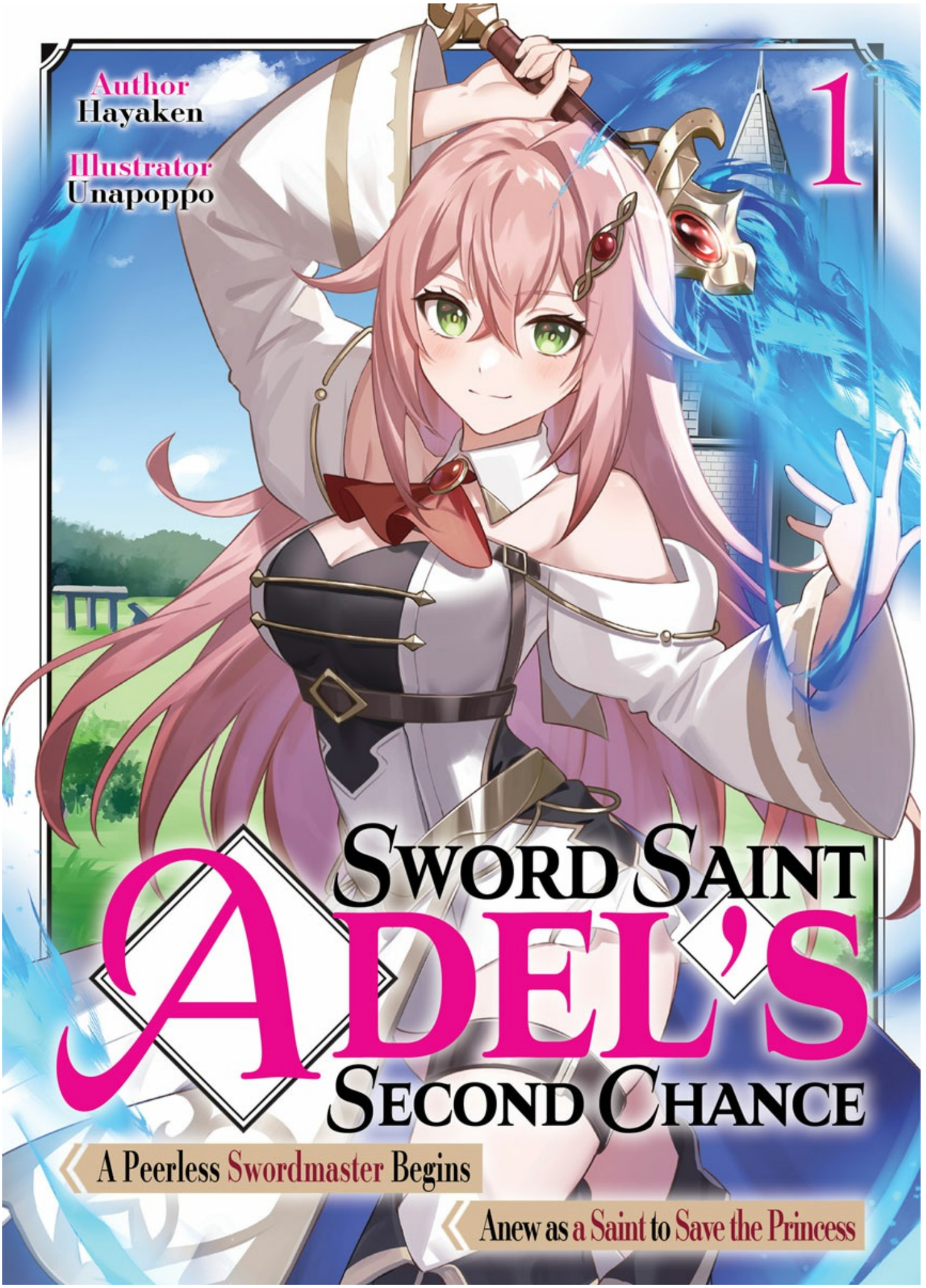
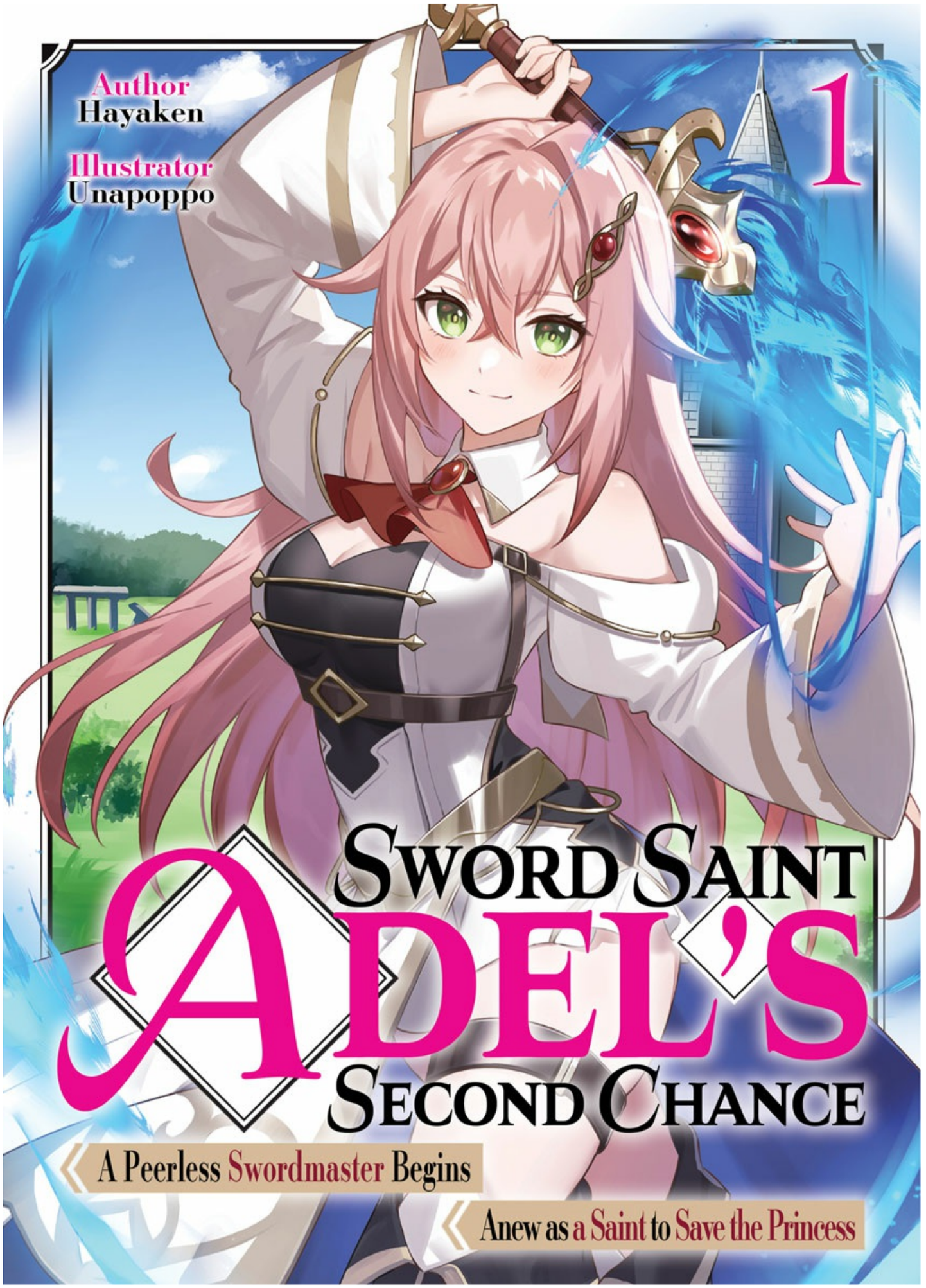

