfless devotion saints showed. It made sense for them to be on the saints' side.

Cerulean blinked at me in disbelief. "How…? Just how? The two of us haven't talked about saints once. Just how could you have known?"

Well, Duke Alcott is in your faction, and he obviously hates saints… was what I was about to say, but I felt like that might get Duke Alcott in trouble, so I just said, "Uhhh, intuition, I guess."

"*Intuition?!* Wow. Your intuition is really something, Fia!"

He believed that? I didn't think he'd buy my excuse. I sighed in relief. *Thank goodness our proud king is such a simple soul…*

Said simple soul scowled and said, "You've guessed that much, so I suppose I owe it to you to fill in the gaps… But honestly, I'm a bit shaken right now. Do you mind giving me some time first?"

"Of course, but you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, you know." I was curious what he had to say, but I had no interest in forcing him to speak.

He shook his head. "No, it's fine… That's a bridge I have to cross sooner or later, anyway."

"Is that so?"

Just as I replied, we reached the central plaza. A fountain sat in the center of the wide-open space. Children played nearby, and a number of adults relaxed around the fountain and chatted with friends.

Cerulean scanned the place, then put some pep into his voice as he said, "All right, Fia. It's time for your saintly debut!"

Chapter 48: Saintly Debut

"M-MY SAINT DEBUT?" I couldn't help raising my voice. Eyes wide, I thought, *But I've been keeping the fact that I'm a saint secret! You're telling me you want me to reveal myself now?!*

Cerulean grinned. "Our job is to make people smile, Fia, so that's what we're going to do. Everyone has certain expectations of jesters and saints, right? We're going to take those expectations and use them to make people smile."

"I-I see!"

I did not see. Not one bit.

But admitting that would be admitting I was a bad jester apprentice, so I just went with it. Cerulean probably didn't expect me to understand what he meant right away anyway.

"What do people expect from saints then?" I mumbled to myself. It would be healing, right? Priscilla had mentioned she went to town regularly to showcase her saint powers, but I was just a *pretend* saint. I couldn't blatantly heal people. That would steal other saints' thunder. Still, I had to do *something* saint-like, or people wouldn't be able to tell what I was supposed to be.

Heh heh. It seems like it's time to pull out my secret weapon! I reached into my dress's inner pockets, pulled something out, and put it around my neck. "Ack. It's so heavy! I couldn't tell how heavy it was in my pockets, but it's really weighing me down now. Hm, maybe the stones don't work as a necklace…"

I leaned forward under the surprising heft, grumbling to myself.

"F-Fia!" Dolly exclaimed. "Are those… No, it can't be?!"

"Hwuh?"

When I turned, I found both Dolly and Cerulean gaping at me. They stared at the shining necklace around my throat, the one made from holy stones cobbled together on a cord.

Surely, my brilliance astounded them. *Heh heh heh! I predicted a situation like this and I stopped by my room at the dorm after we visited Captain Cyril! I'm a genius!* I puffed out my chest with pride.

Dolly pointed a shaky finger at me and said in disbelief, "I-I *did* hear you were given holy stones from the people of Sutherland, but to think you were given so many…"

"Y-yeah… And the ones she's wearing look quite heavy. Those stones couldn't possibly be filled with healing magic, could they, Fia?" Cerulean asked.

Being a duke and a king, they obviously were privy to confidential information. Honestly, it might have been the first time I heard them say anything that actually befit their status.

I thought back to what Cerulean said about what people expected of saints and smiled. "Heh heh! Like any good performer, I won't reveal all my tricks…" I touched my necklace. "But I'm sure I can pull off a good impersonation, just like you want."

I proudly declared my intention to fill the role of fake saint, and yet…

"What?" Cerulean said. "What made you think that's what I want you to do? You can't *seriously* be thinking of using those valuable holy stones in a place like this, can you?!"

"He's right, Fia. Those stones could save the lives of many knights who fight on the battlefield. They're not to be used frivolously," Dolly said.

The pair pitted themselves against my plan for some reason. It was strange how Dolly went straight to using the holy stones to save knights in battle. Maybe he actually cared about the knights more than he let on? Or maybe he did hate them, but a part of him wanted not to? He'd once gone to knight training school himself, so he must have wanted to be a knight at some point. His feelings regarding knights were obviously complicated…

I smiled. "Heh heh heh. Who knows what I'm going to do? I may be your apprentice, but that doesn't mean I have to reveal all my tricks."

They tensed.

"Wh-wha… D-Dolly! Our apprentice is mocking us, right?!"

"I do believe so. Normally, I would say we shouldn't take things so seriously, but this is clearly something else."

They whispered to each other, deliberating. After only a short time, however, their shoulders drooped with resignation.

"By the way," I said, "I know I'm supposed to be a saint, but are you two going to be jesters? Or, what, a horse and a bird?"

Cerulean cocked his head at me. "A horse? I'm supposed to be a unicorn, you said it yourself! I'm a hornless unicorn."

"Ah, I see. Showing more of your sarcasm that way, huh?"

What was a unicorn without their horn? They used it to purify water and neutralize poison. Cerulean lacking one meant, well…

Dolly's voice interrupted my thoughts. "And I'm not just some bird! I'm the legendary Tsarzi, said to be the most beautiful bird in the world!"

"I see. The Tsarzi is that bird with the colorful plumage, right? It's so rare that people call it the 'phantom bird' and the 'bird of legend.' So that's what you modeled yourself after."

The Tsarzi was just an ordinary bird, but they were so scarce some questioned if they really existed, and many rumors circulated about them. In recent years, some began claiming, absurdly, that their feathers had the power to cure any disease, resulting in a big drop in their numbers as people began hunting them.

"Hm? Wait, unicorns have the power to purify water and cleanse poison, and Tsarzi are said to cure any disease… Aren't both of those also saint powers?" I thought out loud.

The pair just stared at me wearily.

"You know, you can be real sharp at times, but it's like you lack all common sense," Cerulean said.

"Indeeeed," Dolly agreed. "Saints can heal some diseases, but *any* disease is a stretch. There isn't a saint around who can purify or

cleanse. The only one who could possibly do such a thing would be, well…"

"Yeah?" I cocked my head. I didn't know there were any non-saints capable of such things.

In a sonorous voice, Dolly said, "Why, none other than the Great Saint of legend from three hundred years ago!"

"Eeek!" I shrieked, recoiling. *Y-you're kidding me!*

Dolly scowled. "What are you shrieking about? Her Holiness the Great Saint was a wonderful saint capable of healing any injury or illness, cleansing poisons, and even removing status ailments! … Although I'm sure her feats have been exaggerated a bit over the years." He pointed at my dress. "I styled that dress after the Great Saint herself!"

I-I see… In my past life, whenever I participated in battles as the Great Saint, I always wore a black dress, but it seemed Dolly associated red and white with the Great Saint.

But with that in mind… I gave the dress a second glance. A cute yet intricate and detailed design flowed down the fabric. It didn't seem like he'd designed this out of bitterness…but I could swear Duke Alcott hated saints. Perhaps it wasn't just his feelings toward knights that were complicated, but his feelings toward saints as well.

As I pondered, I caught sight of a young boy taking a tumble out of the corner of my eye. I smiled at his lively antics, but of course, falling was a big deal for the child. He took one look at his scraped knees and began to wail.

Aw, you poor thing. I plucked some herbs growing near the fountain and cupped them in my hands. Then I scooped fountain water into my hands as well, careful not to let the herbs fall, and trotted over to the child. *The pretend saint's performance begins here!*

"Helloooo! I'm a saint! Do you need help?"

The boy, who looked about five, peered up at me with tears shining in his eyes. As he took me in, his eyes grew wider. "A-a saint?"

A few children hovering around their friend blinked at me in shock.

"L-Look! It's really a saint!"

"Wow! It's my first time talking to a saint!"

"She's so cute! Saints are so cute!"

Well said, little boy! I thought. *Just for you, I'll do a little something special.*

I spun around to look for Cerulean and noticed the adults around the fountain sneaking glances my way.

"Ha ha ha. That's a rather cute 'saint,' huh?"

"Yeah, one smile from her would make anyone forget their injuries. Go on, kid. Let her wash your knees for you."

How wonderful. The folks at Sutherland were all cheerful and nice, but the people of the royal capital are just as friendly! The citizens of the Náv Kingdom are the best!

I smiled at Cerulean and said, "Mr. Donkey, Mr. Donkey, come make this water clean!"

"Wha… C'mon, Fia. I told you, I'm not a donkey or a horse but a —*ouch!*" Dolly stomped on his foot. Tears sprang to Cerulean's eyes… but something in Dolly's expression made him quietly apologize and spin back around with a forced smile plastered to his lips.

Cerulean…you may be my mentor as a jester, but you still have a ways to go yourself, I thought.

Ignorant to what I was thinking, he pushed back. "Miss Saint! I'm not a donkey! I'm a unicorn, the legendary sacred beast!"

"Whaaat? But you have no horn! I heard Mr. Unicorn can cleanse water with his horn, but what can you do without a horn?" I frowned theatrically.

"Don't worry, don't worry! I may have no horn, but I have these magic bells on my ears, see? All I need to do is ring these bells and I can purify any water."

"Really?" I gave him a dubious look.

"Of course! Just watch."

He circled around me, the bells on his ears jangling. I held out my cupped hands, and he reached out with his right hand and performed some complicated dance. To those watching, he looked like a child messing around. One by one, everyone started to clap to the rhythm of his odd display.

I found myself swept along by the mood and swayed in time with the claps, pouring magic into my palms as I did. The herbs floating in the water melted away.

"Aaaand done!" After some time, Cerulean stopped. I'd finished my side of things at about the same time.

For while he danced, I quietly created a fine healing potion, one anybody would be proud of! With a smile, I held my hands over the boy and leaned forward, letting some of the water sprinkle over his knees.

* * *

The moment the shining green droplets spilled from my hands, the children around me exclaimed.

"Huh?! The water's turned green!"

"It's magic! It's the same color as leaves!"

The adults just smiled in amusement.

"Would ya look at that? They're not bad."

"That unicorn and saint sure can put on a show."

Their smiles vanished an instant later, however—the moment the droplets splashed against the boy's knees, his scrapes disappeared.

"…Uh?"

"Huh?"

"Huuuuh?!"

The adults cried out in amazement. The little boy gingerly touched his knees as though moving through a dream. After feeling

the smooth, unbroken skin, he looked up at me, confusion in his round eyes. "Miss Saint, my knees are all better?"

"Oh, thank goodness! I usually mess this up, but it seems I got it right this time."

I played up my role of a saint-in-training. I expected the boy to smile, but he just stared at me with those same wide, round eyes. I tried smiling at our audience instead, but they gaped at me just like the boy. Not a sound disturbed the square.

H-huh? What's wrong? Everyone seemed pretty into it a few seconds ago. Perhaps my performance lacked something. I was still too green to tell where I'd gone wrong, but I figured I should pass the baton to my mentor Cerulean and let him fix it.

"It's all thanks to my sacred beast buddy!" I said to him. "I couldn't have made that holy water without you!"

I'd decided to call the healing potion "holy water" on a whim, but it seemed to hit the mark. I liked the sound of it, at least. I was a total natural at this performing arts stuff!

Ooh, I've got an idea! Why don't I stick with that and insist this isn't a healing potion but holy water? That way, no matter what happens, nobody can claim I'm a real saint because it's just holy water!

Chuffed by my own flash of brilliance, I smiled at Cerulean, only to see him standing frozen stiff, his eyes so wide they could fall out.

Hmm… You have a tendency to forget how to act, huh? You're clearly supposed to brag about how what you did gave the water its

effect. I'm surprised you managed to make it as a jester for so long…

I tilted my head in thought. *…Looks like I have no choice.* Perhaps my performance had dampened the crowd's mood somehow, but Cerulean clearly wasn't going to back me up, so it was up to me to do something to salvage the show!

"Oh, what's this?" I said. "I still have some holy water left over! What should I do?" I scanned the crowd. "Helloooo, everyone! I'm a saint! Does anyone need any help with anything?"

The crowd jolted, yet nobody came forward, even though I spotted a few hopeful faces among the onlookers. It seemed everyone was too modest to volunteer themselves, so I would have to do it for them. Just as one could tell at a glance if someone was tired, it was obvious when someone was injured or sick, even if they tried to hide it or play it off.

However, everyone gathered in the plaza was in good health. I couldn't find a single person with serious injuries or diseases. *That's a good thing in itself!*

"Looks like everyone's doing just dandy! In that case, I'll have to share this holy water with everyone!" I threw my hands up and tossed the spare healing potion into the air. It drizzled down all around me, catching the light and glistening as it fell.

The crowd startled into motion, reaching out to try to catch the falling droplets. The green healing potion showered down on them all evenly, easing aches and pains as it made contact.

Though I said they were all doing fine, that didn't mean they were perfectly well. Most people walk around with some kind of minor

ailment, whether it's back pain, leg numbness, or something else. These things become part of daily life and we learn to endure them. Of course, if I suddenly healed those things, anyone would notice.

"Heh heh heh! I've shared the holy water Mr. Unicorn made with all of you! Now everybody should be feeling in tip-top shape!" I beamed at the crowd gathered around me. The healing potion I made would work immediately and topically, without any need to ingest it, so they should have been feeling the effects already. I figured everyone would smile and praise me soon enough, and then we could bring the performance to a close, but…

"Huh?"

"What?!"

"Y-you're kidding?!"

I did not spot a single smile. The people around me grimaced as they patted at their bodies and cried out in astonishment.

"Wh-what's the meaning of this? I haven't been able to move two of my fingers for forever, but I can move them normally again now!"

"I shouldn't have feeling in one of my legs, but now it hurts when I hit it! Is that even possible?!"

Eventually the commotion died down and they turned their attention to the healing potion.

"S-so, what was that water, anyway? Healing potions are supposed to be clear, right?!"

"That's what I've heard. And you gotta drink it, and it's supposed to hurt like crazy while you heal! I mean, I could never afford to buy any, so I don't know how much of that is true, but still."

"Right! Healing potions are expensive! There's no way someone could make one this easily, and they'd never use it so frivolously! Plus, that saint only used water from the fountain and some weeds growing beside it, right?! There's no way you could make a healing potion from that!"

The crowd clamored, tossing questions around. None of them came close to the truth, but airing all their doubts seemed to leave them refreshed. Gradually, they accepted their improved health and smiles finally began to emerge.

"Ha ha, this is incredible, though! My fingers can move again!"

"I'm sure this is just some gimmick that won't last, but it feels nice to be back in good shape for the first time in a while!"

"Ah, it so nice to walk straight again!"

The commotion built, prompting Dolly to call out to me. "Fia, what're you going to do? It's turned into a huge scene!"

I stuck out my chest. "Heh heh heh! Sure, we stirred up some commotion, but everyone's smiling, so it's all right! I think it's safe to say I've played the role of a pretend saint pretty well."

In a strained voice, Dolly said, "R-right. You did say something like that. But you've gone too far! And this saint act you've put on is nothing like what Cerulean and I had in mind! Ah, jeez, how are we supposed to walk this back…"

"Isn't it a jester's job to put a smile on everyone's faces?" I said. "Why do we need to walk anything back? Everyone's happy. Can't we just end things here?"

"It's not that simple, Fia…" he began.

Before he could continue, I grabbed his hand and pulled him forward. They say things always look more dire than they actually are. I was sure if he took a closer look, he would see that this wasn't all that serious.

I spoke above the astonished murmurs to get everyone's attention. "Mr. Tsarzi! No wonder the holy water was so effective; you must have used your power to heal all injuries and diseases in an act of mercy!"

The people heard my voice and immediately stopped their chatter, listening intently. Their attention sharpened; clearly, my performance was winning them over.

Dolly leapt in to play his role. "Oho, but of course! I am the world's most beautiful phantom bird, after all! Healing others is child's play for me!"

He was nailing it. Dolly made for a much better jester than Cerulean. I gave him a nod, then used my free hand to grab one of Cerulean's. "Do you think the effects of the holy water might last longer because Mr. Unicorn lent his help too?"

Cerulean brooded beside me. "That depends on everyone's hearts. Since I'm a sacred beast, I'm drawn to people with pure

hearts. Those who are kind and sincere will enjoy effects of the holy water for a long time, I think."

"I see! Those who are kind will be well for a long while then! How wonderful! In that case, I think I'll do my best to be kind to others from here on out!" With that, I scanned the crowd, lifting Cerulean's and Dolly's hands up high. "Everyone, please be kind to others if you want the effects of the holy water to last for a long time! Thank you for watching our performance until the end! We've been Mr. Unicorn the sacred beast, Mr. Tsarzi the phantom bird, and just some saint! Hopefully we meet again! Until next time!"

Hands still clasped, we bent into a deep bow. After a beat of silence, the crowd roared with applause.

"That was incredible! I've never seen a performance like that before!"

"Yeah, that was the best one I've ever seen!"

I waved and beamed, smiling at the adults as well as the children.

"Thank you, Miss Saint!"

"Miss Saint, you're the real deal! I can't believe my fingers can move again! I'll be sure to be a good person, so please let this last!"

"Miss Saint! Please come again someday!"

Infected by the crowd's joy, Cerulean, Dolly, and I smiled as well.

"Bye-bye!"

"Until next time."

"Yeah… Next time."

We waved as we exited the plaza, applause following in our wake. Thus ended my saintly debut.

Heh heh. I think we can call this a roaring success, right?

* * *

Once we'd distanced ourselves from our audience, Cerulean and Dolly halted. They leaned against the wall of an unstable-looking brick building and groaned with exhaustion.

"I-It's over."

"I'm dead tired, whew…"

The pair had waited until we reached a side street with very little foot traffic before pausing to catch their breath.

Oh wow. Jester work is really demanding, huh?

They assured me they were fine when their breathing smoothed out.

Just to be sure though, I asked, "Are you two really okay? You seem pretty exhausted."

"And just whose fault do you think that is?!" Cerulean said with a glare.

Wow. Someone's in a bad mood. I suppose my performance was really lacking in his eyes. Trying to cover for me must have been

exhausting, but it wasn't like I was going to nail it on the first try. He didn't need to get so short with me!

"Was my saint act lacking in some way? I tried pretty hard… Just for reference, though, what grade would you give me, out of a hundred?"

The jesters grimaced like I'd asked the dumbest question in the world.

Yikes. That *badly?*

They glared without uttering a word. I squirmed in the silence until Dolly said, "How did you do? Well, per—"

"Dolly! You can't just give her a passing grade! She won't have a reason to stay with us anymore!" Cerulean interjected.

Dolly clamped his mouth shut.

"Hey! C'mon, finish what you were going to say!" I complained, then tried to complete the thought myself. "Perky… Perverse… Particularly well… Oh! Were you going to say my performance was 'perfectly fine?'"

I glanced at Dolly, but his expression remained flat and unreadable. I must have guessed wrong…

"Per… 'Perfection'? Or were you going to say something about my 'performance'?"

Still nothing.

As I went on guessing, he seemed to collect himself. "All wrong! The answer is 'perfunctory'!" he snapped.

"Whaaaat?!" That was far from the praise I'd anticipated.

As I deflated, he frantically waved his hands and fix what he said. “O-oh, er, I phrased that poorly! You did very well, but you shouldn’t rest on your laurels! You should consider your performance to be ‘perfunctory’ for now, for your own sake!”

I lifted my head. “Really? I did well?”