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# Sword Saint Adel's Second Chance: Volume 1 [Complete]


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# Chapter 1: The Rebirth of Swordmaster Adel

“All credit for our victory in this historic war goes to you, Swordmaster Adel! You have done well. Your reputation is well earned.”

The knight kneeling before his king gave a noncommittal grunt. “Your praise honors me, Your Majesty,” he replied flatly.

Though Adel would be attending a celebratory feast right afterward, he was wearing a suit of black armor that hid even his face. The armor projected an intimidating aura at odds with the jubilant atmosphere in the room, but Adel considered this preferable to the alternative. He had lost both eyes, and thought it likely anyone who saw his disfigured face would be frightened. Additionally, purple crystals enchanted with the Night Vision spell were embedded in the helmet’s eye sockets, enabling him to vaguely make out people’s figures. All things considered, staying masked seemed to be the more appropriate choice in this situation.

Just like the king, the ministers and government heavyweights in attendance also directed gazes of admiration toward Adel and heaped praises on him.

“Not only did you defeat the evil Saint Elciel, mortal enemy of our previous king, it was at your hands that Mad Emperor Tristan and the reprehensible generals of the Northern Federation met their demise. You truly are the Peerless Hero!”

“Sir Adel’s achievements and renown will go down in history, not just within our country, but throughout the world! You are the Dark Knight blessed by the heavens who ended the Great War and ushered in a new age of peace!”

Thunderous applause reverberated through the hall, stopping only when the young king spoke again, his eyes shining with expectation and zeal.

“Their words ring true. And now, as our country Wendill lies battered and scarred by war, a new fight begins for us: the fight to restore and to rebuild. The nature of this fight may be different from the one we just ended, but I implore

you to continue lending us your aid. Adel, we are counting on you!”

“As you command. I...will do my utmost.”

Adel had no interest at all in helping out with “restoring and rebuilding.” Not because he had something else he wanted to do, but because there was nothing left that he cared about. However, he had the discernment to not say this out loud and ruin the atmosphere. As such, he went with a generic and harmless answer.

The king declared, “This feast pales in comparison to the glory of Adel’s feats, but nevertheless, let us celebrate the start of our country’s new fight! Everyone, eat and make merry tonight!”

The feast then began in earnest. Sure enough, it was far from lavish, as the palace was still devastated by the Great War. Despite this, the faces of everyone present were bright. Adel couldn’t see them, but that was the mood he sensed in the venue. The war that had split the world into two was finally over, and people could once again put their hope in the future.

However, Adel himself struggled to share this sentiment. He didn’t stay long before announcing that he needed fresh air, and stepped out onto the half-destroyed balcony. Regret still beat hot in his heart, making him feel out of place amongst the revelers.

Unbidden, the name of his late liege came to his lips. “Princess Euphinia...”