“Of course! Right, Cerulean?”

Cerulean scowled in a way that seemed oddly conflicted. “Let’s set aside whether you did well or not for a second. At the end, all eyes were on you. It was like nobody could even see me.”

Dolly nodded. “Right, but it’s possible that was only because of how short you are. They treated me like air as well, and I’m the tallest and most gaudy-looking. So why is it that everyone ignored me?!”

With a tilt of his head, Cerulean frowned and said, “Hmm…”

Dolly’s frown was equally irked. Dolly explained away the way people ignored Cerulean by noting his height, but neither of them could come up with an explanation for the crowd ignoring Dolly.

Irritated, Dolly flung his hair back. “Say *something* at least! If you don’t, it’s like you’re tacitly agreeing that I have no stage presence! Oh dear. I fear I’m no longer qualified to teach Fia.”

I was doomed if one of my teachers gave up, so I rushed to console him. “Don’t say that, Master Dolly! Here, I’ll do my special dance that’s guaranteed to cheer anybody up!”

In my past life, people loved this dance. I stepped back to get ready to perform it, but I bumped into a stack of barrels as I did.

“Ack!”

I stumbled forward, and someone grabbed me from behind before I could fall. I turned around to thank my savior, but my smile grew stiff with surprise.

"Huh?"

The one to catch me was Kurtis.

I blinked several times, doubting my eyes, but there he remained.

"Uh, wh-what are you doing here, Kurtis?" I asked. He was supposed to be guarding the king today. Or rather, he was supposed to be *in charge* of the king's guards for the day. What could have brought him here?

With a serious expression, he said, "Cyril has adjusted everyone's duties for today in light of you guarding Cerulean. As a result, he switched me to guarding Cerulean as well."

"Huuuh?!"

W-wait, what? But my reassignment to Cerulean should mean they have one less person to watch the king. Why would Cyril send another knight to guard Cerulean? And why a captain of all people?!

"Wait, Captain Cyril isn't counting me as *negative* manpower, is he?!"

No way! Utterly unthinkable! I told myself that couldn't be, but Kurtis didn't respond. In fact, Cerulean and Dolly didn't say anything either, despite definitely having heard me.

Their silence spoke volumes…

Chapter 49:
Crisis Part 1

THE REALIZATION THAT CYRIL counted me as a negative he had to balance out came as a shock, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized I hadn't really done anything today that a proper knight would do. In fact, I wasn't even equipped to work as a knight—I'd left my sword behind because Dolly insisted it didn't go with the outfit. If Cyril could see me like this, wearing a saint costume and unarmed, he would probably scold me for being so ill-prepared. I really had no right to fault him for counting me as dead weight.

Wait, but then…that means Captain Cyril had an actual reason to assign Captain Kurtis over here, huh? So I'm not always *dead weight!* I sighed. "This is exhausting…"

Cyril had been pretty against the idea of me going out with Cerulean and Dolly. When I returned, he would probably grill me about every single thing we did. The thought alone drained me.

Dreading the lecture in store for me, I hung my head and took off the necklace of holy stones hanging around my neck. I realized then, as the weight lifted, that they accounted for a good part of my exhaustion.

Dolly took the necklace from me. He fingered the stones as he said, "I've learned much from you today, Fia. Earlier, I said holy stones should be used to save the lives of knights on the battlefield and not used frivolously in a place like this, but…I now understand I was

unconsciously elevating the lives of knights above those of the common man."

"Huh?" I blurted out. Where was this coming from all of a sudden?

"The worth of one's life is not for me to decide. Seeing the crowd smile today made me realize that. I wish for nothing more than for them to continue living without pain. Who's to say who deserves more happiness than another?" He dropped his gaze to the necklace in his hands. "The Great Saint of three hundred years ago would have treated everyone equally, I'm sure. No matter their background, she would have healed everyone without discrimination. That's why I believe…your actions today captured what it truly means to be a saint, Fia."

"Uhh…" I squirmed, feeling awkward now that he'd brought up my past life.

Dolly looked like he was about to continue, but he abruptly exclaimed, "Huh?!" He'd been fiddling with the necklace as though too embarrassed to make eye contact, but now he gaped at the holy stones in his hands. I was still puzzling out his reaction when his wide eyes shifted up to me.

"F-Fia, each and every one of these holy stones is still heavy despite that incredible healing magic you used earlier! I can't believe there's so much left in them! Th-this shouldn't be possible! What's the meaning of this?!"

"Oh!"

Dolly really was too perceptive. Now that he mentioned it, I had originally planned to use the magic in the stones today, hadn't I? *What a blunder! If I had just used the magic in the stones, they would've become lighter and been easier to take home!*

Despite my mistake, I plastered on a smile. "Heh heh heh. I may be your apprentice, but that doesn't mean I have to reveal all my tricks," I said, relying on my new catchphrase.

"Stop thinking you can talk your way out of things by saying that!" Dolly said. He took a step toward me, but Kurtis immediately swept in to block him.

Ever perceptive, Kurtis seemed to grasp what was going on from our brief conversation. Flatly, he said, "If you need to be up close to see through Lady Fi's tricks, then you've already failed as a jester! And you're her teacher, even if only temporarily! How dare you try to force your own student to reveal their secrets!"

Dolly's eyes went wide. "Huh, Kurtis? Were you always like this?"

It seemed the two already knew each other, but Kurtis was practically a different person after returning from Sutherland, which must have been why Dolly was so surprised. Kurtis was a captain, so he should have known Dolly was actually Duke Alcott and treated him with the proper respect. Or so I thought…

Betraying my expectations, Kurtis ruthlessly said, "Don't act like you know me. I don't recall ever getting chummy with some jester!"

Ahh… Kurtis was a rather mild-mannered guy before, so he must look like he's turned absolutely feral to Dolly…

Dolly huffed. “My, how haughty! Well, can *you* see through Fia’s trick, Kurtis?”

Kurtis glowered at Dolly, who paled before his ire.

“Wh-what?” Dolly said.

“The likes of myself could never hope to see through Lady Fi’s machinations,” Kurtis said bluntly. “If she proclaims herself a saint, then there is nothing I can do but believe her.”

“Huh?! Fia, just when did you beguile Kurtis?! He was a completely different man before going to Sutherland. Now he’s become some sort of fanatic of yours! What’s the meaning of this?!”

“Well…”

I didn’t “beguile” him. Kurtis was like this because he was my personal knight in my past life. To better protect me, he had to be ready to do whatever I said without question.

Then again, I did recall him being a little more *normal* in our past lives. It seemed he’d grown a bit odd over the past three hundred years.

“I guess time changes people?” I said, aiming for as harmless an answer as possible.

Kurtis could have stayed quiet and simply accepted this, but he said, “Lady Fi, the passage of time has not changed me one bit. It was my meeting with you that did it.”

…Kurtis, you’re only making things worse. Be a good boy and read the room.

Kurtis took the necklace from Dolly and tenderly offered it to me.

…What. Look, Dolly didn't take that from me, I was letting him carry it for *me. Then again, letting Dolly carry it in the first place was how he noticed the stones were full of magic, so it might be better for me to carry it after all…*

I donned the necklace once more, its heft settling around my neck.

Ugh… Isn't there something I can unload the magic in these stones on? And fast? I scanned my surroundings, but just then, a shout broke the calm.

"It's the king!"

Huh?

Children scurried by on the side street, happily calling out the good news for all they passed.

"The shiny, shiny king is coming this way!"

"And there's lots of knights with him!"

Oh, right! I had forgotten, but the king was scheduled to make his rounds past this part of the city today. That had been my original assignment.

When I looked to the main street, I found a huge crowd lining both sides of it.

Wow, what a coincidence that he'd come down this way, I thought. But foreboding cast a shadow over my thoughts. *Wait…* The one in charge of the king's guard for today was supposed to be Kurtis,

but if he was here with me, then who would replace him? This was the king, after all (albeit a body double), so the options were rather limited…

I kind of didn't want to know the answer, but I had to see for myself so I could decide if I had to flee. Timidly, I peered past the crowd. In the center stood King Laurence and his shiny, shiny hair, glinting like sunlight. *Ah, so he really is here,* I thought, then searched around him—sure enough, my premonition was on the mark. Behind the king stood a familiar tall man wearing a white knight's uniform.

"C-Captain Cyril!" I shrieked.

My voice should have alerted everyone that we needed to run, but Dolly—with his weak survival instinct—happily exclaimed, "Oh, and Duke Balfour is there as well!"

Dolly was Duke Alcott and Cyril was Duke Sutherland, which meant that not only was the king here, but all Three Great Dukes were as well!

This doesn't bode well… This doesn't bode well at all!

* * *

This is bad! All the key figures are assembled in one spot! I retreated a step, but Cerulean grabbed my arm. Innocently, he said, "What's wrong, Fia? Shouldn't we go greet Cyril while we're here?"

"Oho ho ho. You say the strangest things sometimes, Cerulean. We're jesters. We can't just pop over and say hello to the captain of

the illustrious First Knight Brigade."

"What are you plotting this time?" Cerulean narrowed his eyes at me, but I had nothing up my sleeve. All I wanted to do was avoid trouble by getting the heck away from here, but Cerulean pulled me along toward the main street, saying, "If you're not plotting anything, then saying hi shouldn't be a problem, right?"

Dolly followed with a broad smile. I swore the two of them possessed no instinct for self-preservation. Or perhaps what I considered trouble was nothing to the likes of a king and a duke.

Fine. There's a lot of people here. There's no way they'll see us through this crowd.

We lined up behind the throng. Then the woman in front of us exclaimed, "Oh my! You're that saint!"

Whuh?

Others began to exclaim as well.

"Wow, it really is her! You're incredible! Some time has passed since you splashed that holy water on us, but my fingers still move just fine! Say, it'd be a waste for you to not greet the king when you're wearing such a nice dress and all! Why don't you go step out in front?"

"Yeah! Hey, everybody, the saint has returned! Clear a spot for her!"

"U-uh, no, there's no need to go that far for me…" Despite my protests, I was standing at the front in no time. "How have things come to this?!"

Kurtis, who wasn't even around earlier and shouldn't have known what happened, proudly stuck out his chest and said, "It's only natural that the people are touched by your greatness, Lady Fi!"

"Ugh…"

He must've pieced things together based on my conversation with Dolly and how the people called me a saint. Sometimes his cleverness frightened me.

At any rate, here I was, standing at the front of the crowd…as King Laurence came walking along. Left with no other choice, I tried to blend in with the crowd, keeping my face neutral and hoping the king would ignore me. Unfortunately, he did just the opposite, looking me up and down curiously.

"Oh? What an adorable saint we have here."

King Laurence was a capable man—he wouldn't have been chosen as the real king's body double otherwise—so I knew he recognized me as the knight he'd met with not that long ago. That could only mean this whole "an adorable saint" thing was him teasing me. But since I couldn't shout at a king, I forced a polite smile. Duke Balfour stood a step behind the king with his jaw on the ground.

Oh, right… Duke Balfour's been with the king this whole time, so he didn't know about me becoming Cerulean and Dolly's student. The sight of me wearing a gaudy saint costume and accompanied by jesters must have been very strange to him.

I looked past Duke Balfour, this time more fearfully, and caught Cyril staring with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"Eek!" I tried to step back but hit a wall of people.

When I looked more closely, however, I noticed Cyril wasn't staring at me but rather at my necklace.

"Eeeek! I've really done it now!"

To most, the jewelry seemed like nothing more than a shiny necklace, but Cyril was one of the few people who knew its true value.

This is bad, this is bad! Panic flooded through me as I struggled to think of an excuse. I pointed at the necklace and then shook my head as though to say, *"What, these? No, I haven't used a single drop of the magic in these!"* My efforts were for naught, however, as the people around me sang my praises.

"Your Majesty, this saint here is really something incredible! She healed the fingers I haven't been able to move for years!"

"My back has hurt for a long time, leaving me unable to walk without a cane, but I'm all better thanks to her! Look at me, it's like I'm twenty years younger!"

"G-guys, please stop…" I pleaded weakly, lest they provoke even more of Cyril's wrath, but nobody listened. Rather, more voices joined in to commend me.

"Do you see this, Your Majesty?! She's so humble and modest! She even tried to insist on staying in the back of the crowd!"

I'm sorry. I repent for everything. I'll never do it again.

Cyril was on guard duty for the king, yet his attention belonged solely to the crowd describing my good deeds. His expression

darkened with every word and one hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. *For the sake of my own safety, everyone, please stop praising me!* Of course, I didn't think Cyril would actually draw his sword, but there was a real chance he would at least bonk me on the head with the handle.

Desperate, I tried to deflect the blame onto Cerulean and Dolly. I faced King Laurence and said, as loudly as I could, "It is nice to meet you, Your Majesty! I'm honored by everyone's praise, but I'm still in training! I simply performed as this horse jester and bird jester here told me to! Everything was really their idea, so please direct any praise or questions to them, not me!"

The jesters pushed back immediately.

"I told you, I'm not a horse!"

"And I'm not just some ordinary bird!"

They didn't deny that this was all their idea, though, so I breathed a sigh of relief. *Whew. Maybe these two are dumber than I thought?* I was just beginning to believe I'd live to see another day when Duke Balfour, who had come closer at some point, spoke up.

"Your Majesty, I believe I've seen these two jesters in the royal castle before, but this is my first time laying eyes on this saint. She said she was still in training, but the fact that she is with these two might mean she has some talent in the performing arts. Why don't we invite her back to the royal castle for a performance?"

"Huh?"

I shook my head frantically at Duke Balfour's outrageous suggestion.

"I do not think that is wise," Cyril said, quietly stepping closer. "If this saint is only in training like she says, then she may not yet know if she's fit for the position. She is still exploring her role. Though she is a saint today…she could very well be a knight come tomorrow."

"Eek!"

Cyril usually let others do the talking while on duty, so him speaking up right now did not bode well for me. What's more, his words dripped with sarcasm. Desperate, I looked to King Laurence, pleading silently.

"Hmm, both of you make some good points," the king said with an amused smile.

D-don't do it! All of the country's most powerful figures were gathered in one spot, but for some reason they were using their status and abilities to tease some pretend saint. *What a waste of authority and time!*

I slouched, defeated. To tell the truth, I'd already figured out what was really going on here. As King Laurence was Cerulean's body double, it was his duty to follow the real king's will. That was why he approached when he saw Cerulean—he thought he might have something to tell him. He called out to me only because I was part of Cerulean's party.

Furthermore, the king was taking this stroll through town today partly to improve the populace's opinion of him. Duke Balfour noticed

the way the people favored me and suggested the king treat me cordially so the people would extend that same favor to him.

The problem was Cyril. He should have known what everyone was thinking, yet he rebuffed Duke Balfour. Maybe he was just mad at me for dressing up as a saint and doing whatever I wanted, but… *Oho ho ho. No, surely not.*

Hopelessly optimistic, I checked in with Cyril only to find him glaring at me.

"Eeeek!"

No good, no good! My read was correct! This is the face of absolute fury! I have to do whatever I can to stay away from him for the time being!

Oblivious to my terror, King Laurence spoke past me to Cerulean. "Thank you for always keeping everyone entertained." He added a few words to the populace before continuing along his scheduled path and visiting a few stores along the way.

Oh, thank goodness. I'm safe for now!

For some reason, Cyril didn't follow the VIP he was meant to guard, approaching me instead. I held my breath as he drew near.

With a smile, he said, "Why, hello there. Aren't you an adorable little saint? That is a lovely necklace you have. I would love to have a nice, long talk with you if the opportunity should arise."

"Eeeek!" The threat of a scolding lurked under his words.

Of course, none the wiser, the crowd cheered with glee.

"Oh my! That captain in the white uniform has taken interest in the saint!"

"Ah, but of course he would. Just look how cute she is! Ha ha, how nice for you, huh? Make sure to meet with him again so you can tell him about all the good things you've done!"

"U-uh, I don't know if I should do that…" I whispered as Cyril's eyes bore into me.

Cyril smiled elegantly, unperturbed, and turned on his heel before following the king into a nearby store.

He was gone now, but that only forestalled the danger. I didn't feel safe at all.

* * *

"K-Kurtis!" After Cyril announced his intention to scold me, I went to my former personal knight for help. "C-Captain Cyril said he wants to have a nice, long talk with me!" Of course, Kurtis was right next to me and heard the whole thing himself, but I wanted him to understand the horror awaiting me.

He nodded. "But of course he would. It was absolutely clear, even from this brief interaction, that the populace is smitten with you, Lady Fi. He must want to ask what great deeds you have done."

"Huh?!"

Kurtis and I were only somewhat on the same page. We both understood that Cyril was going to grill me about what I'd done with

the holy stones. However, while I dreaded that questioning, Kurtis saw it as a wonderful opportunity. Cyril was a thorough man, so his interrogation would be long and unrelenting. I couldn't for the life of me understand why Kurtis thought that was a good thing; he even smiled, the madman!

Kurtis continued happily. "It is a shame that your feats will be credited to the holy stones around your neck and not your own great powers, but at least what you did for the people will reach Cyril. I'm sure he will be able to see your benevolence."

"Uhh…"

I'd kind of had an inkling for a while, but it sure seemed like Kurtis was actively hoping for me to become famous. He knew I wanted to hide that I was a saint, and he played along with that, but it still seemed like he wished I'd become a figure of note. That wasn't something I wanted at all! I had to make that clear.

"But Kurtis, I haven't done anything worthy of praise!"

As expected, he pushed back, saying, "You are the only one who believes that, Lady Fi."

"No, really, I haven't…"

"I myself have been saved by you countless, countless times! You may not grasp the feelings of those in your debt, Lady Fi, but our devotion is real."

"…Let's just leave it at that for today." I waved a conversational white flag. I was a saint who could heal most illnesses, but I couldn't heal whatever was wrong with Kurtis. Perhaps I'd become an even

better saint in the future and manage to cure him. Here's hoping. For the time being, though, there was no point trying to reason with him.

With the king gone, the crowd was starting to disperse, and me, the jesters, and Kurtis followed suit.

Dolly groaned. "Ohh, I'm exhauuusted. I don't think I can move without some delicious food and drink in me. Let's go eat."

Cerulean tugged at the ears of his hood. "There aren't many places we can go like this. I gotta treat Fia to someplace nice as compensation for embarrassing her during her meeting with Laurence, or Saviz will get mad at me."

"Huh? Are you treating us? Then we shouldn't go somewhere expensive," I said. "I eat more than you'd expect, and Kurtis eats a lot too!"

The mood had lightened, at least until a voice called out from behind us.

"Excuse me, Your Grace!"

"Yes?" I turned to see a man holding a hat in his hands and wearing expensive tailored clothes. Two men who seemed to be his attendants flanked him.

"I apologize for calling out to you so suddenly, but please, I must ask you to save my daughter!" The man bowed his head as he spoke.

"Uhh…"

As I floundered, Dolly leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"That's Earl Peiz. His daughter was a saint, I believe, so…"

“Huh? A saint?” Well, any saint was a friend of mine. “All right! I’ll help you.”

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing, Fia?!” Dolly interjected.

“Yeah, Fia, we’re supposed to go eat now!” Cerulean added. He and Dolly grabbed my arms as though to haul me away.

“Huh? Uh, wait, whoa. Where are we going?” I asked as they began dragging me off.

Together, they said, “To go eat, of course!”

“What’s with you two?”

They’d been rather lax with me up until now despite their high status, but here they were, forcefully carting me away. I was stumped, but Cerulean and Dolly didn’t get far before the earl’s attendants swept around us to block our path.

“Mind getting out of the way?” Cerulean said, scowling. “As you can see, we’re just a group of jesters. This girl’s a saint in name only. Her performance is just a bunch of cheap tricks. She can’t heal anybody for real!”

The two attendants remained unmoved.

“That knight behind you is wearing a white sash, so he’s a captain, correct?” one said. “I find it hard to believe a captain would guard a fake saint.”

“His Majesty the King visited the Central Church today as part of his tour of the city,” the other attendant said. “People suspect there might be an announcement tomorrow pertaining to the selection of the next head saint. It’s safe to presume this lady here is a saint who

has come to the capital for the selection process. You must be a strong candidate in the running for head saint."

"Huh? No, not at all! I'm not really a saint, just a performer with tricks up her sleeve," I insisted.

The earl spoke up then. "I apologize for not introducing myself right away. I am Peiz, an earl. While nothing grand, I have connections in the royal castle and the church and believe I can be of some assistance to you in your bid for head saint."

He was clearly trying to cut a deal: *If you want my support, heal my daughter.*

"Oh, please. You don't know us at all, do you? What connections could you possibly have in the royal castle?" Dolly flicked his long hair back as he mocked the earl. "And why does the likes of an earl think he can make demands of us? If your daughter is a saint, then she should heal herself. If she can't do that, then find a better saint to do it for her. Don't waste your time acting big to some jesters."

This was harsh, even for Dolly. Did he have some kind of grudge against Earl Peiz? Or maybe he was acting like this because he hated saints and didn't want to see one healed? Either way, it was a bit much.

It seemed the earl agreed with me. He frowned unpleasantly, and his attendants called Dolly rude and insolent, but Dolly was a court jester who had plenty of experience insulting people. Mockery was second nature for him. He faced the earl and his men, unrepentant.

"You're a fool to think you can just ask for help and have it given to you like it's nothing! There isn't a saint in the world who is all-powerful!"

* * *

The earl and his attendants glared at Dolly, who glared back just as fiercely. I tilted my head, baffled at this sudden aggression. Dolly was usually pretty aloof and seemed mostly indifferent to others' cares and concerns, but he'd charged in just to butt heads with the earl. Perhaps the earl had hit a sore spot somehow? I looked to Cerulean, hoping he could offer some insight, but he was glaring at the earl just as furiously as Dolly.

Interesting… I guess there's gotta be a reason if they're both *this angry. I'd love to respect their feelings, but…*

"Um, I hate to let you down, but I'm not actually a saint," I said. "So I'm not going to be a part of the selection process for the head saint or anything like that. I'm really just a performer doing tricks, acting like a saint to bring smiles to people's faces. If you're all right with that, I can visit your daughter."

Before anyone else could reply, Dolly exclaimed, "Fia, you have no reason to go with this man!"

I shook my head. "Don't you think we have an obligation to at least hear him out? There might be something we can do to help. Making people smile is our job as jesters, right?"

Dolly looked like he was about to argue, but he swallowed back his words with a grimace. “I can’t believe you’re using my own pride as a jester against me. You really know how to twist someone’s arm!”

“I may still be your student, but I do know a thing or two!” I proclaimed.

“What? No, I wasn’t praising you! I was doing just the opposite!”

Dolly was talking like his usual self again, but his tone did feel a bit harsher than usual. Something really was bothering him.

We followed the earl through town until we reached a horse-drawn carriage bearing the earl’s coat of arms. Seven people—the earl and his two attendants, Cerulean, Dolly, Kurtis, and I—made for an extraordinarily tight fit, so the earl’s attendants hailed a second carriage and followed behind. But when we tried to get in the carriage, we found it was still too cramped, so Cerulean and Dolly told—or rather, ordered, as king and duke—Kurtis to ride with the attendants. Of course, Kurtis flatly ignored their demand.

Surprised, I murmured, “Wow, Kurtis is incredible. He knows who Cerulean really is and still treats him this way!”

I spoke in a whisper, but Cerulean somehow overheard me and, with exasperation, said, “Like you’re one to talk…”

He turned away with a huff. *I guess it’s not just Dolly who’s in a bad mood, huh?* The jesters seemed miffed that I’d accepted the earl’s request. *But they still tagged along because they’re such good people!* I smiled to myself.

The jesters sneered when they caught me.

"What're you smiling about?"

"Life's just peachy for you, huh?"

Good people or not, they had awfully sharp tongues.

After some time, we reached the earl's townhouse, and it was quite a nice one at that. Even tucked within the bustle of the royal capital, it boasted a well-kept garden and a long, sweeping lane that led from the gate to the manor itself.

"Wow! What a lovely home you have," I exclaimed.

Dolly glowered. "As if. It's less than half of half of half of half of half the size of the royal castle!"

Isn't every *home lacking in comparison to the royal castle?* I thought as I side-eyed him. At least he didn't compare the place to the Alcott manor and give himself away. He still had some sense left, I supposed.

The moment we entered the manor, attendants led us to the parlor. The earl and his retinue must have arrived before us. The attendants from earlier stood behind the earl, who sat on the sofa. Cerulean, Dolly, and I sat across from him on another sofa, and Kurtis stood behind us.

Cerulean spoke first. He crossed his legs and folded his arms, scowling at the earl. "I'm sure I already told you, but we were just about to go eat. If you've got something to say, make it quick."

He was in full king mode, all haughty and high-handed, but one could just as easily interpret his actions as those of a rude jester.

Perhaps kings and jesters aren't that different after all? Of course, I would never voice that thought, as I was sure certain people would throw fits.

The earl and his two attendants frowned at Cerulean's words but calmly and reasonably overlooked the jester's tantrum as the earl addressed me instead. "Your Grace, I have one daughter, a saint like yourself. She has always been a rather frail girl, but her health took a turn this past week. She hasn't been able to leave her bed in several days."

I would have offered sympathy, but Dolly spoke up before me. "Oh, how terrible! But what are a group of strangers like us supposed to do about that? If your daughter is a saint, then she should heal herself, shouldn't she? And if you really have all those connections, then you should look for a real saint instead of relying on a bunch of jesters! Or do you mean to say you lack the money to pay for one, even with a home like this?"

I was about to admonish Dolly, but again I was too slow to speak up. "Don't be so hard on him, Dolly," Cerulean said. "You know nobles love to put on airs even if it bankrupts them. The fact that he's relying on jesters is proof he has neither money nor connections. Worst of all, his request is utterly shameless."

I gaped at my belligerent companions. Something clearly agitated them about this whole situation. Free-spirited though they were, they were usually more indirect with their nasty comments. I'd never seen them go directly for the jugular like this.

Earl Peiz's patience snapped and he raised his voice. "I tried to overlook your words, but I can tolerate it no longer! You jesters may be too imbecilic to understand the implications of what you're saying and how great my influence is, but these rude jabs are unpardonable all the same!"

Huh? Wait, the earl is seriously complaining? I gawked at him. Cerulean and Dolly were definitely being rude, I got it, but I thought the earl would display more composure, especially since he was asking for a favor. *This isn't good. He doesn't seem like the thick-skinned type. I need to step in here…*

"O-oh, yeah! These two jesters are so foul-mouthed, aren't they? But y'know, they're actually really good people, so…" I loudly tried to smooth things over, but Dolly interrupted me.

"Hmph! So you finally reveal your true self! You're the type of man who only thinks of himself, and maybe his family, though I doubt even that! This negotiation is over! We're leaving!" Dolly jumped up, jutting his chin out.

I grabbed his arms and said, "D-Dolly! Please be mature and stop!"

Somebody help me stop him! Please!

I looked to Cerulean for help, hoping a friend might be the right answer for Dolly's temper. It was hopeless, however.

Cerulean sneered and said, "Ha! We may be dumb jesters, but we understand what we're saying perfectly well! We also understand

just how shameless this whole charade of yours is! Oh, wait. Have you forgotten what happened ten years ago?!”

Oh, great. He’s lost his cool too! But beyond that, something Cerulean said bothered me.

“…Ten years ago?” I murmured.

Had Cerulean and Dolly known Earl Peiz that long? I mean, I suppose they might have given their positions as king and duke, but…

While I tried to piece things together, Cerulean laid into Earl Peiz, who sat silent and tense. “You better not have forgotten! You were there yourself when Duke Alcott heard the very same thing Dolly just told you! ‘If she’s a saint, then she should heal herself!’ Even though it was obvious he’d asked for help precisely because that wasn’t possible, everyone just… I was there myself and still remember the face you made! Yet you didn’t offer a single word of help!”

“Huh, but that was ten years ago, right?!” I said with a puzzled look at Cerulean. He should have been a wee baby then—I thought at first, until I remembered that he would have actually been nineteen.

So then all of this was about the death of Duke Alcott’s younger sister ten years ago. With a start, I turned my gaze to Dolly, whose face was taut with tension. He and Cerulean were both clearly remembering that tragic event a decade ago.

As though to confirm my guesses, Dolly said, “That’s right! Your silence was as good as complicity, was it not?! Or did you simply not care since it had nothing to do with you? Either way, you can’t simply change your mind just because now you’re the one in trouble!!”

* * *

Cerulean jerked up off the couch as Dolly had, and both of them turned to storm out of the parlor. I was left perplexed. I understood their anger, but I still didn't think it was okay to look the other way while the earl's daughter was sick and needed help.

Perhaps I needed to let them cool off while I stayed behind myself…if they'd allow that. They were so heated that they'd probably drag me out with them. I looked to Kurtis, hoping for a lifeline. Though I didn't like using force, he had the brute strength to peel them off me if it came to it.

Kurtis merely stared at me. I gave him a nod, confident he'd catch my meaning. As my former personal knight, he knew me better than anyone, after all. *Yes, Kurtis! It's exactly what you're thinking! There's no point in trying to talk this out anymore. But we can't leave the earl's daughter in need, so get Cerulean and Dolly away from me. By force if you have to!*

After a moment, Kurtis responded with a nod as though he could hear my pleading thoughts. Then he stepped forward and… didn't reach out to grab Cerulean and Dolly but instead addressed the earl. *Huh?*

"Earl Peiz, is quarreling with jesters truly what you're after? If so, then I see no point in us having come at all. We came because we

thought there was something we could help you with, but if not, then we'd best be on our way."

Kurtis spoke softly but everyone could hear the ultimatum beneath his words. I gaped at him. *What are you doing?!*

"N-no, wait, please!" Earl Peiz said, similarly flustered. But his pleas stopped there. Clearly, he was desperate to save his daughter, but it didn't seem he knew what to say to get our help with that. Honestly, I didn't blame him.

I didn't know the earl's side of the story, of course, but from what everyone said, it seemed like whatever happened ten years ago opened a rift between Duke Alcott and Earl Peiz. I doubted Earl Peiz realized the jester before him was that very same duke, but he certainly understood that he had to tread carefully and that Dolly had some sort of connection to Duke Alcott. In fact, he had to be very wary of Cerulean and Dolly both simply because they knew what happened in the past. The duke likely dismissed Cerulean's comment about being present at the event itself, as Cerulean looked about ten now, but he was probably wondering who'd leaked the information about the event and who these jesters were to have heard it.

With Earl Peiz rendered speechless, Kurtis jumped in. "I hold the position of brigade captain. My duty for today, given to me by my superior, is to guard these two royal court jesters."

Earl Peiz sat up stiffly. "Y-your superior, you say?!"

There were very few people who held a position above captain in this kingdom. I didn't know who the earl was thinking of, but

judging by his pale face, he was envisioning someone quite high up in the pecking order.

The earl thought quietly for some time. After a few moments, he seemed to conclude that opposing Cerulean and Dolly wasn't in his best interest. He clenched his teeth and bowed his head.

"I apologize for my indiscretion," he said courteously. "My daughter has been sick for some time, and that seems to have affected my temper. Please, find it within yourselves to forgive my rudeness."

Incredible, I thought, eyes wide. An earl was far above the likes of two random jesters, but that difference in status crumbled when you were dealing with a royal court jester guarded by a knight brigade captain. Earl Peiz clearly saw that these jesters were favored by the king and had his ear. He couldn't afford to scoff at them, but for a noble to actually bow his head to lowly jesters was quite the feat.

Dolly wasn't as impressed as me, apparently. He regarded the earl with contemptuous boredom. "Ugh. How unsightly. You flip-flop as it suits you, I see! This is the problem with you nobles, I tell you! Always so quick to bow your heads the moment you catch a whiff of someone of higher status. If you're going to pick a fight, at least see it through to the end instead of cowering before authority like a lowly worm!"

Cerulean—a pure-bred king born with a silver spoon in his mouth—added fuel to the fire by saying, "Dolly, let's be kind and overlook that bit. You know nobles can't help but live so shamefully.

They've survived up until now by acting like beggars. It's the only way of life they know."

The earl's contrition was not enough to satisfy Dolly and Cerulean. They continued to berate him, unleashing an anger they'd apparently carried with them for the past ten years. If they wanted to, they could have probably used their influence to directly affect the earl and his estate; the fact that they were sticking to insults displayed tremendous self-restraint on their part.

I won't say Earl Peiz wasn't acting out of self-interest either; he'd certainly apologized because of his sick daughter. But I was sure he was genuinely worried about her.

The moment things calmed a bit, I cut in. "Um, it's starting to get late. I wouldn't want to impose on you too much when it's only our first visit, so I think we should take our leave soon, but could we greet your daughter before we go?"

Earl Peiz rose, clearly relieved to change the subject. "Of course. I'm afraid she's in no state to leave her bed though. Would you mind accompanying me to her room?"

I followed him, but it seemed for a moment like Cerulean and Dolly might not. After a beat of hesitation, they trailed after me. Those two really did have soft hearts underneath it all.

The earl led us to his daughter's room. A maid waited in a corner, and sunlight streamed in through the windows. The earl certainly looked after his daughter.

I stopped just past the doorway while the earl approached the bedside. "Ah, you're awake," he said. "I brought some guests for you

today."

With his permission, I approached the bedside. A brown-haired, pale-faced young woman lay beneath the sheets.

Her eyes widened when she saw me. With a weak smile, she said, "Oh. A red-haired saint. It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Ester, daughter of Earl Peiz."

Her voice alone revealed how weak she was.

"Hello, I'm Fia. I've come today with two jesters and a knight brigade captain." Hoping to put a smile on her face, I leaned into my performance and put some pep in my voice.

Ester curiously scanned the room, her eyes growing wider when she noticed Cerulean, Dolly, and Kurtis. With a smile, she said, "My, what fun, colorful costumes. And the captain's white knight uniform looks wonderful."

What a kind girl, I thought. Though I'm sure her curiosity was genuine, she went out of her way to comment on my companions even though they'd failed to greet her.

I turned, annoyed with them, and froze. Cerulean and Dolly looked on the verge of collapse.

* * *

"Huh? Wh-what's wrong?" I said.

Cerulean and Dolly were pale. "…Don't worry about it," Cerulean said, weakly shaking his head. But how could I *not* worry?

"No, I'm going to worry!" I said as I rushed over to them. "My gosh, you two look even worse up close!"

Cerulean raised a hand to stop me. "We're fine, really. Dolly and I just have…a phobia of sick people."

"Huh? A…phobia of sick people?" I said. I'd never heard of such a thing.

Dolly staggered toward the edge of the room and leaned heavily against a wall. He certainly didn't seem fine, but he stoically lifted his head and managed a smile anyway.

"Yes, it's a rather rare phobia," he said. "We feel an inexplicable and irrational fear whenever we see a sickly, bedridden person. It's at its worst when the person in question is a young woman in her twenties… It seems today is just not our day… Ah, I feel nauseous." He slid down the wall as he spoke, eventually coming to sit on the bare floor.

Cerulean, pale as a sheet himself, tried to encourage Dolly. "Hang in there, Dolly! Look closely. Her hair's brown, not silver-blue. This isn't like last time." Cerulean's voice grew weaker as he went, until eventually his legs gave out and he was down on one knee.

I wanted to do something to help, but Cerulean shook his head and told me not to worry.

"We'll be fine, really," he said. "Actually, the best thing you could do for us is finish your business quickly. We're the ones who took you out today, so we have a responsibility to see you get home safely. No matter how ill we feel, we won't be leaving this room until you do."

Aw. Cerulean's such a gentleman despite only being a child. Moved by his manners, I returned to Ester's bedside. *Now, what to do…* It didn't seem like her life was in any immediate danger. Perhaps a trickle of healing would be enough for today. Then Charlotte or Priscilla could finish the job tomorrow.

Even as I formulated my plan, a wracking coughing fit shook Ester. The maid on standby rushed in to prop her up and held a clean white cloth to her mouth. Ester hacked into it, and eventually a splotch of blood bloomed on the white cloth. Instantly, my plans changed. If she was suffering this much, how could I possibly think of postponing her recovery?

Once the fit subsided, I took Ester's hand in mine. She looked up at me and through labored breaths said, "Please…please keep your distance, Lady Fia. My disease is infectious…"

I smiled. "It's okay. My friend here, Mr. Unicorn, can purify and cleanse diseases; and Mr. Tsarzi there can cure just about anything. I'm invincible as long as I have these two." I bent down and touched my forehead to hers, holding her hand tighter. "Ester, could you close your eyes for me? You're a saint, so you should be able to heal yourself."

"Huh?" she gasped. "Lady Fia, I…I may be a saint, but my powers are not all that strong…"

"Perhaps, but you know your own body best. If there's anyone who can heal you, it'll be yourself," I said softly. When she hesitated, I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry. I know you can

do it. Mr. Unicorn and Mr. Tsarzi are here too, so right now you're invincible."

She smiled, amused that I would put so much faith in two silly jesters in silly jester clothes. "Yes, you might be right," she said. "If they have the power to make others strong, then perhaps I can believe in myself as well."

She closed her eyes at last. I brought both of her hands up to her chest and squeezed them.

"Hey, Ester? Even when you squint, you can still see your body and feet, right? Can you try looking down at yourself and seeing if anything is off?"

She thought for a bit but eventually said, "I'm sorry… I can't see anything off."

Hmm. Even if it is her own body, this might be a bit hard on the first try. To make things easier, I added a dark glow to her chest and her back. This was the same glow that appeared when one used healing magic, just tinted black. I figured she might recognize it.

I heard her swallow. Cautiously, she said, "Ah… I-I think I see something! Around my chest and my stomach."

So close! I corrected her gently. "Hmm, I think that might be your chest and the other side. Your back maybe?"

The jesters by the wall murmured, their hurried conversation growing louder as they went on.

"Huh? Maybe the nausea is making me see things, but doesn't it look like her body is glowing black?" Dolly said.



"What a coincidence. I see something as well. Around her chest and her back," Cerulean said.

…Whoops. I guess I didn't adjust my strength enough. I thought I kept things dim enough so only Ester would notice, but… Hmm… For my own sake, I decided to conclude that the jesters just had abnormally good eyesight.

I turned my focus back to Ester. "Anyway, why don't you try using healing magic on those parts of yourself? Generally when we heal diseases we use healing magic on the whole body, as we don't know which parts are sick, but that requires many times more mana than usual. I think that might've been your problem. Let's try healing specific spots instead, like we would for a cut."

Ester's eyes flew open and she blinked up at me. "Now that you mention it, that does make sense."