When he had been a gladiator slave who lived every day in darkness, Euphinia, the princess of Wendill and a rare user of the holy summoning arts—for which she was known as a Saint—had saved him and allowed him to stay by her side as her knight escort. She was the one person he had ever sworn his absolute and undying fealty to.

Adel was known by many names: Swordmaster, Dark Knight, Peerless Hero. But none of these titles mattered to him. His identity as Princess Euphinia’s knight escort was the only thing he took pride in. And yet, he would never be known by that position again.

Even now, he vividly recalled the princess’s warmth. There was no way he could forget, nor did he have any intention of doing so.

Five years ago, Adel had been a gladiator slave, imprisoned in a place where he was experimented on and forced to participate in fights meant to demonstrate their results. This was where he had lost both eyes and suffered all the wounds that now scarred his body. He spent his days desperately attacking the opponents set before him, clinging to life despite having been condemned to a world of darkness. Even he did not know why he wanted to live so badly. Perhaps it was pure animal instinct. Whatever it was, he gave himself to it fully.

One day, Princess Euphinia showed up out of the blue, walking up to Adel's cell after he had finished his fights for the day. She carried with her a soft, flowery fragrance that couldn't have been more out of place in the putrid jail that stank of blood, sweat, and excrement. In fact, her scent was so pure and fresh that it made Adel uncomfortable.

The melodious, bell-like voice of a young girl, seemingly fourteen or fifteen exclaimed, "Are you okay?!"

"What is..." Adel stirred, sensing the source of discomfort approaching.

"Oh no, how awful! But don't worry, everything's okay now. Everything's okay."

Adel felt something warm and smooth brush against his cheek. It seemed to be someone's finger. He had never felt such gentle human contact since losing his eyes. In fact, he realized he had never been treated with such kindness at all. It simply wasn't a part of the life he had lived.

Without hesitation, the source of discomfort enveloped Adel. It took him a while to realize he was being hugged. This was a brand new experience. He also felt drops falling on his head, though he only realized now that they had been Euphinia's tears. Even though she and him had been complete strangers at the time, she had still felt his pain as her own and was moved to action.

"Come with me. I'll bring you out of this place!"

"Don't bother. There's no telling what they'll do to you if you try. In fact, I can't believe you managed to come all the way in here in one piece."

"Trust me! If I could get in here, don't you think I can get back out?"

"Uh... How *did* you manage to get here in the first place?"

“Well, it’s a bit of a long—”

“Sum it up in one word. I want to rest up before my next fight.”

“One word? Then... ‘authority’ would be most appropriate, I think?”

“Au...thority?”

While Adel tried to wrap his head around the answer, additional footsteps and voices rushed into the jail.

“Princess Euphinia, please don’t do this!”

“The princess of Wendill should not be entering a place like this!”

“Being in such a foul place will sully your holy self! We implore you to return with haste!”

Euphinia replied in a clear and noble voice, “I see nothing in this place that sullies me. Rather, my heart would be stained if I were to turn a blind eye to what I see and leave without doing anything.”

The others fell silent, allowing her to continue. “This man is now in my care. If anyone makes even the slightest attempt to deny me this, I, Saint Euphinia, will never work with the Holy Tower Church again. I will also reconsider Wendill’s relationship with the Church.”

In sharp contrast to her previously gentle manner, Euphinia now radiated the aura of someone accustomed to wielding authority. Despite her youth, she carried herself with such majesty that those she faced found themselves unable to voice further objections.

“Now, let’s go,” she said to Adel. “From now on, I will protect you. You no longer have to worry about anything.”

The princess gripped Adel’s hand. Her own hand was warm and soft, but it was trembling. Though she carried herself with dignity, she was likely scared inside. After all, these people had reduced Adel to his current state and clearly thought nothing of it. Her voice sounded calm, but she was dead set on facing down the surrounding adults and bending them to her will.

Adel sensed this and respected her for it. “I can’t stand merely being kept like a pet. Use me. My eyes may not see, but my sword hand is sure.”

“Thank you very much! I guess we’ll be helping each other out, then!” The shaking in Euphinia’s hand seemed to subside a little.

After that day, Adel’s life had become filled with light and meaning. He learned the joy of having a master he could fully believe in and serve wholeheartedly. He still was blind and scarred all over, but he did not mind. In fact, he even felt grateful for his days as a slave for granting him the strength to protect his princess.

Even now, Adel could vividly recall his first encounter with Princess Euphinia. But those memories were all he had left.

“I had no choice. Please forgive me,” he murmured toward the stars he could not see.

During the Great War between the Northern Federation and the League of Southern Nations that split the world in half, Euphinia had been killed by forces sent by the North. For this reason, Adel sided with the South and spearheaded their efforts to annihilate the North.

Euphinia herself had loved peace and dedicated her life to bringing both sides to a truce. Adel knew that if she could see how the war had ended from her place in the heavens, she’d be looking down with pain and disappointment on her face. However, he had been unable to stop himself. The anger and grief he felt when he had lost her was then the only thing that still drove him. He did not fight for the people’s sake, nor to bring about peace. No, he had merely given himself to his hatred, mindlessly cutting down the enemy that he so loathed. Honestly, he felt uncomfortable receiving praise for his actions.

And now that everything was over, the only thing that remained was regret.

Suddenly, a voice asked Adel from behind, “Do you regret how things ended?”