From over by the wall, my overly loyal former personal knight muttered, "That is true, but for one who possesses irregularly high amounts of mana, such fine tuning is unnecessary."

Oho ho ho. Oh Kurtis, just what are you trying to imply? I refused to acknowledge him, keeping my focus on Ester.

"Go on," I said. "You shouldn't need as much mana if you're focusing on the sick parts."

"I'll try it," Ester said with a nod. I released her hands and she splayed them over her chest as she began to chant. "O holy energy that fills me. I ask you to cure me of my illness. *Heal*."

Magic seeped from her hands, but…

"Hm?" I couldn't contain a noise of surprise. Fortunately, Ester was too focused on her magic to hear me, but…what was the meaning of this?

The outlet for Ester's magic was incredibly narrow, only letting through a terribly small amount of her power. Perhaps there were a lot of saints with weak outputs like this these days? That would explain what I saw that one time I went to Starfall Forest; it had taken a long time for several saints to heal a knight.

None of that mattered right now, of course. I set my hands over Ester's and widened her magic outlets.

"Huh? Huuuuuh?!" she exclaimed.

"My, I didn't know you could yell like that." This was the first time I'd heard her speak so loudly.

Through teary eyes, she said, "Wh-wh-wh-what do I do?! My magic suddenly started pouring out all at once! I'll be out of mana in no time!"

"Huh?"

That can't be. I only opened her outlets to normal levels. At this output, running dry was…

"Very possible, huh. Whoops."

It appeared her reserve of mana was many times lower than I expected, perhaps because she had been bedridden for so long.

"It's probably because you've been sick, huh?" I said. "In that case, I, the friend of the legendary Mr. Unicorn and Mr. Tsarzi, will help out." I emphasized my relation to the two jesters once again in

order to deflect attention away from me. Easing out of her grasp, I stepped back, then let out a tiny trickle of my own magic. "*Heal*."

And suddenly…

"Huh?"

Her illness vanished in a flash. Ester blinked up at me in shock.

* * *

I hadn't done anything special to Ester with my magic, but if any aspect of the healing deserved particular notice, it was the way I'd suppressed the glowing effect. Healing magic naturally created a glow, but I purposefully held that back. Someone used to seeing healing magic—for example, a saint like Ester—might conclude I hadn't cast any magic at all. Or at least that was my hope.

Plus, I spoke only the word "heal" but omitted the chant. Most saints wouldn't leave that part out, so what I did hopefully looked offhand and flippant. She should have concluded it was her own magic that healed her…

I forced a smile as I met Ester's shocked gaze. "What's wrong, Ester? Oh my, don't tell me. Are you feeling just a *liiiittle* bit better?"

I tried my hardest to act like I couldn't tell she was healed.

"Huh? Uhh…yes," she said. "Yes, I do feel a bit better. As a saint, I can more or less tell how severe an illness is, but…I feel as though I've healed completely."

I clapped and exclaimed, "Woooow, that's incredible! Your magic must have been stronger because Mr. Unicorn and Mr. Tsarzi are here! I helped by cheering you on a bit too, I'm sure, but the healing itself was all you, Ester!"

I went on clapping as she stared at me blankly. Without warning, large tears streamed down her face.

"Huh?!" I searched her for some new malady. "A-are you still hurting somewhere? Your chest and back should be healed as far as I can tell, and I don't see anything else wrong…"

She shook her head and said, "I feel fine, Lady Fia." Fresh tears slipped down her cheeks, however.

"B-but, you're crying…"

"I'm sorry. My chest just feels so tight that I can't help myself."

"Your chest? …But it should be healed?"

"It is. I have been cleansed of my illness, and a warm light has replaced the sickness inside my chest. It is this light and the comfort it gives me that brings me to tears."

"Uhhh…"

I don't really get it, but I guess she's better? I blinked, confused.

With a teary smile, Ester said, "Oh… To think a saint's power could be so amazing. This must be how a saint is truly meant to be. My heart is touched by such overwhelming power and kindness."

Ester was pretty emotional. Most people who recovered from an illness were happy but not quite *this* happy. I was glad, but I didn't

expect this much of a reaction and began to wonder if my lie would hold up.

"F-Fia! Just what have you done?!" Cerulean exclaimed behind me.

"Y-yeah! What's going on?! How are you able to heal such a serious illness?!" Dolly followed up.

When I turned, I found the jesters had moved closer and were no longer so pale and sickly.

"You two are looking much less faint! I'm guessing you feel better?" I asked.

"I told you we have a phobia of sick people," Dolly said, "but there aren't any sick people left in this room! Wait, that's not important right now! Just what is going on here?! Don't tell me you… you…"

He pointed at the necklace of holy stones around my neck and was about to say something but stopped, glancing at the earl and Ester. The earl seemed in a daze, however, and Ester was still overcome with tears. Dolly breathed a sigh of relief before turning back to me, but he couldn't restrain himself entirely. "I can't believe you. So high-handed!" Satisfied with that, he stepped back.

"Just absurd…" Cerulean muttered under his breath, shaking his head and stepping back as well.

What's up with them? I wondered. Regardless, they were ruining my excuse. Their reactions made it way too obvious that I was the one who'd healed Ester. I'll admit my ruse was a bit far-fetched to

begin with, though. Maybe I should have claimed the holy stones had healed her? That worked for people like Dolly and Cerulean, who knew what the holy stones were, but Ester didn't. And from how Dolly and Cerulean were acting, it seemed they preferred things that way.

Hmm. This is tough… I had to do something, so I grabbed Ester's hands as she continued to cry and looked her directly in the face. "Ester, I know this might disappoint you, but I'm not actually a saint!"

"…Huh?"

Her confusion only made me more certain she hadn't bought my initial excuse. Good thing I had a new plot in mind. I regarded her seriously before I continued.

"The truth is, I'm a member of a jester troupe. I'm a saint with tricks up her sleeve, not the real deal."

"Huh? Okay…?"

It didn't seem like she was buying it, so I lowered my voice as though sharing a secret.

"And believe it or not, my jester friends here are royal court jesters!"

Heh heh heh. If I phrase it like this, it'll sound like I'm a royal court jester myself!

"And I'm actually the king's favorite! That's why he's given me a *special gift* that lets me use the same powers as a saint."

I stroked my holy stone necklace as I met Ester's eyes.

Technically speaking, this wasn't a lie. These stones were a gift from the people of Sutherland, but Saviz had to approve them. Saviz's boss was the king, so it wasn't *that* much of a stretch to say I received these stones with the king's approval. What's more, I'd spent the whole day with Cerulean, so we were pretty close. Therefore, it was *basically* true that I was the king's favorite, and he had given me these stones!

With that utterly self-serving conclusion in mind, I turned my attention back to Ester. I stroked my necklace deliberately, hoping she would understand these weren't normal stones, but the very power that had healed her.

To my disappointment, she cocked her head to the side in confusion.

…Oh dear. It doesn't seem like she gets it. I tried really hard to create a story that was half truth, half fiction. Was it all for nothing?

I hung my head and noticed Cerulean's face bunched up with anger.

Oh great! Not only was this meaningless, but I've stepped on his toes! I'm worse off than before!

"Fia, could you not make such misleading statements?!" Cerulean complained, just to kick me while I was down. "The king doesn't have any interest in any woman! Least of all you!"

Come to think of it, there was a rumor going around that the king was a misogynist or something, wasn't there? I recalled. The current acting king was a body double, which served as a bulwark

against any potential woman troubles but also made succession quite complicated—and rendered my excuse pretty flimsy.

"Cerulean's right!" I spoke up, trying to save my ruse. "The king likes little boys who dress up like horses and tall, effeminate men more than me!"

"Fia! Just stop, you're only creating more problems!" Cerulean shrieked.

Sheesh. Talk about hard to please.

I frowned. This was becoming a real pain. The best I could do now was wrap this up so we could be done with it.

"Uhh, so basically, Ester, I have a lot of tricks up my sleeve thanks to the king and I used one such trick to heal you. But these tricks of mine are super-secret, so I want you to keep what happened today hush-hush. Is that all right?"

Ester blinked her teary eyes a few times, then smiled broadly. With a big nod, she said, "Of course!"

Good, good, I thought with a smile.

Then her next words hit me like a sledgehammer.

"You're a saint whose existence is a secret known only by the royal family, hidden from even the church, right?"

"Huh?" I gawked at her.

She clasped her hands and gazed up at the ceiling with a dreamy look. "There aren't many saints around, so I've come to learn the faces of all the others. But I've never seen you before, Lady Fia. I'd understand if you lived somewhere far away, but if you live in the

royal castle, then it makes more sense that the royal family hid you away!"

"Uh, well…"

Wh-what do I do? She's misinterpreting what I said earlier about the whole royal court jester thing! She thinks I live in the royal castle! …Okay, well, I do technically live on royal castle grounds, just at the knight dorms, but that's probably not what she means. Yeah.

At any rate, Ester was totally off-base. I was just about to correct her when she grabbed both my hands and stared determinedly into my eyes.

"Don't worry, I won't let a soul know you're a saint who the royal family is hiding! I swear!"

Her eyes shone. I gave up the fight. My perfect explanation had somehow been perfectly misunderstood. My shoulders slumped in defeat.

* * *

We left the earl's manor soon afterward.

It was clear Ester had completely misconstrued what I said, but I decided to let it go. It didn't seem like I could patch this over easily, and she'd promised not to tell others about me, so what did it really matter? The earl also promised to keep his lips sealed, so that should be that.

The earl bowed incessantly and Ester watched us like she was trying to memorize our every detail as Cerulean, Dolly, Kurtis, and I said our farewells and climbed into the earl's carriage.

We made straight for the castle. Despite all their grumbling about wanting to go eat earlier, Cerulean and Dolly now claimed they were too tired to go out for dinner. Sheesh. They could really learn a thing or two from Zackary and Desmond's unlimited stamina. I was starving myself, but I had to admit the jesters seemed dead tired. I had never heard of a phobia of sick people before today, but it seemed like it took its toll.

The pair sank back in their seats, eyes closed. A bit hesitant, I spoke up.

"Are you two all right? It'd be bad if you collapsed on the way back to your rooms. Should I walk you back?"

I decided to speak in Lua. It was supposed to be our secret language for emergencies but we never did get to use it, and I felt that was a bit of a waste.

Eyes still closed, the jesters grumbled.

"Whyyy you using Luuuua? Daaayyy's oooover, isn't iiit?"

"Yeaaah, and why'd yooou make a fooool of youuurself at the eeeend there? Yooou actuuuually loooked gooood for once toooo."

I wanted to argue, but their voices were flat and their eyes were shut. I was really starting to worry.

Noticing my silence, they finally opened their eyes and shared a glance.

"Right… Why don't we take you up on your offer and have you walk us back?" Cerulean said. "It seems we're more tired than we thought. We might not make it on our own."

It's not like him to admit weakness. He must really not be doing well… Almost the moment that thought crossed my mind, the jesters sat up straighter. It seemed like they were scheming, but I was just glad they looked less faint.

With the pair uncharacteristically quiet, and Kurtis his usual quiet self, the carriage fell silent. Before I knew it, I nodded off. By the time I woke up, we'd reached the royal castle.

I walked Cerulean and Dolly back to their rooms, with Kurtis a step behind as though he always followed us like this. Their path eventually took us to an off-limits area.

The jesters apparently enjoyed their own private room inside the royal castle. *I mean, that makes sense. They* are *court jesters,* I thought as they led me into a room decorated with gaudy wallpaper. I gawked at the strange chamber. When Dolly grabbed an odd prop sitting on a bookshelf, the whole shelf slid to the side, revealing a hidden door.

"Huh?"

Dolly opened the door, and I followed him into pitch-black darkness.

"Hmmm?"

I was still wondering what exactly this dark space was for when yet another door opened to reveal a more spacious room.

Dolly said, "This is my private bedroom as Duke Alcott. As I hold an important position in the royal castle, I've been given a separate room aside from my office."

"Oh, that makes sense."

It was kind of amusing that the jesters' room and the duke's room were connected by secret doors. I turned to find the door we'd entered through was now a closet.

"Ah, so the secret door in the jesters' room connects to the duke's closet. That's why it was so dark inside."

Normally there would be no way that the jesters' room and the duke's private room would neighbor one another, but the king liked his jesters so much, he outfitted them with a really nice room that just so happened to sit next to the duke's, or so the excuse went.

I was still amusing myself with that fact when Dolly gestured for me to sit on a sofa.

"We'll be changing out of our jester costumes," he said. "Do you want to change as well? Cerulean should have some clothes around from when he was about your height."

It was a very kind offer, but I still hadn't had dinner, so I refused.

"No, that's all right. My clothes are clean enough, so I'll just keep wearing this. And I've already seen you two back to your rooms, so I think I'll just head out. Oh, unless you want me to return the

saint costume?" I had almost forgotten, but the costume *had* come from Dolly, after all. Maybe he wanted it back.

He shook his head. "No need. That costume is yours. You're free to do with it as you will. More importantly, we missed our chance to eat, so why don't we do that next? I'll have some food brought to this room. There's something I'd love to chat with you about if you're willing to stay."

"I'd love to!"

That saves me the effort of making a trip to the dining hall! I thought as I sat on the sofa with Kurtis. Meanwhile, Cerulean and Dolly slipped into the dressing room to change.

I gawked at the room around me while waiting for them, taking in the gorgeous upholstery and expensive furniture. Unlike the jesters' room, which had been full of strange toys and props, this room contained shelves of difficult-looking books and a stately desk. It was hard to believe the same person lived in both rooms.

Beside me, Kurtis said, "Lady Fi, I hate to be so forward, but could I say one thing?"

"Of course."

It was unusual for him to raise concerns. I tensed as I waited for him to speak.

Solemnly, he said, "I advise against becoming any more involved with Cerulean and Dolly than you already are. The two of them bear a burden both dark and great. Superficial methods cannot grant their wish, but someone like you could, Lady Fi."

"Huh?" My eyes shot wide as he blindsided me with this sudden insight.

Kurtis's serious expression did not flicker. "Please be aware that if you lend them your aid out of sympathy…it will be at the cost of exposing your greatest secret."

"Whaaaat?!"

Kurtis slid off the sofa, getting on one knee before me. "Lady Fi, please do not forget what is most important here! No matter how much your heart pains you, no matter how much you wish to be of aid, do not forget what must come first! If anything, I advise you to leave now before you feel compelled to help!"

He'd made a similar request in Sutherland, so I kind of understood what he was getting at. The thing of "utmost importance" that he was talking about was probably my own life. My ever-loyal ex-personal knight constantly worried about me.

"Kurtis, thank you for always thinking about my well-being," I said. "But I'll be all right. Not even I am silly enough to put myself in danger for no reason."

I spoke from the heart, trying to reassure him, but he shook his head. "You say that because you don't know the burden Cerulean and Dolly bear. If you continue to involve yourself with them, it will only be a matter of time before you call forth spirits, I'm certain!"

I couldn't say a word to refute him. This was so unlike him. It was clear he knew something I didn't, and that filled me with unease, my heart pounding too hard against my chest.

Perhaps unnerved by my silence, Kurtis continued. “The same goes for Commander Saviz and Cyril! The two of them carry a burden equally dark and grave! Please, I beg you, do not become involved with any of them any further!”

The seriousness of his expression struck me, but I couldn’t bring myself to comply. I could only watch him in mute horror.

* * *

Kurtis and I stared silently at each other. Only the sliding of the dressing room door finally broke the stalemate.

“Thanks for waiting,” Duke Alcott said as he entered the room. With one glance at Kurtis and me, he froze, then took a halting step backward. “Oh, pardon me! Have I arrived at a bad time?” He escaped to the dressing room and called back, “Were you mid-proposal? Please, don’t let me stop you. I’ll wait as long as needed!”

“Hwuh?”

Duke Alcott had seriously gotten the wrong idea when he saw Kurtis kneeling before me.

“W-wait, it’s not what it looks like!” I shouted.

“What Lady Fi says is correct!” Kurtis said, still gravely serious. “I would never dare be so profane as to propose to my lady!”

Duke Alcott returned, an odd expression on his face. “Oh, I see. My mistake. I won’t pry, but you two sure have a strange relationship,

huh? Kurtis, you're the superior officer, but you clearly respect Fia greatly."

Cerulean joined us then. He and Duke Alcott had changed out of their jester costumes and into ordinary yet fine shirts. Duke Alcott, having abandoned his long-haired wig and makeup, looked more normal again. Cerulean's change was less dramatic, as he merely appeared to be a well-to-do young boy from a good family.

They sat on a sofa across from us just as maids arrived with plates. I gawked, amazed by the number of dishes they carried.

"Forgive me," Duke Alcott said, "this is all we could prepare on short notice. If this were my manor, I would've been able to serve you a proper meal, but I do not have as much authority in the royal castle."

I gaped at the table, positively overflowing with dishes, and wondered if he was messing with me.

"Er, no, this is more than enough," I said. "More than we can even eat, maybe…" I reminded myself that I was speaking to Duke Alcott, not Dolly, and added, "…sir."

He frowned. "Fia, even after we've grown so close, you insist on putting up a wall between us? We're already friends. Our status doesn't matter. Oh, and don't try to complicate things further by saying it's because we're teacher and student now, okay?"

He made these claims of friendship so casually. Was this what Kurtis was warning me about? I checked with a glance his direction. The ever-strict Kurtis appeared conflicted. Maybe it was best to heed his advice.

"Uhh, so you say, but I do think our difference in status is pretty important, sir," I said.

"Fia!" Duke Alcott exclaimed, leaning forward and clasping one of my hands in his. "I'm serious! You've moved me! I heard you got those holy stones from Sutherland, but I never thought I'd witness something so valuable and powerful actually put to use! Even if you found a knight on death's door, I believed everyone would avoid using the stones for fear that a more opportune moment might come!"

His fervor overwhelmed me. "Right," I said, nodding along.

"And yet you used them without a second thought to help someone! Without the slightest shred of doubt, you endeavored to help everyone you could! I don't care if this is blasphemous of me to say, but your actions reminded me of the legendary Great Saint of three hundred years ago!"

This sudden turn in the conversation left me utterly speechless.

Duke Alcott continued in a rush. "I have been moved by you, Fia, and I respect you greatly! I want to be your friend so I can stay by your side! If I am lacking in any way, then I will endeavor to correct that so I can one day be a worthy friend! Please, let me be your friend!"

I couldn't deny such a frank and sincere request. I nodded, still speechless. Kurtis frowned, but what choice did I have? I couldn't reject Duke Alcott when he was being so earnest. Besides, becoming friends with someone wasn't the same as "getting more involved" with them.

Duke Alcott beamed. “Thank you, Fia! I know I can be unfair or come across wrong at times, but if I can be your friend, I’m sure I can learn to live true to my ideals like you do! Thank you so much!”

“U-uh, I’m not really doing anything that amazing, sir…” I looked down at my hands. While I was glad Duke Alcott was so happy, I was also worried about what Kurtis would think of all this.

Duke Alcott was, of course, oblivious to my worries and reproached me in an upbeat tone. “Fia, friends do not speak to one another so formally. I am not your superior officer or anything, so please speak more freely with me. You speak freely with me when I’m Dolly, and I’d rather you keep things consistent.”

“Y-you have a point…”

Encouraged, he pushed. “And please, call me Lloyd. Duke Alcott sounds so terribly stiff.”

“Huh?! I-I don’t know if I could go *that* far…”

“I do recall that you called the heir of Marquess Wyner by name when you visited my home.”

I did. I do all the time, in fact. But Fabian’s different because he’s a fellow knight recruit…

While I struggled with that point, the duke trundled on. “Not to mention that you speak to Kurtis, a knight brigade captain, without using his title.”

“Guh. B-but, it would be impudent and disrespectful of me to address you by name! I would get reprimanded for sure!” It was my last, desperate attempt at an excuse.

Duke Alcott merely grinned. "That won't be a problem! People won't complain if I tell them not to. I'm a duke, after all. Getting people to do what I want is child's play."

"…Fine." Defeated, I gave up the fight.

Ngh… I feel like I'm the one always having to make concessions, I thought, hanging my head.

Duke Alcott—or, rather, Lloyd—jovially raised his glass. "All right! Let's toast to me and Fia's new friendship!"

"Count me in," Cerulean said. "If calling someone by name is proof of friendship, then Fia and I have been friends for a while now."

I was getting fed up with all this, but all I could do was go with the flow. "Sure, sure! Let's toast to friendship and eat already!"

…By no means did I agree just because I was hungry.

Despite the rocky start, the meal itself proceeded peacefully. We chatted as we ate, talking about how angry Cyril got when Cerulean and Dolly said they were taking me out dressed as a saint and how we coincidentally ran into him in town. *Everybody really loves Cyril, huh?*

Midway through our meal, however, Lloyd's cheer began to feel forced, and I sensed the same from Cerulean. It was like they were tiptoeing through our conversation. They didn't broach the topic of Earl Peiz or their phobia of sick people, sticking to lighter subjects. I—and Kurtis, I'm sure—pretended not to notice and went along with it.

Eventually, Lloyd started talking about the Great Saint.

"You know, I've read through just about every book there is on the Great Saint. I'm sure much about her has been embellished or misremembered, but every single book always makes a point to mention how she had a noble heart and would treat everyone equally."

I nodded. That was pretty commonly known stuff.

He paused, his gaze weighing me. "You are very much the same, Fia," he eventually continued. "You used your holy stones without a second thought, seeking nothing in return. I can't help but think that you act the way all saints should."

"Huh?"

He mentioned before that he saw parallels between me and the Great Saint. Was he trying to draw even more? That wasn't good…

He twirled a twist of hair nervously between his fingers. With a sigh, he said, "No, this wasn't what I wanted to talk about… Fia, I want you to hear us out for a moment. We were planning on approaching this topic after we ate and unwound for a bit, but it seems I can't help steering the conversation in that direction. I lack restraint, apparently."

He and Cerulean had been restless throughout this whole meal —something was clearly bothering them.

"Well, all right," I said.

Lloyd sighed with relief. He laced his fingers together and dropped his gaze down to them, speaking softly. "Let me preface this discussion with one thing: Fia, I wished to become your friend

because I was moved by your actions. It was my unadulterated adoration of you that inspired me, not any ulterior motive… Although perhaps some would consider my desire to better myself by being at your side an ulterior motive. All of this to say…you needn't let our friendship factor into what we're about to discuss."

"Sure," I said.

Back when I became friends with Cyril, he'd used that friendship to coerce me into journeying with him to Sutherland. That in mind, I braced for whatever Lloyd might throw at me now.

"Back to what I was saying about you moments ago…" Lloyd said, "I believe your decision to save Earl Peiz's daughter was correct. It was wrong of me to try and leave without helping her. I may have a grudge against the earl, but I had no right to involve his daughter in that. Intellectually, I understood that, but I couldn't control my emotions. That's why seeing you save her brought me such tremendous relief."

Whatever I was bracing for, I hadn't expected praise. Bewildered, I foolishly stammered, "Oh, er, yeah."

Pure adoration softened Lloyd's expression. "You are incredible, Fia. I was moved by how you always find the best solution in any situation, and I am only more impressed by you after how you saved the earl's daughter. As you said, it is true that it requires many times more mana to heal someone who's sick than it does to heal someone who's injured. As it is unclear where precisely the disease has taken root, saints must heal the whole body."

Right, I had said that to Ester when I healed her.

"That is why most recommend that saints work together with physicians and heal whatever area the physician identifies, but saints don't typically like that method, balking at the thought of following someone else's advice. You really only see saints expending huge quantities of magic to heal the whole body, rather than being more precise, but you easily presented an alternative."

"H-huh? O-oh, that's just because, uhh…"

Lloyd sounded impressed with me, but if he really thought about it, it would seem strange to him that someone who wasn't a saint could know so much about healing magic. I was about to come up with an excuse, but Lloyd's smile reassured me that wasn't necessary.

"It's okay, I understand," he said. "You're not a saint, so you couldn't possibly come up with that idea on your own. You must've gotten it from someone else. Perhaps Saint Charlotte? It doesn't really matter. What impresses me is that a non-saint like you would possess such useful knowledge."

Oh, right, I thought. *I guess saying I heard it from Charlotte would line up with his expectations. Wow, Lloyd's better at making excuses for me than I am for myself!*

Lloyd clenched his hands. "Earl's Peiz request to heal his daughter was something you couldn't possibly have planned for, yet you had the necessary information to heal Ester and deployed it expertly despite never having tried anything like that before. You have a talent for finding the best solution in any given situation, Fia. That's why…"

He choked on his words, grimacing like he couldn't bring himself to say them. He opened and closed his mouth several times, trying but failing to get the words out. Eventually, he gazed directly into my eyes. "Fia, I have a request. Please use that talent for me! You have the right to refuse, of course…but please, I beg of you." He awkwardly grabbed my hands and lowered his head until his forehead was almost touching them. "Please pick a Rose of the Great Saint for my sister."

* * *

"For your sister? But isn't she…?" I thought she died ten years ago, but I didn't want to say that out loud and remind him of it.

Lloyd understood regardless. "I did say my sister Colette passed away ten years ago, but that wasn't entirely accurate… My sister isn't dead."

"Huh?!" I exclaimed. I could swear it wasn't just Lloyd who'd spoken of Colette's passing. Fabian had said something as well. It was public knowledge that Colette had died, and from what I gathered, there hadn't been any rumors challenging that fact or any reason to doubt her death in the past ten years.

…Was she actually alive?

I blinked, struggling to comprehend the situation. Lloyd grimaced as he said, "My sister isn't dead, but…she isn't exactly alive either. She's been asleep for the past ten years. We can still make her

drink water from time to time, but she hasn't opened her eyes or moved once."

That gave me more clarity about her condition. Lloyd's sister must have been afflicted with the sleep status ailment. I would need to see her for myself to be certain, but Red, Blue, and Green's younger sister had once bore the same curse with the same symptoms. The only outlier was the fact that Colette would still drink water.

Cerulean interrupted my whirling thoughts. "Fia, Colette is asleep because of the Spirit Lord's power that I've inherited."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

With a pained frown, he continued. "I was there when she was on the brink of death and prayed as hard as I could for her to survive. The Spirit Lord's blood running through my veins responded to grant my wish. But instead of curing her, it put her into a state of eternal sleep."

"I… What?"

"Ten years ago," he said, "Colette was extremely sick. We all thought she would die. So I wished for time to stop for her, hoping she could sleep until a saint appeared who could heal her."

"…I see. That must've been difficult." I didn't really know what to say. This was way more complicated than I first thought.

Magic that could stop time for someone was beyond the realm of man—only the Spirit Lord could enact such a thing. As a member of the royal family, Cerulean carried a bit of the Spirit Lord's blood within

him. The Spirit Lord could, therefore, lend some of their power to grant his wish, but…

"I understand time has stopped for Colette for ten years, but where is the energy to maintain that coming from?" I said. "No spell should be able to last that long without an energy source."

Impressed, Cerulean cocked an eyebrow. "You're really something, Fia. I can't believe you know how the Spirit Lord's power works to such a degree."

I braced, hoping against hope that he wasn't about to answer my question the way I thought he was.

"The energy comes from my life force," Cerulean said. "The moment I prayed for her to survive, Colette and I became linked. Since she's not truly alive, the maintenance is thankfully minimal. I merely become a year younger for every year she remains frozen in time."

He said it so casually, so indifferently, like it was nothing, but this was far from nothing. Cerulean was shaving away his own life to keep Colette alive.

Normal magic used mana as payment, but thanks to the Spirit Lord's involvement, this magic came at a special price. Thus, Cerulean's life slowly drained away every year he remained connected to Colette, and his time stopped alongside hers. The cost was far too great, and I couldn't let that go…

"Cerulean, why would you go so far for Colette?" I asked. He may be close to Lloyd, but that didn't explain such a tremendous sacrifice.

"Because she was to be my queen," he said simply.

"Oh!"

All at once, the pieces fit together. If that was the case, of course he'd try to save her, even at the cost of his own life.

I thought back to Lloyd's earlier request. "So, what's this about wanting me to pick a Rose of the Great Saint?"

"That's, well… We wish to bet our future on you," Cerulean said.

"…Uh, okay. Definitely need you to elaborate on that one."

I really wanted to agree to help them, especially now that I fully understood the situation, but first I had to understand what they wanted from me.

"Fia, do you remember how Saviz requested you pick out some flowers to offer to a saint?" Cerulean said. "The one who originally made that request was me, and the one the flowers were for was Colette. I've been regularly giving flowers to my 'Sleeping Beauty' for a while now… But never did I expect you would bring her the Rose of the Great Saint for me."

As I understood it, the king regularly offered flowers at the grave of a saint. Saviz therefore frequently asked others to procure those flowers. Wanting to pick the best flowers possible for a fellow saint, I'd decided to use the roses in the castle garden to remake the Rose of the Great Saint when Saviz asked me to perform this duty. I guess those flowers had made their way to Colette in the end.

"I haven't thanked you yet for that, have I? Thank you, Fia, for finding such wonderful flowers for me. Colette has always admired the

Great Saint. I'm sure she would be honored to receive the rose named after her," Cerulean paused for a moment, then said, "I remember thinking it was the best parting gift imaginable for her, now that she doesn't have much longer. But that was before I knew about the special effect the rose had."

He met my eyes solemnly.

"Her Holiness the Great Saint truly was extraordinary. There were a myriad of spells only she could use. She saved so many… But with her death, the world assumed it had lost those spells. *Assumed.*

"It was not until the captains' tea party that we discovered an incredible fact," he continued. "We knew drinking black tea containing petals from the Rose of the Great Saint could induce various effects, but we always believed those effects did not surpass the magic of any ordinary saint. However…at that tea party, Cyril's strength was enhanced, and Desmond and Zackary suffered a paralysis status ailment."

Ah… Yeah, that did all happen, I thought. I was a bit irritated during the tea party, so I'd poured my magic into the petals used for the tea, which enhanced their innate effects. This resulted in some amusing results for me, if not the captains, but why was he bringing this up now?

Tears welled in Cerulean's eyes, threatening to overflow. "Can you believe it? The magic of the Great Saint, thought to be lost three hundred years ago, was rediscovered through the petals of her rose."

"Oh. Right."

I see. I suppose that's one way to look at it.

"Her magic is exactly what Lloyd and I have been hoping for these past ten years. We had just about given up when, in our darkest hour, a glimmer of hope appeared…"

Emotion overwhelmed Cerulean, and Lloyd picked up where he left off. "Tomorrow morning, all of the churches in the kingdom will receive a notice declaring that the selection process for a new saint has begun. The selection itself will take place two weeks later, after which we will have ourselves a new head saint. We're confident the newly selected head saint will be able to heal Colette, so long as we can wake her from her sleep."

"…I see." I wasn't sure what to make of this. Cerulean and Lloyd had to know the holy stones I held could heal someone at death's door, but they skipped right over that. Perhaps they hesitated to ask more of me when they'd already given me such a difficult request. I clutched at my chest, my heart aching for them.

Cerulean suddenly lifted his head. Tears spilled down his cheeks as he raised his voice to say, "That's why we need your help, Fia!"

He made no move to wipe away his tears as he implored me. "Each petal from a Rose of the Great Saint produces a different effect, so, please…pick out a petal that will awaken Colette from her sleep!"



Side Story:
Duke Lloyd Alcott — A Promise to Protect

"BROTHER, I'VE BECOME A SAINT! Now I'll be able to heal you whenever you get hurt during your sword training."

"No, Colette. The power of a saint isn't to be used so frivolously."

"Oh, there's Master Laurence! I'll go ask if he's hurt anywhere!"

"No, like I just said—hey, no running! Are you even listening to me?!"

"I'm listening, I'm listening. Master Laureeeence!"

"In one ear and out the other with you, huh… Ah! You tripped! See, that's why I told you not to run! Now who's the one who's hurt?"

Lively laughter of Lloyd, Colette, and Laurence filled the Alcott manor.

Ah… I remember. We used to be so happy back then…

* * *

"Already twenty-seven, huh? Ha ha… I just keep getting older and older."

I looked in the mirror and saw the mighty Lloyd Alcott smiling wryly back. Time was beginning to show on my face, placing fine lines around my eyes and mouth. A pang of guilt struck me as I observed

those creeping imperfections. The three of us had believed we would be together for ten, twenty years…but time had stopped for all but me. I was aging without them.

My guilt turned to frustration, and I slammed my fist into the wall beside the mirror.

"Hah! The miracle we need is already lost to the world! …Just where am I to find hope to cling to?"

Alone in my room, the thoughts I usually kept hidden spilled out. The past ten years had made it painfully clear that miracles did not come easily. We'd done so much but managed nothing. All our efforts seemed to be in vain…

But I couldn't give up.

I remained hunched, my breathing ragged, before eventually collecting myself and washing my face.

Today would be no different, I was sure. It would end with me disappointed over our lack of a miracle, and then the cycle would repeat the next morning.

With one-third hope and two-thirds resignation, I left the room. I did not know it yet, but the events of this day would leave me amazed. Finally, the miracle we'd been searching for had come.

On that day, I was participating in the last of the king's meetings with the incoming knights of the First Knight Brigade. I did not participate as a duke, however, but instead dressed up in the gaudy

guise of a jester. The target for our hazing this time was a young female knight.

I thought the king and his many aides would intimidate her, but she took in the room with little more than curiosity. Everything seemed a wonder to her; sentimentality welled up in my chest as this bright young girl reminded me of my sister. I would quickly discover this knight—Fia Ruud—was nothing like my sister, however. My sister was the type to make small, adorable mistakes, whereas Fia was more like an unpredictable storm.

I cannot count how many times Fia left me flabbergasted during that meeting. She correctly identified our speech as the Lua language, picked up on how our king's name was an anagram, detected how Cerulean's costume was a nod to the old national flag and sacred beast, and even realized that Cerulean's arm was cursed.

Any one of these observations alone would have been enough to shock me. Fia possessed superlative intuition and wit. But the true surprise came many nights later.

Late into the night, Cerulean visited my room with a flower all thought lost to the world. It caught the light and shone as brilliantly as a jewel.

My breath caught in my throat, leaving me unable to speak properly. In a faint, trembling whisper, I said, "That's… No, it can't be…"

The flower bore an uncanny resemblance to the Rose of the Great Saint that I had seen in forbidden tomes. But it, and its jewel-like beauty, should have been lost together with the Great Saint.

"Cerulean, is that…is that real?" I asked.

The tense look on Cerulean's face and otherworldly beauty of the flower gave me my answer, but I had to be sure.

In a stiff voice, Cerulean said, "Odds are high that it is. Saviz brought it to me after looking into its authenticity himself."

"It's…real…" My mind flashed to my sister. Colette had adored the Great Saint. What better parting gift for her as her time dwindled? For a Rose of the Great Saint to be found now of all times had to be some sort of miracle.

I hung my head and covered my face with my hands. Cerulean spoke from above me.

"Lloyd, that's not even the most surprising thing. Do you remember Fia, the last person we interviewed?"

"Of course," I replied with a nod. There was no way I could forget such an astonishing character.

Cerulean dropped not one but two shocking revelations on me. "She is the one who found this rose. What's more, Saviz claims she found it in the royal castle garden."

"Fia found this…in the royal castle garden?"

Was such a thing even possible? I could admit Fia had a sharp and observant eye and had gleaned more during her interview than anyone else ever had, but surely even she couldn't find a flower thought to be lost to the world? And within royal castle grounds, where many people came and went every day? Every inch of the royal castle was under strict management. If a flower with abnormal beauty

like the Rose of the Great Saint had bloomed, somebody would have reported it right away. Yet this Fia had outdone all of them and spotted it first somehow?

"How can that be? Fia may be a genius, absurdly so even, but this is preposterous. How did she just so happen to find the long-lost Great Saint's flower at the ideal moment, a flower we've been searching for so long ourselves?"

We'd tried to find a way to save my sister, but as her time dwindled and we drew no closer to saving her, I'd started thinking I should at least prepare her a fitting gift to take with her to the afterlife. Then this flower appeared—found by a female knight I'd only learned of recently.

"I asked myself that same question at least a hundred times before I came here," Cerulean said. "But at the end of the day, no matter how surprised we might be, the fact of the matter is that Fia has found it."

"…You're right." My heart raced. I drew a deep breath, lacing my fingers together to hide how they trembled as gratitude swelled inside me. "It would seem Fia is my savior. To the uninformed, this may seem like any other flower. Even most of those who know of the Rose of the Great Saint would merely admire it as a relic of the past tied to a historical figure. But I've yearned for this for a long time. It may be just some flower, and it may not help me wake Colette, but…she admired the Great Saint…more than anybody…"

Too overwhelmed to continue, I let Cerulean finish my thought for me.

"I know," he said. "She would have considered receiving the Great Saint's own rose to be the highest honor."

I wasn't confident I could manage words, so I simply nodded as the memories from ten years ago flooded my mind.

* * *

Blood stained the carpet as my sister lay on it, her face pale. I reached out with trembling hands and hugged my dying sibling, praying for the bleeding to stop somehow. It was meaningless, of course. She went limp even as I held her.

When our parents left this world, I promised I would protect you in their stead and yet I can't do a thing for you…

I shouted, begging for someone to save my sister. Tears streamed down my face as I offered the saints everything I possessed, but nothing moved their hearts. My sister was dying—all because she had a pathetic brother who couldn't persuade a single saint to help.

Never had I felt my powerlessness as keenly as I did in that moment, but while I crawled on the floor, lost in my despair, Cerulean used his own life to save Colette. As a result, time stopped for Colette and she fell into a deep sleep, while Cerulean slowly grew younger…

No. To say he was growing younger was wrong. His life was being stripped from him. The lord I served, the man I considered my

closest friend, took on a great burden in my stead, and that fact ate away at me.

Yet he acted as though what he did was nothing at all.

"It's fine. Without Colette, I wasn't going to live long anyway."

I knew that was true, but still…

"All the more reason why you shouldn't have done this!" I exclaimed. "You deserve to live what limited life you have left freely!"

Calmly, Cerulean replied, "And I will. My life is being slowly whittled away as payment for stopping time for Colette, but I still have some years to live as I please."

"…I'm sorry. And thank you." I bowed my head deeply. There was nothing else I could do. He allowed my sister to live at the cost of his own life, but I could give him nothing in return.

I would likely have broken if Colette died that day, lost to despair and tortured by my own powerlessness. Tormented by the thought that there was something I could've done and blaming myself endlessly, I might have done the unthinkable.