Adel whirled around, surprised that he had failed to notice anyone approaching. One could move silently by teleporting with wind spells or by isolating sound using dark spells, but doing so would have required anima. The fact that Adel did not sense anima being used spoke volumes about his visitor’s skill.

That said, he could tell that this person bore him no ill will. Spurred by the feeling that the speaker could see through to the depths of his heart, Adel decided to answer honestly. “I do indeed. I failed to protect the one person I swore to serve, and I am deeply ashamed of my powerlessness.”

The vague silhouette that Adel could make out was short. Their voice gave him the impression of a young boy, but he could not tell for sure. In the first place, this appearance probably meant little in indicating the visitor’s true identity.

“But what you achieved was quite remarkable. That’s why I’m here.”

“What do you mean?”

“By the will of the Watchers, I am rewarding you for your actions. Is there anything you wish for?”

“The Watchers, you say. Wait, are you perhaps a Divine Beast?!”

“That’s not the right question. All that matters is what you wish for and whether I can grant it. I’m not a god, so I’m not omnipotent. And I don’t have that much time with you. So, speak. What is your wish?”

Adel fell silent, but not because of indecision. There was only one thing he wanted. He didn’t even need to think about it. “I wish to see the late Princess Euphinia again. This time, I want to fulfill my role as her knight escort and protect her to the very end.”

“You want me to bring Princess Euphinia back to life?”

“If that’s possible, yes.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that. I can’t resurrect the dead. Unlike the gods, I’m not all-powerful.”

“I see...”

Left with nothing else to wish for, Adel was about to ask the young boy to take his leave.

“But I *can* help you see the princess again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Instead of bringing her here, I can send you to her. Through the wall of time.”

“What?! You can do that?!”

“Sure I can. However, what happens after that depends on you. If you do nothing, history will just repeat itself. There’s a force that compels humans to live out their fates. Even if small details are changed, it eventually leads to the same outcome. You might end up right back here again, with nothing but regret. Knowing this, do you still want to return to the past?”

“Without a doubt! This time, I swear I will live up to my role as Princess Euphinia’s knight escort and protect her from everything! If you can truly send me back in time, please do it right this moment! Please! I’m begging you!”

Adel bent over, bowing as low as he could.

“Okay, I’ll do what I can to help you fulfill that wish of yours.”

The boy’s voice was fast fading into the distance as Adel’s blank sight registered movement. Surprise filled his mind as a vortex of unbelievably dense anima swallowed up his body.

“Well, off you go. Bye-b...”

The boy’s last words faded into silence.

◆ ◇ ◆

*Splish, splish.*

Adel stirred, waking up to the sound of dripping water.

“U-Ugh...”

Next, the damp smell of mold and a stench of condensed human sweat assaulted his nose. It was an odor that would make most people grimace, but it invoked feelings of nostalgia within Adel. This was the smell of a place seared into his memory.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the same floor paved with bluish-black stone that he recalled.

“What?!” he blurted, sitting up in surprise. A quick look around revealed that he was behind iron bars in a prison cave.

“I-I can see?!”

Adel’s sight had returned to him. In fact, it was as if he had never lost it in the first place.

The young boy did say that he would send Adel back in time. If that was truly what had happened, then this must be before Adel lost his eyes. With such irrefutable proof before him, Adel had no choice but to believe he was actually back in the past.

“In that case, Princess Euphinia must still be alive!”

This place was the Moving Coliseum of Navarra, where many gladiator slaves were imprisoned and forced to fight. Adel used to be one of them, made to continue fighting even after he had lost his sight. This was where Euphinia had found him and, deeply mourning his situation, forcibly brought him back to Wendill Palace and appointed him as her knight escort.

In other words, in this timeline, he had yet to lose his eyes. That meant he hadn’t met Princess Euphinia yet. In fact, he suspected that at this time, he had only just been brought to Navarra. Back then, he had been nothing more than a weak, powerless boy. But that was no longer the case. He could feel all the strength and skills that had earned him the nickname of “Swordmaster” still alive and well within him.

“In this case, there is only one thing to do!” Adel declared. “Time is of the essence!”

Someone far away shouted, “Hey, girlie! Pipe down already! You’re a newbie here, and don’t you forget it!”

Adel ignored it, assuming the order had been directed at someone else.

“Now, what should I do? I ought to destroy a sickening place like this, but I’m worried about our current location.”

“Girlie, I know you hear me! Don’t ignore me, dammit!”

“If we’re far from Wendill, travel is going to be a problem.”’

As implied by its name, the Moving Coliseum moved around from country to country, carried by the multiple legs that it was outfitted with. If it was currently somewhere far away from Wendill, Adel thought he should consider just staying put and letting the facility carry him closer before taking action.

"Okay, I *know* you gotta be fucking with me!" the faraway speaker roared. "You may be cute, but you have a really shitty personality, you know that?!"

Another voice spoke up derisively. "She probably doesn't want to talk to you 'cos you're ugly and your breath stinks! Wouldn't be the first time, I bet!"

Laughter filled the cell across from Adel's. "Story of his life!"

"C'mon, give me a break!" the first speaker whined. "I was just letting her know she was being noisy!"

"I'm sorry, but can you all be quiet?" Adel asked, not understanding what everyone was making a fuss about. "I'm trying to think here."

"What in the— *You're* the one who started this, girlie! By ignoring me!"