In that sense, Cerulean saved both Colette and myself. By stopping time for her, he gave me a grace period in which to find a cure. It was a second chance to fight for her, a reason to have hope for the future, a reason to live. From the day she fell asleep, I've spent my time searching for a way to wake her.

He cast the Spirit Lord's Blessing on her. Though Cerulean's powerful prayer brought about our predicament, not even he knew how to undo it. I scoured through countless books, read every

forbidden tome I could find, but still could not discover a way to save my sister. I spoke to many people, traveled far and wide, but came no closer to a solution. At a loss, I began to wonder what might have happened if this had all taken place three hundred years ago. Could the Great Saint have healed my sister? Her magic was the only thing I could find that was capable of dispelling status ailments.

"Ha ha ha, I'm really grasping at straws if I'm thinking of the long-lost Great Saint. I need to find something that's possible for us in the present…"

I slumped in my chair and covered my face with my hands as I drowned in despair over my own powerlessness. I'd spent every day over the past ten years trying to find a way to wake Colette with nothing to show for it. I'd spent every waking moment clinging to my faint hope, but time slowly eroded that hope away.

My sleeping sister grew more and more emaciated with each passing year. I could see her gauntness with my own eyes. Eventually, she would waste away entirely, and then…she would ascend to the heavens.

Though I still held out hope, grim resignation took root within me. It was around that time we received an unbelievable miracle: The Rose of the Great Saint, thought to be lost for the past three hundred years, was rediscovered…

* * *

I pulled myself out of my reminiscing to gaze at the Rose of the Great Saint once more.

"She would have considered receiving the Great Saint's own rose to be the highest honor," Cerulean said.

He and I rejoiced at this unexpected break, then made our way to Colette with the rose in hand. I offered it to her alongside words of encouragement for her recovery and could swear I saw her smile. It could've been a trick of the light, but it was the first I'd seen any hint of life since she fell asleep, and my joy nearly bowled me over. I believed in my heart that my sister truly appreciated this gift.

Still feverish with emotion, Cerulean and I went to Saviz's office to express our gratitude. When we arrived, however, we found First Knight Brigade captain Cyril present as well. As he was among the few who knew of our circumstances, Saviz allowed him to stay. Reflecting back on it, though, Cyril normally would've taken his leave if he didn't have any business of his own with us. At the time, I was too excited to consider that.

Cerulean and I sat on a sofa across from Saviz. I bowed my head deeply to him. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Your Highness. Because your subordinate found the Rose of the Great Saint, I was able to give the greatest honor imaginable to our sleeping saint."

Saviz answered with a frown. It was unlike him to show so much in his expression. What bothered him so?

Come to think of it, Cerulean and I had come straight from Colette's room, so we weren't in our jester costumes and my identity

as Duke Alcott was clear. Perhaps Saviz worried about how this visit looked, given the king's faction and the prince's faction ostensibly stood in opposition. In my excitement, I'd neglected my due diligence and potentially created problems for Saviz. I wanted to apologize, but Saviz spoke up before I could.

"No, you're fine on that account," he said. "The timing of your visit surprised me is all. Cyril and I were just talking about the Rose of the Great Saint. I've only just heard his report and still haven't quite processed it all myself, but…it appears the Rose of the Great Saint is capable of causing status ailments."

* * *

Cerulean and I blinked in stunned silence. We'd been seeking a solution for so long that this sudden turn of luck left us stuck between disbelief and hope. Understanding this, Saviz softened his tone.

"Normally we wouldn't report something like this without verifying it first, but given the circumstances, I think it's okay to tell you what we understand so far."

He glanced at Cyril beside him. Cerulean and I trembled with joy while Saviz and Cyril explained everything clearly and plainly.

Apparently, it all began at a captains' meeting. After the report of the discovery of the Rose of the Great Saint, one captain made a suggestion.

"Seeing as it's called the Rose of the Great Saint*, it's likely been bred in a way that suits the Great Saint's own tastes. The Great Saint is said to have loved rose hip tea, so when the Rose of the Great Saint is done flowering, we should try making tea from its fruit. Perhaps we'll learn something about her from the experience. Just soaking the flower petals might produce some interesting effects… Who knows?"*

This was news to everyone at the time. Saviz and Cyril believed that even if some effects did manifest, they would only be for healing. But when the captains held a tea party to find out, they experienced some unexpected outcomes. The rose petals proved capable of not only healing but also inflicting status ailments.

Inflicting status ailment effects, and dispelling them, were both magic only the Great Saint herself could wield. With her death, the world believed that magic lost. I told myself not to get my hopes up as Saviz and Cyril explained all this, but soon it was too much for me to contain. In a faltering voice, I said, "Y-Your Highness, wh-what do you mean the rose inflicted status ailments?! Only the Great Saint should be capable of that!"

Though rare, there were shamans who could borrow the power of monsters and magic items to inflict status ailments through curses, but the Great Saint was the only person able to directly use her magic to cause status ailments. Of course, she could also remove status ailments inflicted by others.

"Indeed," Saviz said in his usual calm, flat voice. "There is much we don't know about this flower, as it's been three hundred years

since we last saw it, but we can hypothesize that it bears similar effects to the Great Saint's own magic."

Normally, his matter-of-fact delivery would soothe my nerves, but I couldn't stop my trembling at this news.

Cerulean seemed similarly anxious, barely managing to find his voice when he said, "I-Is such a ridiculously convenient thing really happening?"

Cerulean wasn't truly looking for an answer, so Saviz continued.

At the tea party, the captains tested nine cups of tea. Of them, eight produced effects, some the same effect. These effects differed depending on the petal floating in the tea. Unfortunately, they found no sign of any status-ailment-removing effects, but that would've been difficult to test in the first place since it required a test subject who was already afflicted with a status effect.

I let out a shaky sigh at this. "Ah… A petal with the effect we seek might actually be out there… If only…"

I couldn't finish, so Cerulean did it for me. "If only we knew which petal to pick. Colette is near her limit. I doubt she'll endure if we pick the wrong one."

"I have my mages on it," Saviz reassured us. "They're working to determine the petals' effects and the strength of said effects."

Moments like this really made me appreciate Saviz's presence.

Cerulean had been restlessly rubbing his hands, but he finally unwound. In a low murmur, he said, "Hope can be a scary thing. I've already started to hope she might wake up again. I know from what

you've said that our chances are one in a million, but after so long with no hope at all, I can't help but feel like we finally have a shot."

I felt the same, but all I could offer him in that moment was a nod. *Ah… I can't stop myself from dreaming. I can just imagine her opening her eyes. I'll ensure she has reasons to smile for the rest of her life.*

Shaken, Cerulean and I rose uneasily from our seats and turned to leave. But something struck me before I reached the door, and I turned to ask, "Your Highness, you said earlier that of the nine cups, one had no effect. May I ask whose cup that was?"

Saviz met my gaze and said, "It was Fia Ruud's."

The solution struck me like a bolt of lightning. Cyril had said the captains made a special exception so Fia could join their gathering, but now I felt as though a higher, divine power must have made that call.

There simply had to be a magic that could remove status ailments. Fia must have drunk the cup bearing that effect, but as she wasn't affected with any status ailments, nothing had changed.

"…Let's bet our one chance on her," I murmured to myself as I left the room and walked down the corridor.

The fact that I met Fia now of all times, the fact that she found the Rose of the Great Saint, the fact that she received the petal with the ability to remove status ailments—it all felt like a sign, a sign that everything would be okay if I entrusted this to her.

The next day, Saviz received the results of the investigation into the petals. The captains had experienced many abnormal effects at the tea party, but the investigation team itself failed to produce anything on that scale.

"Reality is cruel," I murmured. "But…I wonder why. I still feel like Fia could manage something."

I had no basis for my belief, but Cerulean seemed to understand.

"Yeah," he said. "For such a miracle to appear at our final hour feels like some kind of divine intervention."

The next day, Cerulean and I witnessed even more of Fia's greatness, her straightforwardness, her ability to find the best choice in any situation. I grew all the more certain she was our only chance and thus begged for her help.

My dear, dear sister's life was on the line. I never thought I would rely on the help of another again, but I was fully prepared to believe in Fia—and Cerulean felt the same.

"Please…pick out a petal that will awaken Colette from her sleep!"

Perhaps this was the best choice we could have made.

Side Story:
King Laurence — I Would Choose You Over the World

IN EXCHANGE FOR THE POWER they wield, a king must know restraint.

I was fine with that.

So long as I had you by my side.

I would have given up everything for you in a heartbeat, Colette.

You were all I ever needed.

This is a story from before I became a jester, back when I was still called Laurence.

"Master Laureeeence! I've brought some refreshments! It's a meat soup, so I figured a manly man would like it!"

"Thank you, Colette. I think I'll have it right away. …That's quite an aroma. Is this really a soup? It looks like a mountain of meat."

"That's because it *is* a mountain of meat! The meat sucked up all the soup, leaving nothing behind!"

"I see. This meat is quite a novel color as well. Green meat, purple meat…just what kind of meat is this?"

"It's the basilisk and hell viper the knights hunted."

"Ah. So lizard and snake. Meat is meat, but I think I'd rather eat meat from ordinary animals. Oh, sorry. It's rude of me to complain

when you went through the effort of making this for me. I was just a bit intimidated by the toxic-looking color… Did you know hell viper are venomous? Perhaps it'd be wise to prepare some stomach medicine before I partake."

Upon eating the soup, I was bedridden for two full days, but as a result I developed a decent resistance to poison.

"Well done, Colette. We royalty are always at risk of being poisoned. It was very forward-thinking of you to help me build up some resistance. Look at me, I'm fine. To tell the truth, I thought you might have forgotten to remove the poison from the hell viper meat, so I made sure not to eat a lethal amount. …C'mon, I said I'm fine."

I reassured her over and over, but her tears kept flowing as she cried at my bedside. Small cuts covered her fingers. She'd worn gloves two days ago when she brought me the "soup," so I hadn't noticed then, but preparing that meal must have taken a heavy toll on her.

"Ha ha, oh Colette. Work with the chefs next time, okay? They'll step in if it looks like you're adding anything harmful." More importantly, the chefs would keep her from cutting up her hands.

Apparently Lloyd had scolded her over all this. Afterward, she felt so guilty she stayed by my side for two days without eating.

"I think it's better if I don't cook at all anymore, Master Laurence…"

I grabbed her hands, which had grown thinner over the past two days, and looked into her eyes. "Colette, your food is the only thing I genuinely find myself wanting to eat. I may have gotten sick

from your last meal, but I still thought the meat was delicious. Please don't take this joy from me."

She lifted her teary face to meet my gaze. I smiled and patted her head as affection welled up in me. She was the only one I adored like this.

Colette Alcott was my childhood friend Lloyd's younger sister, so I'd known her since birth. I used to sneak out of the royal castle and go to the Alcott manor back then. Every time I heard her infant cries, I'd rush to her room. She would always stop crying the instant she saw me, even though her wet nurse could never manage to settle her down. Then she'd reach for me with a smile, a smile that contained none of the scheming or ulterior motives I'd become accustomed to in the royal castle. She would follow me everywhere, calling my name with a lisp and smelling oh-so sweet. She never hid how she felt, her affection on display for all to see. And so she became the one person in the world I believed would never betray me.

When she turned ten, we learned she was a saint. They hadn't discovered her power or examined her at three, as was customary, so she probably wasn't a particularly powerful saint, but that didn't matter. She was a saint, and that changed everything.

Royal family members could not marry just anybody—their partners had to be saints. In fact, being a saint was the *only* restriction.

"Master Laureeence! Are you hurt anywhere? Huh? Why am I asking? Because I'm a saint, of course! I'll be able to heal you now!"

She was probably the only person who would ever reveal they were a saint so nonchalantly. Although people worshipped saints, Colette simply wanted to help me. One could search the whole world and not find another saint like her.

I took her hands and knelt on the ground. "Lady Colette Alcott, will you be my queen?"

"Huh?" Her eyes went wide, but then she exclaimed, "Yes! I'll do it! Let me do it! I'll definitely make you happy!"

Her enthusiasm amused me. "Heh, shouldn't that be my line? But yes, I'm sure you would. Just having you promise to be by my side is all I need to be happy for the rest of time. I'll definitely make you happy as well, Colette. I can be brave for your sake. I swear to always do my best to give you happiness."

From down on one knee, I watched her smile bloom. A breeze kicked up, sending the colorful flowers of the duke's garden whirling around her as though they too sought to celebrate this occasion.

I will probably never forget that moment for as long as I live. The emotions that flooded through me remain vivid even now, just as vibrant as they were that day. I knew I could only find happiness at her side.

"Colette, I swear I will make you happy."

I repeated that promise once more, then stood up and embraced her.

My love only grew over the next six years, but eventually Colette fell into a deep sleep, and our dazzling, laughter-filled days came to an end.

Faced with a choice, I immediately chose Colette. If it was her or the world, I would choose her every time. I did not care about becoming king. I spent my days thinking of nothing but waking her. My only thing I regret is the burden I placed on Saviz, but he did not run from it.

"I will look after the kingdom in your stead, Brother," he said. My little brother was the embodiment of nobility, but I pitied him regardless. He never learned of love, nor of the joy that came from being chosen by another. He showed no interest in such things, but someone who cared so much for his knights and his kingdom clearly harbored abundant affection in his heart. To sit on the throne brought great solitude; he would not manage it alone forever.

"I pray someone appears before you who is what Colette was to me."

Saviz shrugged at my heartfelt words. "I doubt that'll be an issue. The church will pick a suitable saint for me to wed."

"No! I'm not talking about someone you can wed but a partner you can entrust your heart to!"

"I have no need for such a person," he said.

I couldn't find the words to argue further, so I fell silent. As royalty, Saviz could only ever marry a saint, but I doubted he would open his heart to anyone. However, I had no right to tell him to feel

otherwise, as I had abandoned my duties and forced the throne on him.

"…I'll be praying for your future happiness."

I wanted him to be happy despite the burdens he bore.

Ten years passed. Our search for a way to awaken Colette proved fruitless until the day a peculiar female knight appeared. Our meeting with her changed our fates, and though Colette remained at the forefront of my mind, part of me prayed someone would come along to change Saviz's fate as well.

Please, let Saviz find someone he can entrust with his heart.

I prayed fervently for my brother, so he would not have to endure the solitude of the throne.

Side Story:
Zavilia Updates His Hit List

"HMM… WHAT TO DO…" Zavilia sat at his favorite spot by the bay window of my dormitory room, pondering the scraps of paper strewn about his feet.

"What's that, Zavilia?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, just my hit list. It's been ages since I updated it, so I was thinking it's about time." His eyes remained glued to the scraps of paper as he swished his black tail back and forth. He focused intensely, but his words struck me.

"Your *hit list*?!" I shrieked.

Come to think of it, he had made such a list a while back.

I drew near to see my adorable black dragon writing something decidedly *not* adorable. I recognized many of the names on his list.

<u>Hit List</u>

1. Desmond, Second Knight Brigade Captain

2. Cerulean the Jester

3. Saint Priscilla

…

"Eek! Z-Zavilia! I-Isn't this already updated?!" I exclaimed with a small jump. Some of these names hadn't made the list last time.

Zavilia didn't even look up at me as he replied, too immersed in his list-making. **"I've only gotten to the fifteenth place so far. Number sixteen should be..."**

"N-no, I think you've written more than enough! Actually, why are you making such a scary list in the first place? I-I mean, you've been able to fly around freely on castle grounds lately, right? With you to protect me, I'm perfectly safe! There's no need for this!"

I grabbed Zavilia's shoulders and shook him, and at last he regarded me.

"Well, I can't ensure your absolute safety, and it'd be too late if I were to arrive after something happened, so wouldn't it make sense to execute threats preemptively?"

"E-e-*execute?!* M-my, those are some scary words you're slinging around there, Zavilia! Uhh, I'm happy you're worried for me, but I'll be fine. And there's nobody dangerous around me that you have to 'execute.' I've only met Saint Priscilla once, and you have her listed third, for crying out loud!"

Zavilia simply scoffed. Apparently recalling my visit to Lloyd's manor, he said, **"Once is more than enough to see how awfully she treated you. That Priscilla girl deserves to be taught a lesson after what she did. You made me promise not to split space apart and teleport over no matter what I heard, but you didn't say anything about me flying to the manor normally—and I genuinely considered doing just that."**

"Eek! I wasn't trying to leave you a loophole. Don't intentionally misinterpret my words! Like I said before, Priscilla is a fellow saint, not my enemy! Everyone is already worried by how few saints there are, so you can't hurt her!" I ran down the list again to try and change the topic. "And what's with your number two here? Cerulean is just a small child! Don't tell me the great black dragon is going to hurt a child?!"

"He may look like a child, but he's actually a twenty-nine-year-old man and the king. He's the troublesome type, and he forced all his duties onto his younger brother while keeping his power. Plus, he's willing to sacrifice anything to get what he wants."

Wow, Zavilia is sharp! I thought. Cerulean was sacrificing his own life to try and save Colette, after all.

"The more power one wields, the greater their demands. As there's much that only you can do for him, Fia, I see trouble in your future if you get involved with him. The best thing we can do is pluck this worrying seed out before it has a chance to grow into a big, cumbersome tree—then chop and mince him into pieces for good measure."

"P-pluck, chop, *and* mince?! That's going way too far! Cerulean's brother, Commander Saviz, may be tall, but I don't think Cerulean will grow that big. If anything, he's getting smaller every year, so relax, okay? He's not going to grow into a big tree but will instead remain a tiny shrub not worth worrying about!"

“I think you’re missing my point here…” Zavilia continued to grumble, but I pretended not to hear and instead checked the list again.

“Let’s see, number one is…Captain Desmond! Ah, now *this* I can get behind! Er, I-I’m not saying he’s a bad person or anything, but he likes to have a bit too much fun and gets carried away.” He also bragged and teased a lot. If one took half of his teasing seriously, then I could see why Zavilia would put him on the list, but it wasn’t like Desmond could change his ways at the drop of a hat. He’d lived his whole life with that nasty personality of his and…

Zavilia slammed his tail against the floor to snap me out of my thoughts. **“There’s no excuse for the rudeness he shows you, and he insults you knowing full well of my existence, thus indirectly provoking me. I originally planned to face him head-on, but I’ve settled instead on burning him to a crisp in front of an audience to prevent any future issues from the others. I’m currently awaiting a good opportunity.”**

“Eeeeeeeeeek! Z-Zavilia, no! Bad dragon! Captain Desmond works himself ragged every day, so he gets exhausted to the point where he doesn’t know what he’s saying! Everything you hear from him is nonsense! He’s not someone you should take even the slightest bit seriously!” And yet Zavilia was taking him *very* seriously. I could tell from how he spoke, and it sent me into a panic.

Zavilia mulled over my words. **“…Really?”**

“Yes, yes!” I insisted. “He’s not someone my adorable, smart little dragon should waste time on!” I changed the topic by brute

force. “Incidentally, Zavilia, I heard Gizara, that griffon we brought back from the Giza Ravine, laid eggs! Wanna go see?”

Finally, Zavilia’s interest turned away from death and destruction. **“Oh? You want to go see that strange knight acting all weird?”**

“Strange knight?” The last time Zavilia had said something like that he was referring to Quentin. “What, did Captain Quentin do something again?”

Quentin had always been a rather eccentric individual, but he became all the odder when monsters got involved. Gizara was his familiar, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he pulled something weird again. Zavilia must have spotted Quentin getting up to something during one of his flights.