"Hmm? And who's this 'girlie' you keep referring to?"

"You, duh! Who else could it be?!"

"What a strange thing to say. What about me makes you think I'm a woman?"

"What makes me thi— What about you *doesn't* look like a woman?! You've got plenty of both ass *and* tits!"

The men who laughed at the first speaker earlier now agreed with him.

"This gal is cracking me up."

"Honestly, you don't see chicks *this* hot, even outside!"

"I know, right?! And she even *smells* different. Oh man, I can't get enough of this."

"It ain't gonna last, though. After a few days in this hell, she's gonna be every bit as dirty and smelly as the rest of us!"

"Ain't that the truth! Ha ha ha ha!"

The men filled the jail with their laughter again.

Adel still had no idea what they were talking about, but he found himself feeling annoyed. He raised his arms to cross them.

“Hm?”

Something wasn’t right. His hands were feeling something really soft. This sensation prompted him to look down for the first time. This was when he noticed the two impressive mounds bulging from his chest.

The “WHAT?!” just came naturally from his lips. He was struck by another wave of surprise by how high the pitch of his voice was. He sounded completely different from before.

“I’m...a woman?! That’s impossible!” Adel was so confused, his voice was shaking. He couldn’t wrap his head around what had happened.

“I got no idea what’s ‘impossible’ here, but you’re a woman all right, head to toe. If you doubt me, why don’t ya take a look at your reflection?”

There was a jug filled with drinking water in a corner of Adel’s cell. He shot over like a bullet fired from a gun and peered inside.

The face that looked back was one of a beautiful young girl, perfect in every way. Age-wise, she looked about fifteen or sixteen. Her round eyes were as clear as jewels, and her skin was as white and smooth as porcelain. She had long, glossy hair colored a shade of pink that seemed like a diluted shade of his original red. When Adel leaned forward a bit more, voluptuous breasts also came into view, introducing sensual allure to the overall look.



There was no doubt that ‘he’ was now a ‘she.’ And unbelievably attractive, too.

“H-How did this happen?! What was the point of this?!”

Sure, maybe undergoing a gender change was not all that big a deal compared to something as incredulous as time travel. In fact, the former might just be a side effect of the latter. Even so, the change was so unexpected that Adel found it difficult to take it in stride.

“Uh, girlie, you okay? Your face looks pale,” the first man called out, seemingly worried upon seeing Adel’s shocked reaction. Despite first impressions, perhaps the guy was actually a pretty considerate person.

“Uh... It seems I was the one in the wrong. I apologize for my disrespect.”

“R-Right, okay. Well, cheer up. You’re cute and sexy, which I’m sure will give you an advantage somewhere.”

“That’s...a good point. Perhaps this is *his* way of telling me to protect Her Highness with everything at my disposal, including even feminine wiles.”

It was true that there were likely things Adel could do as a woman that she couldn’t as a man. This change might prove useful for protecting Princess Euphinia. Or at least, that was what she had to tell herself to come to terms with the situation.

Changing gears, Adel asked out loud, “Excuse me, may I ask something?”

“Hm? Yeah?” someone replied calmly, but he was nearly drowned out by others shouting excitedly in unison, “Sure, ask us anything!”

“What the hell, you guys?! Don’t butt in!”

“*You* shut up!”

“Let us talk to her too!”

“Don’t hog her! That ain’t fair!”

Everyone in the jail soon became embroiled in very juvenile bickering. Adel knew that if she were her old self, this wouldn’t have happened. She hadn’t created this situation on purpose, but it presented a good opportunity to try

out what she could do as a woman. It was still embarrassing, though.

“I don’t care who answers me. I know we’re in the Moving Coliseum of Navarra, but does anyone know where our current location is?”

The first man shook his head. “Sorry, I’ve no idea. I haven’t been let out of my cell for quite some time.” A closer look revealed that, strikingly, he was wearing an eyepatch that covered nearly half his face.

“Ugh, I don’t know either,” another man groaned.

“I might’ve had a clue if I’d been brought out for a fight with an audience, but... Sorry, it’s been a while.”

“Then again, no matter where we go, the ones watching us are always just sick bastards who get off to watching people die, right? Shit looks the same no matter which country it’s from!”

Laughter erupted again. “Hear, hear!”

In spite of their circumstances, these gladiator slaves had a pretty good relationship with each other. Adel recalled this being the case in her past as well.

She recognized a few faces, but not many. Judging by her current appearance, she surmised that she had only just been taken prisoner here in Navarra. If so, it would be five years later when Princess Euphinia, who’d be fifteen years old at the time, came to free them all. Very few of those present would survive until then.

Every single day, many slaves met untimely ends, either from being forced to participate in experiments set up as fights or as subjects of human experimentation conducted with inhumane spells. This was what Navarra was created for.

Adel leaned back against the stone wall. “I see. Sorry for bothering all of you.” Due to her lack of information, she figured it would be wise to just wait and see for now. She wanted to rush to Euphinia this very second, but as the saying went, haste makes waste.

“Oh, but a few of us were taken out for experiments just now,” one of the

men said suddenly. “Maybe you could try asking them when they get back.”

“If they make it back alive,” Adel shrugged.

“Nah, Boss will be just fine! He’ll definitely make it!”

Adel recalled the one who all the gladiator slaves looked up to and called “boss”. She then realized what her being in this time meant.