“Well…I *could* explain, but it’s far more instructive to see it for yourself, so let’s go.”

“Ohh, sounds exciting! Let’s do it!”

Truth be told, I didn’t want to go *anywhere* near Quentin, or as Zavilia put it, “that strange knight,” but I had to distract Zavilia from his hit list, and you can’t break an omelet without cracking a few eggs.

Nonchalantly, I slid Zavilia’s hit list to the far corner of the bay window. “Shall we be off?”

“We’re the ones who brought that griffon here, so I suppose we have a responsibility to check on things before

something goes wrong… I guess I can work on my hit list later."

Guh. Shoot. I guess you won't forget about it that easily, huh… It seemed I only managed to postpone the issue. I hung my head. *M-maybe Zavilia will have so much fun meeting Gizara and Quentin that he'll lose interest in working on his hit list!*

With abundant optimism, I made for the familiar stable with Zavilia.

Side Story:
Kurtis — The Proper Way to Spend a Day Off

"THE PATH TO THE women's dormitory has certainly seen better days…"

I'd been inspecting the castle grounds when I spotted a pothole on the path leading to the women knights' dormitory where Lady Fi was staying and halted.

"How terrible. What if Lady Fi stumbled because of this?"

The pothole was by no means huge, but Lady Fi was prone to going deep into thought and highly likely to trip on it as she walked. It just so happened that I had the day off, so I rolled up my sleeves, hauled over a sandbag from the equipment storage room, filled the depressed area with sand, then covered and leveled it with dirt to make it match its surroundings. Once complete, I surveyed my work with satisfaction.

Just then, Desmond passed by, and he stopped to regard me strangely. "I'm guessing it's your day off as you're in plain clothes, so what the heck are you doing?"

"Is it not obvious? I'm making sure the path to the women's dormitory is level so there's no danger of Lady Fi tripping." I announced my plan proudly, but Desmond shook his head.

"Huh?! You, a knight brigade captain, are doing such a thing on your day off?!"

"I am!" I said, bemused by Desmond's shortsightedness.

"…I see. You know, I've been cursing my luck lately for having to work back-to-back-to-back overtime, but after seeing how you spend your time off, I feel like I still got it pretty good!" He cheered up as he spoke and smiled broadly by the end.

"Good for you," I said, and we parted ways.

I was passing by the dining hall when the shouts of the chefs inside stopped me in my tracks.

"Whaddya mean the fura-fura bird meat failed to deliver?! We need that meat for tonight's dinner! These knights are nothing but lumps of muscle. They need their protein! If we serve 'em nothing but vegetables, they'll riot, for crying out loud!"

"Look, complaining to me about it isn't going to fix anything! Ahh, blast! Why'd we also have to be out of ham and sausage at such a time?!"

"You mean we've got nothing but *rabbit food*?! Ain't no way! We're dead, I tell you! Dead!"

I listened to them panic for a few moments before cutting in. "Starfall Forest is about an hour one-way from here. A round trip should take me three hours or so. Should I hunt some monster meat for tonight?"

The three chefs gaped at me wide-eyed. I waited for them to muster a nervous reply.

"U-uh… You're a knight brigade captain, right? There aren't many of ya, so I more or less remember your faces. You seem to be on break today. Are you sure you wanna trouble yourself with something like this?"

"It's fine," I replied. "We must have meat at tonight's meal at all costs."

"E-*exactly*! You don't want to deal with hordes of starving knights either, huh?"

It seemed the chefs had misunderstood me. I cared little for the other knights, but I would not allow *Lady Fi* to go without. Unconcerned, I let the misconception stand, then turned away to make for the stables, where I could borrow a horse.

"Lady Fi is fond of meat. I cannot let her suffer a disappointing dinner." She also wished to grow a little taller, from what I understood. Thus, she needed meat—the building block for healthy bones and muscles.

Precisely three hours later, I returned to the dining hall with the body of a deer-like monster. The chefs showered me with effusive appreciation.

"Th-thank you so much!"

"Now we don't have to worry about the knights throwing a fit!"

"I understand we can't make you a meal because you captains have your own dining hall, but isn't there anything we can do for you?!"

I rejected their attempts to repay me, but they insisted on doing something, so I made one simple demand. “Very well. If a female knight with vivid red hair comes to eat here, let her eat all the meat she wants.”

“Absolutely!”

Satisfied with that deal, I left the knights’ dining hall behind.

I still had a little time before dinner, so I made for the eastern side of the castle grounds with a bag of herbs I’d brought back from Starfall Forest. The eastern side hosted a spring gurgling with green healing potion. I knew Lady Fi visited this place from time to time.

When I reached the spring, I took out the herbs I’d brought and planted them around the water. I’d picked them specially from Starfall Forest, knowing they couldn’t be found around the castle itself and figuring Lady Fi would enjoy seeing them.

I devoted myself to planting the herbs until a long shadow suddenly draped over me. I looked up to see Zackary standing over me with a quizzical expression.

“Kurtis, what the heck are you doing? Why are you planting weeds in the royal castle garden?”

Of course, these were not weeds but herbs. However, the modern world had all but forgotten their medicinal properties, categorizing them as weeds, so I understood his confusion.

“Lady Fi likes these plain-looking kinds of plants,” I said. “I figured she might stroll through a place like this in her free time, so I

planted them here in the hopes she might see them."

"…You've sure got a lot of free time. Fia's a good kid, but I don't get why you and Quentin act all weird whenever she's involved."

Something about what he said bothered me. "Are you suggesting Quentin and I are alike?" I asked.

"Well, no, you're far better. I was talking to Quentin a bit ago, and, uh…let's just say I've sworn never to go near that guy again!"

For all his bulk, Zackary trembled as he spoke, and I wondered what Quentin must have done to make a man as kind as Zackary want to avoid him. It must have something to do with Quentin's monster obsession, I concluded and parted ways with Zackary.

Gray darkened the edges of the sky when I finished my herb planting. I made my way to the captain's dining hall, only to find Desmond and Zackary already eating there. Desmond beckoned me over, then appraised me from head to toe when I approached.

"Kurtis, why is it you're wearing the same clothes I saw you in this morning? And how come you don't have a scratch on you?"

"Pardon? Why would I be injured?" I asked as I sat down. A chef quickly brought over a tray with my dinner. The dish used flower-horned deer meat.

Zackary stabbed his meat with a fork and said, "I heard from the chef that this meat came from the chefs in the main dining hall. 'The gracious Captain Kurtis hunted this monster in no time, asking for nothing in return,' the chefs apparently said."

"Ah, right," I said. "I happened to overhear that the chefs needed meat for tonight's dinner. Lady Fi is still a growing woman, so I couldn't allow her to miss out on her protein. That's why I lent a hand."

Despite my very reasonable explanation, Desmond slammed his hand on the table. "Again with this Fia nonsense, Kurtis?! And isn't this meat from a flower-horned deer?! You hunted one alone? You went into Starfall Forest *alone*?! There isn't an idiot in this world who would step into that place alone, not knowing what kind of monster might show up!"

"I see no issue. I had no intention of going farther than thirty minutes past the entrance. At that depth, the monsters are nothing worth worrying about, and I could always flee if something unexpected appeared."

My calm explanation only seemed to rile Desmond up more. "Where is your confidence coming from?! Anything could have shown up! Some blue dragons appeared there not long ago! Heck, the black dragon showed up too!"

I appreciated Desmond's concern, but I needed to put his worries to rest. "I'm not saying I would defeat such dangerous monsters. If I encountered one, I would simply flee."

"The fact you think you could *simply flee* is the problem! Who do you think you are?! It isn't that easy to escape a dragon!"

In my past life, I'd had a superior who defeated four blue dragons nearly single-handedly and without suffering so much as a scratch. Compared to that, escaping from dragons was nothing…

Saying that would only invite further frustration, so I instead said, “I see. I’ll be more careful then,” and left it at that.

After eating, Desmond and Zackary struck up a friendly conversation. I sat back and merely listened until Desmond turned to me.

“Just what do you think days off are for anyway, Kurtis?! You spent your morning leveling the pathway in front of the women’s dormitory so Fia wouldn’t trip, then spent your afternoon hunting a vicious monster so Fia would have meat! You’ve spent your whole day off on Fia!”

And what was so wrong with that?

Zackary spoke up next. “Desmond’s right, but there’s even more to it. I found Kurtis planting weeds around the eastern side of the grounds sometime after he delivered that monster to the chefs. Apparently he thought Fia would be happy if he did.”

“What? Planting *weeds*? Kurtis, you need to use your time off on something more meaningful! Ha ha, even my days of constantly overworking are better than how you spend your holiday! I guess your day off isn’t so meaningless if it makes me feel better by comparison!” Desmond crossed his arms over his chest. “But why plant weeds? I suppose Fia does pick weeds often… Wait, don’t tell me you planted all those weeds she picks?”

“Not all of them. I just happened to go to Starfall Forest today, so I picked whatever plants caught my eye.”

The other knights shook their heads.

"Kurtis, man… I thought you were picking weeds from the west side of the castle grounds and replanting them on the east, but you went through the effort of finding them in the forest and carrying them all the way back here?" Desmond groaned.

"Talk about a waste of a day off!" Zackary exclaimed.

I did not at all care for their suggestion that spending my day off on Lady Fi was a waste. "I'm sorry, but is one not meant to spend a day off as they see fit?"

"…No, they are," Desmond replied, exasperated.

What was the issue then, I wondered.

Zackary swept in to explain. "You're right about a day off being whatever you want it to be, but please use your days off for yourself!"

Wait, was all their complaining for my sake? I was touched, even if they were completely missing the mark.

"I am using it for myself. Everything I did today was exactly what *I* wished to do." I tried to make them understand, but Desmond went on chiding me.

"Come to your senses! On top of your foolish decisions, everything you did today was for Fia! Your time off is supposed to be spent on what *you* want to do!"

"As I've been trying to tell you, that's exactly what I did! I may shop, take care of chores, and do similar things, but that's only out of necessity. To tell the truth, I consider it time wasted. The time I spend working for Fia's sake is the *only* time I consider truly well spent!"

How many times would I explain myself? Perhaps now they would understand.

They simply stared at me with wide eyes, not saying a word.

"I am making full use of my time, and don't you doubt it!" I stressed. "What I did today is the proper way to spend a day off!"

Still, they did not respond, but at least they did not protest, so that was that. Finally, I could make my coworkers understand the proper way to spend a day off.

Side Story:
Quentin — Quentin Agutter (Age: Twenty-Nine, Single) Becomes a Mother

"C-CAPTAIN QUENTIN, wh-what's going on with your stomach?!"

I'd risen from my chair and reached for the bookshelf when my vice-captain, Gideon, cried out in shock. He'd been in my office for a while but hadn't noticed my stomach until now. I understood his surprise, but he didn't need to shout like that. With a sharp look, I admonished him. "Be quiet! You're going to wake my baby!"

"Y-y-your baby?" He gaped at me for some reason, staring at my stomach.

I puffed up my chest. This pride swelling inside me must have been what every pregnant mother felt. "That's right. I'll be prioritizing my motherly duties for the time being. I want my child to have the perfect environment for a safe birth, so no more shouting, you hear?! Don't shake me, don't make me run, and keep your voice down as much as possible."

"Y-y-yes, sir…"

Though confused, Gideon was obedient enough to comply, so I nodded and returned to what I was doing. I picked out a book from the shelf and returned to my desk, caressing the griffon-egg-sized bulge on my stomach as I did.

My recently obtained familiar—Gizara, the lord of the griffons—laid her eggs late last night. Knowing the time was at hand, I'd spent most of my recent nights sleeping at the familiar stables. Gizara had been particularly restless last night, and I knew it was time. Nervously, I looked after her as she laid not one but two eggs, each big enough to fit in both my arms. I will probably never forget the joy of witnessing new life enter this world under a sky full of sparkling stars.

"Well done, Gizara! You are the greatest mother this world has ever known!" Tears overwhelmed my eyes.

Gizara silently scrutinized the two eggs she had laid. Then she kicked one far away and slowly lowered herself on top of the other.

"Gizara? I don't care how tough these eggshells may be, you shouldn't be kicking your eggs! What if they broke?! Now get up. You can warm both of these eggs at the same time, can't you?"

I frantically picked up the egg she'd kicked away, gently returning it to her. She turned her head away, however, refusing to let me put the egg under her.

"Gizara, what's the matter? Don't you want to warm this egg?" Such behavior was so unlike her.

With some annoyance, she replied, **"Griffons typically only lay one egg and only ever raise one child. On the rare occasion when we lay two eggs, we will pick the larger one to warm."**

"What?! Then what'll happen to the smaller one?!"

“What happens to it is of no concern to me. I have already chosen my egg.”

I was stunned. Were all wild griffons this ruthless?

“…I see. Then you wouldn’t mind if I took this egg as my own, right? I’ll keep this egg warm myself until it hatches! Starting today, I’m this egg’s mother!”

Her tone turned icy. **“…You’re only wasting your time.”**

“Not if I can help it!” And just like that, I swore to become a fine griffon mother.

Thus, I kept the egg tucked underneath my knight uniform and carefully carried it around. In an ideal world, I would stay home all day to focus on keeping the egg warm, but unfortunately, I had my work to attend to.

Gizara’s egg was about as big as a person’s head, so the bulge around my stomach was quite conspicuous. Passersby gave me hard stares as I navigated the castle, but I ignored them, knowing it would only be a matter of time before they got used to the sight. Most people left me alone, but occasionally, someone would approach, always exclaiming annoyingly as they did.

“Quentin, what’s with your stomach?! Just how much have you been eating?! Come with me to the training grounds! I’ll help you slim that stomach down again!”

It was always a captain who called out to me. This time it was Zackary.

"This isn't fat; it's my child! I'm going to be a mother soon, so don't bother me! And stop shouting or you'll scare the child!" I kept my complaints as quiet as I could, for the baby's sake.

Zackary goggled at me. "…What are you even saying? I'm used to your nonsense, but I think I'm going to have to start questioning your sanity now."

It seemed my perfectly concise and clear explanation was still too difficult for him. I'd thought him more sensible than this, but I supposed I'd given him too much credit. I tried simplifying yet further. "I'll be delivering my own child soon. This is my first time, so I don't know when it will come out. I want to do everything I can to keep my child safe, so don't make me move vigorously or do anything extreme. I absolutely cannot go to the training grounds right now."

After a long pause, Zackary said, "I…see. My bad. I'll keep my distance from you from now on. Good luck on your childbirth."

Finally, my words penetrated his thick head. For some reason, however, he turned quite mild-mannered. He backed away a step, then briskly hurried away.

I encountered Clarissa and Desmond afterward, and the two of them both reacted in similarly noisy and bothersome ways. As a preventive measure, I sheltered myself in my office. That's where Gideon reacted to my stomach bulge, which brings us to the present…

I sighed. "Ugh. It'd be nice if they had a knight uniform that was a bit baggier. Though I'm sure even then my stomach would feel a

little tight. This is what all mothers have to go through, huh?”

Being pregnant must be rough. Having an entire baby take up a space where there usually was nothing was a burden unlike any other.

I was musing over all this and patting my egg over my clothes when a knock came at the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened slowly, and in peered Fia with the Black Dragon King perched on her shoulder.

“Black Dragon King! Miss Fia! What brings you two here?” I hurriedly stood to greet them. Fia took one look at me and gawked.

“Wow! Gizara was telling the truth; you really are trying to hatch that egg yourself!”

“That I am! Apparently griffons only raise one egg themselves, so I took it upon myself to become this egg’s mother!” I said.

Fia smiled. “What a great idea! Birds imprint on the first person they see, so maybe bird-type monsters like griffons do the same. If you keep the egg right up against your skin like you’re doing, then you’ll probably be the first thing they see!”

I gave Fia the same explanation I’d given Zackary, Gideon, Clarissa, and Desmond, but none of them were nearly as supportive as her. Certainly, none of them had offered advice as she had. Yet another reminder of how wonderful she was.



From her shoulder, the Black Dragon King nodded and said, **"I don't know who the egg's father is, but there's a chance the egg might take the best traits from both of its parents and become a griffon even greater than Gizara. In such a case, it could probably eat Quentin by the time it's a fledgling. Imprinting will be a necessary measure to prevent that."**

Gizara's aura was many times greater than my own. I stood no chance in that fight. If a griffon even greater than Gizara hatched from this egg, it could annihilate me in seconds. The Black Dragon King's advice was wise.

"I'll be sure to make my own face the first thing this child of mine sees!" I declared.

The Black Dragon King smirked. **"You really are a rather weird knight. Most wouldn't risk their life to hatch an egg."**

"Huh?!" Fia said. "Quentin, are you really *that* determined to make that egg hatch?! It'd be real awful if the chick you hatched and raised yourself wound up eating you! But you're willing to be its mother anyway?! Wow!"

"Though rare, there are cases of even human mothers losing their lives during childbirth. Becoming a mother is a grave undertaking!" I patted my bulging stomach as I spoke.

Fia nodded, admiration shining in her eyes. From the corner of the room, Gideon scowled as though to say, "What the heck am I listening to?" but I couldn't care less whether he understood or not.

Fia, eyes positively sparkling, said, "You're amazing, Captain Quentin! I know no other unmarried man who understands a mother's

struggles so well! I'm sure you'll become a wonderful mother!"

Her kind words left me overwhelmed with emotion. "Thank you, Miss Fia! I swear I'll live up to your expectations and become a fine mother!"

For once, it felt like she and I were on the same page.

From her shoulder, the Black Dragon King chuckled and said, **"I'm sure you'll be an overly doting mother."**

The future looked bright. I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before I would see the face of my griffon child…

Side Story:
Serafina and the Captains' Dinner Party

(THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO)

"FIND LOTS OF MONSTERS today?"

A familiar voice called out to me while I ate lunch on the sunny terrace. I hadn't heard Sirius approach, but now he stood looking down at the food on the table.

"Three salads, two meat dishes, three fish dishes, a soup, and a mountain of desserts… You have quite the appetite."

"What can I say? I'm in good health," I replied, unruffled.

The corner of his lips quirked. He sat down next to me and said, "I still haven't received the report on this morning's monster extermination trip, but I'm guessing you encountered a fair amount of the beasts, judging by your appetite."

"…I'm afraid I don't see how the two correlate." I wiped my mouth with a napkin.

He laughed. "Ha ha ha, you don't, do you? Well, for some inexplicable reason, your mana and your stomach seem to be connected. You're always hungry after you use a great deal of mana, and you somehow recover once you eat your fill."

"Oho ho ho. Oh Sirius, you can be so silly sometimes. I recently talked with some other saints and learned very few think to top off

their mana by eating. So do you really think someone like me would do something so crass? Even if I did, I certainly wouldn't admit it…"

Sirius tousled my hair like I was a child.

"So you finally realized. You're ten years late, but I suppose we can consider that remarkable in your case. You're wrong about one thing though: The number of saints who top off their mana by eating isn't 'very few.' It's just you."

"Huh?"

Well, that was news. But…it certainly explained why the other saints seemed to walk on eggshells when they tried to explain things to me.

"Your mana reserves are phenomenal. The second-greatest saint has less than a quarter of your mana. On top of that, there aren't any other saints who can use up all their mana so quickly."

"Oh, is that so? I had no idea."