“Excuse me! By ‘Boss,’ are you perhaps referring to—”

*Creeeeeeeeak!*

A heavy door opened in the far end of a passage in this prison cave. Footsteps approached soon after.

“Heh heh heh. Here I am, going to the trouble of bringing you back because you couldn’t die like you were supposed to. Least you can do is walk faster, pussy.”

“Don’t worry. I’d much rather be back in my smelly cell than talk to you.”

A giant, round man and a gladiator slave came into sight. Adel recognized both of them. The former was a jailer here named Radan. As revealed by the earlier conversation, he was far from being an upstanding person. Adel knew that there were at least a few slaves who ended up dying not from experiments or fights, but as toys that he “played” with to pass the time.

“Now, now. If a precious subject says hurtful things like that, my hand might slip and burn them alive.” Radan sneered, fiddling with a strange iron cylinder with trident ornamentation on both ends.

The next instant, glowing red whips shot out from the two ends of the cylinder and trussed up the man in front of him, making it impossible for him to take another step. He groaned and fell to his knees, evoking cries of concern from those in other cells.

The fire that enveloped the slave died down as Radan yanked on his bonds. “Enough. Get to your feet. The next time you get smart with me, I really will burn you alive, you hear me? Heh heh heh!”

The face that glared back at Radan was not human. No, it was that of a lion. This was all the more alarming because the man himself had actually come from

a perfectly normal human family. In fact, it had even been a family with peerage. Adel had heard from this person in the past that his face had been turned into that of a monster's as a result of Navarra's experiments to bolster his strength.

"Boss, you okay?!"

"What happened to the others who went with you?!"

The slave got to his feet and spat out a curse in deep frustration. "I'm the only one who surv—"

"MASH!" Adel shouted. This might be the wrong time and place, but she couldn't hold back the nostalgia and joy she felt from seeing the lionman's face. It was just how she remembered it from before she had lost her eyes.

This man named Mash had done a lot for her in the past. Soon after Adel was first brought to Navarra, Mash had taught him how to fight and survive. It was pretty much all thanks to him that Adel had managed to stay alive long enough to be rescued by Princess Euphinia. In a way, Adel thought of Mash as a mentor. But sadly, Mash had not made it by the time of Euphinia's visit.

Mash looked over puzzledly. "How do you know my name, lass? Have we met before?"

"Oh, uh, well..."

Adel wracked her brains for an excuse, but Radan saved her the trouble. "Hoh, a newcomer! Lookee what we have here. Hey, freak-face! Get your ass back into your cell!" He kicked Mash's back, sending him stumbling into his cell, then turned around and opened the door to the cell that Adel occupied alone.

"Heh heh heh..." he sniggered, turning the lock.

"In a way, this is convenient," Adel murmured, looking down and observing her own youthful, bodacious body. If she were a man, Radan surely wouldn't have come into the cell of his own accord. Adel still had her grievances about her gender change, but she had to concede that it was working out in her favor in this situation.

"Oh, you bet," Radan smirked. "Is it 'cos you think that hot body of yours is

great for seducing guys? Well, I'll let you seduce me, baby. Heh heh heh." He slowly closed in on Adel, running his obscene gaze over every inch of her body.

If Adel had been an actual woman, she would have been so revolted that chills would have run down her back. However, as she was viewing the situation through the perspective of a man, all that was in her mind was appreciation for how she already had Radan right where she wanted without even having to lift a finger.

"No, stop it!" Mash shouted, showing concern for Adel. "That girl didn't do anything to get punished for!"

"Yeah, stop it!" a voice echoed. "You're making me jealous!"

Someone else added, "Yeah, yeah! Let us have some fun too!"

"This isn't the time for such jokes!" Mash roared, unleashing divine punishment on the two speakers and evoking cries of pain and apologies.

However, Adel waved for him to stand down. "It's fine, Mash. Just watch."

"B-But..."

Radan chortled vulgarly. "How terrible your hell is depends on how much money you can pay. And attractive women—which, oooh boy, you definitely are!—can pay with their bodies instead. Don't worry, I'll treat you well! And trust me, you'd want to enjoy yourself while you can. When Cardinal Navarra is done with you, you'll be a monster like the rest of them. No one would ever think of touching you *then*."

"I think I'll be fine."

The Moving Coliseum of Navarra was run by a cardinal of the same name from the Holy Tower Church, and all the gladiator slaves here were subjects of his human experimentation. The fights they were forced to participate in were really just trial runs to gauge the effects of the experiments they underwent.

The experiment performed on Adel in the past had boosted his natural healing ability several times over. It was successful, but that was why the cardinal then destroyed his eyes to test if Adel could regenerate them. Obviously, that was a failure, and so Adel had permanently lost his sight.

“I hope so too. That way, I have more time to enjoy you...uh, what’s your name?”

“I’m Adel. Adel Astal.”

“Adel.” Radan voiced the name slowly as if enjoying how it felt on his tongue, then chuckled nastily again. “Well, you’re mine now, Adel.”

He reached out toward Adel, but she grabbed the hand and stopped it. “Hold on. I haven’t decided yet whether *you* pass *my* standards. I have a question.”

“Oh, you want advance payment? Sure, I’ll play along. What do you want to know?”

“What is the coliseum’s current location, and where is it heading?”

“We just entered Wendill Kingdom and are heading for the profane lands of the Torust Empire.”

Torust was a superpower northwest of Wendill, and one of those collectively referred to as the Four World Powers. In Adel’s previous timeline, Torust had also been a member of the Northern Confederation. In other words, it was a country that she had considered an enemy.

The Kingdom of Wendill, Euphinia’s birth country, was not one of the Four World Powers. It was a small sovereign state situated practically in the very center between the Four. For this, it was also referred to as the Middle Kingdom.

This was naturally a very precarious position to be in, but Wendill also happened to be where Alderfort—the religious capital of the Holy Tower Church—was located. It was the Church’s influence that protected Wendill from being invaded by her neighbors.

“So we are in Wendill! That’s fortuitous. Thank you.”

“You happy with that? Well then, it’s my turn to have what I want!”

“No, it’s not. I have no time to deal with you.”

“What’s this, you gonna dine and dash? We can’t have that, oh no we can’t.” For some reason, Radan sneered with delight. “That said, it’s true that docile girls are boring. I just *love* breaking ones that are cute and defiant like you. Heh

heh heh. Go on! Show me what you can do!”

He pushed the fist that Adel was holding to bowl her over.

“Ugh, I can’t watch this any longer!”Mash began violently shaking the bars of his cell. “You guys, help me break this!”

However, despite the clanking, the iron bars refused to budge. Mash was much stronger than the average human, but his cell had been specially designed to contain that kind of strength.

“B-Boss, it’s no use!”

“If we make a fuss, we’ll get punished again!”

“But I can’t just—”

“It’s fine, there’s no problem,” Adel cut in, grinning at Mash. “Look. He’s not moving, is he?”

“U-Ugh... Hnggggg!!!!!” Sure enough, Radan was pushing so hard his face was turning red, but his fist made no headway at all against Adel’s dainty, white hand.

Mash’s eyes widened with disbelief. “H-How are you doing that?!”

Adel clearly had Radan’s arm completely suppressed, seeing as it wasn’t moving an inch despite him being nearly twice her height. Everyone who could use spells—including Mash—had the ability to sense the movement of anima. A particularly powerful spell or valuable spelltool could explain the situation, but Mash knew for a fact that Adel was not using any anima. What he did notice, however, was a faint golden glow surrounding Adel’s hand. He surmised that this was the source of Adel’s strength, but he hadn’t the faintest idea what it was.

“I’m sorry, but as I said, I don’t have time for you!” Adel crouched down a little and twisted her body, revealing the golden glow now surrounding her beautifully flawless right leg.

That leg drove straight into Radan’s abdomen in the blink of an eye.

*BOOOOOOOOM!*

The large man roared in pain as his body shot back like a cannonball and slammed against the stone wall. The iron chestplate he had been wearing was crumpled and now bore a deep imprint of a foot.

“Wooooooow!” The slaves cheered in unison. Only they knew whether this was in surprise at the power of Adel’s kick or in appreciation of the fact that her high kick gave them a glimpse of her underwear. Mash, for one, however, felt ashamed that he had let such a sight bother him.

“See? Not a problem.” Adel smiled at Mash, making his heart skip a beat from guilt. “All right, it’s time to move. I need to hurry. Mash! Help me out. Let’s go together.”

“Uh, yes, ma’am.”

“Hm? There’s no need for honorifics between us, is there?”

“Then what should I call you?”

“Just ‘Adel’ is fine.”

“G-Got it, Adel. However... I’m sorry, but have we met before? If so, I apologize for not remembering.”

“Ah, no, *I’m* sorry. It’s a bit hard to explain, but in short, I know you but you wouldn’t remember me.” Adel turned and kneeled down to yank off the bundle of keys on the unconscious jailer’s belt.

“I see. So, what is it that you’re trying to do? And what was that power you used to send Radan flying with a kick? I didn’t feel you use any anima at all.”

Adel unlocked the door to her own jail cell and stepped out. “I’m getting out of here while we’re still in Wendill.”

“You’re escaping?!”

“That’s right. There’s someone in this country who I have to meet. By the way, what I used just now was ki.”

“Ki?! It actually exists?!”

Spells and spelltools were attuned to elements such as fire, water, earth, and wind. Ki was also technically considered an element, but there were none who wielded it in this day and age. It was considered a myth, described as a way to create miracles using one’s own power, rather than relying on Divine Beasts. However, no one knew anything more about it, much less how to use it.

“You might not believe me, but yes, that was indeed ki. I concentrated ki into my foot to boost my kicking power for a split second. And the result was as you saw.”

This was one of the basic ways to use ki. Adel called it “Ki Convergence.”

Mash continued, “Well, like I said, I didn’t feel you use any anima. So I get that whatever you did was beyond my understanding.”

“Ki is one’s own life force. I don’t need anima produced by Divine Beasts to use it.”

One could consider anima to be the ki released by Divine Beasts. In other words, a person’s own inner anima was their ki. Mash had said it was beyond him because whereas people could sense anima, it was common sense that perceiving ki, much less manipulating it, was impossible.

“Fine, I’ll believe you. You did take down someone more than twice your size.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about thaaaaaaat!”

The shout had come not from Adel, but Radan. The jailer suddenly leaped to

his feet and pointed his cylindrical spelltool at the girl. In the next instant, incandescent red whips shot out from both ends and wrapped around Adel, reducing her to the same state Mash had been when being brought in.