His smirk softened. "It's possible to forcibly recover mana by drinking a magic restoration potion, but it doesn't compare to natural recovery. Your massive mana reserves probably take a huge toll on your body, so you compensate by eating a lot. Speaking of which…" He abruptly changed the topic. "You gave a captain some healing potions the other day, didn't you?"

"Oh, right. I did."

A few days ago, I was carrying a wooden box of healing potions down the corridor, feeling a bit bummed that I had made way too many, when I happened across the Fifth Knight Brigade's Captain

Alnair. I asked if he would mind taking a few off my hands, but before I could finish, he shouted, "Gladly!" I ended up giving him the whole box.

"You could find those sort of healing potions anywhere, but I figured more wouldn't hurt given how dangerous knights' jobs are. I hope they get some use out of them."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "You realize your healing potions are special items only the royal family can use, right? They aren't something you can 'find anywhere,' as you say."

"Huh?"

My healing potions usually went to my brothers, but they certainly weren't limited to the royal family alone. The ones my brothers didn't use went to the royal guard, the townsfolk, and others.

Sirius seemed to realize what I was thinking. "Officially, at least, only the royal family may use them, but no one would dare defy the noble Great Saint's wishes, so everyone overlooks the healing potions you distribute yourself."

"Wh-what, really? I had no idea!" I said, eyes wide.

…Wait, but that means I could keep distributing healing potions to everyone and pretend I didn't know I was breaking the rules.

I grinned mischievously at my great idea. Sirius merely sighed.

"Moving along… The captains are so grateful to receive healing potions from you that they want to invite you to a formal dinner. Of course, they fail to realize a dinner with the one and only Great Saint

will be an honor for *them*, not you. Please forgive the idiots. It's my own fault for not keeping them in line."

From the way he covered for them, I could tell Sirius loved his knights. Not that that was anything new.

"Is that so? Then I'll gladly take them up on the offer!"

And thus, I would have dinner with the captains the following week.

One week later, I headed to the captains-only dining hall wearing a plain dress, Sirius at my side. I'd requested we use their dining hall so I could get a glimpse at their normal lives.

The doors swung open from the inside as we approached. Our four familiar captains stood crammed at the entrance: Second Knight Brigade Captain Hadar, Third Mage Knight Brigade Captain Tsih, Fifth Knight Brigade Captain Alnair, and Sixth Knight Brigade Captain Elnath. Their medals gleamed proudly on the breasts of their uniforms.

Though they welcomed me warmly, their faces were tense, and they gritted their teeth through the usual courtesies. These people were more comfortable with a sword than a salad fork—a formal dinner took them out of their element. So I appreciated them going to all this trouble for me.

I handed a pink package to Tsih, who stood near the entrance. "Thank you for your invitation. I made cookies for everyone. Feel free to share them."

"C-cookies? Y-y-you made cookies?? All for *me*?!"

Alnair punched Tsih in the stomach…or so I thought. Tsih didn't react much at all, his eyes only bulging slightly, so I must have seen wrong.

"Tsih, keep your sleep talk to yourself or I'll mash you to a pulp."

I could also swear I heard someone whisper a threat, but surely that was just my imagination.

I blinked to steady myself, while Alnair pushed Tsih into the background and said, "Did you by chance make these yourself, Lady Serafina?"

Maybe he worried I'd messed them up. "I did, but don't worry. I make sweets often, even if I do get told it's not a hobby befitting a princess. They should be palatable. Of course, they don't compare to store-bought cookies, so you don't need to force yourself to eat them."

"Understood! I'll savor the smell and preserve them for eternity!" Hadar said.

"I'll pass them down as a family heirloom!" Elnath said.

"…Actually, please just eat them."

Once greetings were out of the way, the captains led me and Sirius to the table at the center of the room. I exclaimed at the extravagant spread laid out before me.

"Oh my, what a feast!"

Dishes of all sorts cluttered the table from edge to edge.

"We spent the last three days holed up in the forest hunting all the delicious monsters we could find!" Hadar said in his booming voice.

The other captains hastened to elaborate.

"And it's not just meat! We collected a bunch of delicious-looking fruits and some honey as well!"

"Our chefs used the ingredients to make all these carefully thought-out dishes!"

"And we all made sure to take baths to get the stench off us, then changed into new knight uniforms!"

I smiled at all this care and effort just for me. "Thank you, everyone! I'm looking forward to this dinner!"

Once Sirius and I sat, the captains served us, putting a little of each dish onto our plates. I eagerly took up my knife and fork, eyeing the incredible spread, then froze before I could dig in.

I'd been out on another monster extermination trip this morning and used a lot of magic, so I was plenty famished. I'd planned to snack a little before coming here so I wouldn't eat *too* much at dinner, but we returned later than I expected, and I only had time to bathe and change clothes.

…This is a problem. I need to keep the dainty princess act up, but I'm starving. Determined, I only let myself open my mouth a tiny bit and nibbled cautiously at a veggie.

This was *hard*. I was utterly *ravenous*, but if I gave in to the growling in my stomach, the knights would be appalled. My hunger gnawed at me, and I granted myself a slightly bigger bite next time.

Alnair, sitting in front of me, excitedly spoke up. "Lady Serafina, thank you very much for giving us those special healing potions meant for the royal family yesterday! Their effects were every bit as incredible as one might expect! I feel as though I've lived my whole life just to thank you in this moment, so now I can die without regrets!"

Okay, that was a lot, but the captains did describe Sirius as a "monster" and "a man able to work forever without break," so I supposed he and the other knights were prone to exaggeration. Healing potions had the same effect no matter who made them, but it was nice to hear the captains appreciated them.

"They're just ordinary healing potions you could find anywhere, but I'm glad you like them," I replied with a smile.

Hadar frantically shook his head. "O-ordinary potions you could find anywhere?! Not at all! Your potions are one of a kind! I've used many healing potions in my line of work, but I've never experienced any even remotely as powerful as yours!"

"Hadar is right! My guts were in knots, and I had a terrible fever that made me feel like I was burning up with every breath! Then I drank your healing potion and even the air itself tasted delicious! It was like I was breathing a wind straight from heaven!" Alnair balled his hands into fists as he spoke. He was exaggerating again, obviously, but his appreciation was genuine, at least.

I let the captains go on for a while, but eventually Sirius frowned and said, “You all talk too much.” He was probably annoyed by the stories about how soft he was on me. This was all news to me, however—and juicy news at that—so I ignored his grumbling and let the captains keep going.

That was when my stomach grumbled noisily.

“Ack?!”

The captains sitting across from me didn’t seem to hear, but Sirius, who sat right next to me, definitely noticed. He glanced at my hands and said, “You’re not eating much.”

“Y-yes I am! I’m eating lots!” In truth, I was eating less than an eighth of what I really wanted, but I couldn’t let the captains think the Great Saint, whom they so respected, scarfed down food like an animal.

Sirius grinned. “Serafina, when you’re invited to a dinner, there are two things you must not do: Be picky with your food and leave food uneaten. Take as much as you can to show what a fine, respectable lady you are.”

“Huh?!” Before I could respond, the four captains gasped at once. They leapt to their feet to protest.

“C-Captain Sirius, there’s no way she could eat all this food!”

“She’s as dainty as a spirit! Her stomach has to be tiny!”

“I’m sure any food would taste great in her presence, but not even I could eat all of this!”

"I thought you were supposed to be soft when it came to her?! How can you ask for something so unreasonable?!"

Sirius let the complaints wash over him. When the captains finished, he said, "I have been in charge of Serafina's education ever since she was young and have a duty to make her a respectable young lady, that is all. But I would also hate to see the food the four of you spent three days working hard to gather go to waste."

A single thought streaked through the minds of all four captains: *Yeah right! There's no way you care the slightest bit about us!* Wisely, they chose not to voice this particular thought. Instead, they wordlessly resumed their seats and began to eat. They must've been trying to help me, since Sirius told me to leave no food behind.

Thanks to the healthy captains and their equally healthy - appetites, plate after plate cleared. I watched in amazement. From my side, Sirius muttered, "Finally. Some peace and quiet."

I wondered if he'd spoken up just to make the captains stop talking, but then he rose and brought over my favorite dishes. Silencing the captains may have been a happy byproduct, but Sirius truly did want to give me a chance to eat my fill. The captains were so focused on their own food that none of them noticed me, so I could finally eat as much as I wanted.

"It's all so delicious! You can tell everyone selected the ingredients with care," I said between bites.

Sirius smiled in response.

I shoveled food into my mouth until I suddenly found a green ririko fruit speared on my fork. These curious fruits could change from

green to red. Usually one would pick and cook them while green, but I found the green ones too sour, so I only ate the red ones.

I stiffened, not sure what to do. Sirius leaned close, opened his mouth, and ate the ririko fruit right off my fork.

"Huh?!" I exclaimed, but the four captains drowned my shock with their own.

"Huuuh?! D-did he just…?!"

"Did Captain Sirius eat off Lady Serafina's fork?!"

"Is that even allowed?!"

"What's going on?!"

The captains stopped and stared. Heat flushed into my face, but Sirius didn't seem affected in the slightest. "Not bad. You lot picked some decent ingredients, but what's with the looks? Serafina was feeling full, so I ate a little for her. I'm only being soft on her like you all asked me to. Is that a problem?"

"…No," the captains said as one. They seemed to have more to say, but none of them were brave enough to speak up, agreeing meekly with Sirius instead.

Sirius nodded before turning his attention to my red face. He brushed my hair out of my eyes and smiled kindly. "It looks like their attention has returned to you; it'll be tough to eat more now. How about it? Do you feel satisfied, Serafina?"

Between this sudden kindness and the way he'd eaten directly off my fork, my chest was so tight it could burst. I wondered at the

feeling. It was almost like the satisfaction of eating a filling meal, so I figured I must be full and nodded.

"I see," he said, and patted my head.

The captains finally noticed the stack of empty plates beside me. It was far less than what I usually consumed to refill my mana, but for an ordinary lady, it would suffice. The captains rejoiced.

"I-I can't believe Lady Serafina ate so much of our food!"

"It was worth holing up in the forest for three whole days!"

Their joy was infectious. I smiled. "Thank you for inviting me today. The food was delicious."

"No, thank you for coming!"

And just like that, with everyone smiling, the dinner came to an end.

Later that night, when I was alone in my room, hunger dug at my stomach, so I called for a maid and had her sneak me a late-night meal. I chowed down, feeling keenly that I really hadn't eaten enough that day.

…But if that were the case, why did I nod at Sirius when he asked if I felt full?

My hands froze above my plate, and I cocked my head to the side. Unable to find an answer, I gazed out the window to watch the moon cutting through the thick dark of night. For a while, I simply took in its majesty. Then I murmured, "…The moon is beautiful, isn't it?"

I was only commenting on the moon’s beauty—but its radiance did bring to mind a certain gray-haired royal guard captain of mine.

Side Story:
Laurence — Colette (Nine Years Old) Gets Locked Up

"WHAT? COLETTE was locked away in the royal castle dungeon?!"

I grabbed the chamberlain by the collar after he reported to me.

"A-ack, Y-Your Highness, please, I can't breathe! If you don't loosen your grip, I'll be summoned to the pearly gates with my report left unfinished…"

I doubted at first that the grip of a twelve-year-old could truly choke him out, but reconsidered as the lanky man flailed in my grasp. I hurriedly loosen my hold but continued to press him. "There! Now tell me what happened. Why was Colette thrown into the dungeon?!"

"Well, you see…" he began.

I paled as he explained. After he was done, I dashed to the dungeon while shouting, "Coleeeeette!" with the chamberlain trailing behind me.

Just the other day, Colette proudly treated me to food she made herself. It was rather…unique, the kind of dish I've never seen here in the royal castle. She used monster meat but forgot to remove the poison, which made serving it to royalty a bit of an issue. I knew she meant no harm, so I quietly hid the indiscretion. I assumed that was the end of it, but Colette, apparently guilty over going unpunished,

placed *herself* in the dungeon. Confused, I rushed to the dank underground cells.

Surely no duke's daughter would willingly put herself in such a dire place, I thought. But all the blood drained from my face when I glimpsed Colette through the bars of a cell. She sat atop a bed carved from stone with nothing but some straw for padding, head hanging listlessly.

"Colette, what are you doing?!"

The knight guarding the dungeon startled and straightened when he noticed me. I didn't so much as glance his direction, going right for the cell, grabbing the bars, and getting as close to Colette as I could.

"Let's go! I'm getting you out of here!"

Colette didn't lift her head to look at me, instead burying it in the straw. Through tears, she said, "N-no! I've done something awful to you, Master Laurence, and I must be punished!"

"I see. But you realize you're the daughter of a duke, right? If we locked you away in a dungeon, it would have to be a dungeon fit for a noble—one with the proper furnishings and such. If you stay here on that paltry bed of straw, we'll have to punish whoever brought you here as well."

"Huh?!" She jerked her head up, her naivete on full display and rather adorable.

If she really wanted to insist on staying in this cold and uncomfortable cell, I couldn't stop her, but she was too kind to do that

at the cost of someone else getting punished, which was exactly how she ended up here in the first place. The moment she placed herself in this cell, it was checkmate.

From what the chamberlain said earlier, a knight who knew me and her *very* well had brought Colette here. He of course knew of Colette's naivete, so when she insisted on going to the dungeon, the knight brought her to the one for regular prisoners, confident I would arrive eventually to try to convince Colette to leave the cell.

Just as planned, Colette paled at the thought of the knight suffering because of her. She left the cell without further protest.

"I-I'm the one who kept insisting on being thrown in the dungeon," she said. "It's not the knight's fault!"

"I know, I know," I said as I led her to a warmer room. I wrapped her in a blanket and made her sit on a sofa, then brought her something warm to drink.

She dissolved into tears, water dripping down her cheeks. "I-I'm sorry, Master Laurence. I know apologizing again and again doesn't mean anything. I should be punished, all the more so because you're the crown prince."

Regret twisted her face as it dug into her.

"Look, I've told you before, but I knew you might've forgotten to remove the poison the moment you showed me that meat. I ate it anyway because that was what I wanted to do. So if anyone is at fault here, it's me."

"Huh? B-but…" She furrowed her brows at me like she couldn't figure out if I was joking, comforting her, or merely stating the facts. Of course, it was all three of those things at once, but this adorable open book of a girl couldn't keep any of her feelings off her face. She could be stubborn at times, and she was certainly naive. Trying to persuade her wasn't too hard.

Sure enough, she came around after about ten seconds of thinking. Though her shoulders still slouched, she swore she wouldn't try to punish herself any further.

When it came time for her to return, she murmured, "…I wish I could be a saint. Then I could help you whenever you're in trouble."

"Is that right? I've never heard of anyone wanting to become a saint for somebody else's sake," I replied. Most people wanted to become one for their own sake.

A brilliant smile lit up her face, and it made me think of how wonderful the future could be if she got to live out this ambition of hers.

"…But that would be nice, indeed," I said. "I'll pray from the bottom of my heart that you turn out to be a saint."

That way, I can make you my queen.

There's no knowing which of us wished for it more, but by next year, when they tested her, Colette ended up being a saint. Our shared wish had been granted.

Which meant there was something I absolutely had to do.

I dropped to one knee and proposed on the spot to the only girl in the world who could make me knowingly want to eat poison.

Side Story:
Quentin Announces to Clarissa and Desmond That He Has Become a Mother

"U-UH, WHAT'S WITH your stomach, Quentin?!" Clarissa shouted. She'd been walking down the corridor when she encountered Quentin sporting a conspicuous stomach bulge.

Her concern was genuine, but he frowned anyway. "Keep it down! You'll scare my baby!" He patted his stomach. "I'm going to be the mother of a griffon soon."

Clarissa crossed her arms and cocked her head. *Quentin's going to be the mother of a griffon?*

"Uhh, can men also experience false pregnancies?" she asked. "I don't think a false pregnancy can make your stomach bulge *this* much though… And you said you're going to be the mother of a griffon? At least stick with humans, even if it's just in your imagination."

"I'm not imagining anything!" Quentin said. "There's a real griffon egg right here!"

Clarissa's eyes lit up. She might have been serious or joking when she said, "Oh, interesting, interesting. Y'know, I hear griffon eggs are delicious and nutritious. I've always wanted to try one."

"What?! Clarissa, how could you suggest something so terrible?!"

"Oh, come on. If you actually raise that egg until it hatches, we all know you'll become obsessed with the griffon chick. That would

certainly be fun to watch, but you'll be too busy doting on it to buy me bread and cake when I get hungry. I need my errand boy."

"If you eat my precious egg, I'll never run another errand for you again! Forget that, I'll never *talk* to you again!" Quentin growled like a mama bear trying to scare off a predator.

Clarissa took a hasty step back. When Quentin went on glaring, she hastened to leave.

Like a true protective mother, Quentin let Clarissa escape, choosing not to run and potentially injure his child.

Sometime later, Quentin encountered another captain. This time it was Desmond.

"Whoa, whoa, what's happened to you, Quentin?" Desmond exclaimed when he spotted Quentin's stomach bulge. "Did you change your uniform or something? I hate to break it to you, but I don't think stomach bulges are in style this year."

Quentin scowled. "What's with you captains and your lack of common sense?! One look at my stomach should make it obvious that I'm with child, shouldn't it?! In what world is this a new uniform trend?!"

"…What?"

"I said I'm with child! Griffon child! So don't get in my way, don't bother me, and whatever you do, don't pester me!"

After a long pause, Desmond said, "…I see. I must be working too hard. Come to think of it, I haven't had a wink of sleep these past

two days. Ha ha ha, no wonder I'm starting to hallucinate."

He put his hands up in surrender, refusing to believe the reality before him, and backed away. He kept his eyes on Quentin as he retreated, as though faced with a dangerous animal, then broke into a full sprint once he rounded the corner. In moments, he was gone.

Quentin watched Desmond go with a frown. "Does nobody understand the greatness of what I'm doing?" He sighed. "Everyone still has a lot of learning to do before they're fit to be parents themselves."

The day Quentin and the other captains could see eye to eye remained a distant dream.

Afterword

THANK YOU FOR BUYING this book! We've made it to Volume 8 now. Thank you for sticking with me this far.

Fia finally learns of the head saint selection, makes her debut as a (pretend) saint, and, well…performs some miracles! But the head saint selection part of the story will be put on temporary hold for a while, as the coming arc will focus on the royal family instead.

Once again, chibi provided the wonderful illustrations for the volume! The jesters they drew for the last volume were simply wonderful, so I just had to have them again for this volume! If I saw the Fia, Cerulean, and Dolly on the cover performing in a plaza, I'd definitely go watch them myself. Thank you, chibi.

This volume is being released at the same time as Volume 2 of the prequel, *A Tale of the Secret Saint ZERO*. To mark the occasion, we decided to include the prologue of said prequel in this volume. Please check the series out if you liked that prologue! While *ZERO* is a prequel work, I believe it stands on its own and can be enjoyed as is!

Also to mark the occasion, we're hosting our second character popularity poll! A short story for the winning character will go up for free on our publisher's (Earth Star) home page, so go ahead and vote for your favorite!* Incidentally, the winning character last time was First Knight Brigade captain Cyril at 726 votes.

I've also started a Twitter account (https://twitter.com/touya_stars) for making announcements, so feel

free to follow me there.

I would like to end by thanking you for reading this far. Thank you to everyone who worked hard to make this book a reality and to all my dear readers. Coming out with two books at once was hard, but I enjoyed the work! I hope you enjoyed reading.

** Voting closed in February 2022.*



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