“Adel!” Mash cried in alarm.

Instead of replying, Adel turned to look at Radan with ice-cold eyes. “You should have stayed down.”

“How dare you?!” Radan roared. “How dare you take advantage of me when I was treating you nicely just because you’re a little cute?! I’m gonna burn you alive!”

“I wouldn’t if I were you; you’ll regret it. Just leave that spelltool on the ground and lead us outside without resisting. If you do, at least I won’t kill you.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?! No, *you’ll* regret this! DIEEEEEE!”

*Fwoooosh!*

Red flames burst from the spelltool in Radan’s hand, enveloping Adel from head to toe.

“BWA HA HA HA HA! Killing a hot broad feels as good as—”

Radan’s laughter broke off abruptly as the flames faded to reveal Adel, standing there without even a strand of hair singed.

“Huh? Wh-What happened to the flames?”

As if that wasn’t enough, the whips tying Adel up came loose seemingly of their own accord. The spelltool’s handle also began to pull away, as if being drawn by a powerful force.

“Ugh! Wh-Why isn’t it listening to me?! This has never happened before!”

The more Radan tried to pull his spelltool back, the more violently it resisted. It slipped from his grasp, as if it had a will of its own, and flew straight into Adel’s hand.

“I’ll be taking this!” When Adel swung the handle, fire burst from both ends, forming thick blades instead of whips. The flames now burned a pale blue, showing that it had become much hotter and deadlier than before.

“That’s impossible! What did you do?!”

Each spelltool was created to reproduce the effects of a particular spell using the anima in its core. They could be used even by those who normally couldn’t use anima, as well as in places without a Divine Beast to provide anima. In exchange for this convenience, their max output couldn’t be increased even if the user was proficient with spells.

This particular spelltool, Salamander’s Tail, had the effect of generating fire in long, thin forms—in other words, as whips. The length of these whips could be adjusted to a degree, and its output could be suppressed so the whips would merely constrain someone without burning them. However, *raising* its output, especially to the point of changing the color of the flames and taking the shape of blades, was definitely beyond its specs.

Radan, who had used this weapon for a long time, knew that best. And yet, Adel was indeed holding a double-bladed sword of blue flames. This was simply an impossible sight. There was only one conclusion Radan could draw from this.

“No! Salamander’s Tail can’t do that! This has to be a bluff! DROP DEEEEEEEAD!”

The jailer drew the scimitar at his waist and raised it overhead as fast as he could. However, he never got to swing it down, as Adel’s blade of blue flames had already separated his head from his body. The scimitar flew out of his hands, hit the ceiling, and landed harmlessly with a loud clang.

“Sorry, I lied. Dead men can’t regret anything.” Adel watched as the blue flames engulfed Radan’s body, reducing it to a pile of ashes in no time.

“A split second?!” Mash gasped.

After a moment of awed silence, the slaves erupted into cheers of celebration.

“Sorry for the wait.” Adel picked up Radan’s scimitar and handed it to Mash. Its quality wasn’t anything to write home about, but it was better than nothing.

Mash looked a bit dazed. “It was over so quick, I’m still processing it. Radan was actually a pretty good fighter, but you just... Were you using ki again?”

The girl nodded. “Yes.”

This technique, which she called “Ki Amplification,” involved enveloping a spelltool with ki. Doing so would allow her to control it as if it was a part of her own body. The instant Radan tied her up, she had seized complete control of Salamander’s Tail by sending her ki through the whip. At that point, wresting the weapon from Radan’s hand was child’s play.

Both Ki Convergence and Ki Amplification were fundamentally the same phenomenon. The result of applying it to Salamander’s Tail was the double-bladed sword of blue flames that had lopped off Radan’s head in one swing.

The slaves, who were not privy to any of the details, only knew that they had seen Adel pick up a spelltool, which was supposed to have equal power for everyone who used it, and push it far beyond what it should have been capable of. Common sense dictated that it was impossible, but they knew what they had seen.

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“All right, time to go. I’m not waiting for anyone, so keep up if you want to get out of here too.”

Cheers and cries of celebration filled the air.

“Whoooooo! Thank you!”

“Can’t wait to say goodbye to this place!”

“I never dared dream I would be a free man again!”

“Hold on, Adel,” Mash interrupted. “If we move together in a group of this size, they’ll catch on right away.”

“Does it matter? We’ll just cut down anyone who stands in our way.”

“I’m sure you could roll over just about any normal opponent, but this is a bad time. A Saint is here.”

“A Saint, you say?”

The term “Saint” referred to those who had the ability to hear the voices of Divine Beasts and summon them to borrow their powers. As spells and

spelltools used by normal people were all powered by anima from Divine Beasts, the role of Saints in this world was considered absolutely crucial.

However, only women had the affinity for summoning, and it was rare even among their demographic. Naturally, the few who did were held in extremely high esteem. At times, Saints were given even more respect than kings and queens.

The person Adel had considered her liege, Princess Euphinia, was also a Saint.

“And it’s not just any Saint. It’s Saint Elciel, one of the seven Eminents. If you’re not careful, you might end up having to fight her!”

Adel’s eyes widened. “What?! As in, the War Saint?!”

Elciel, also known as the War Saint, was one of the Eminents, a group of seven individuals recognized by the Holy Tower Church for exceptional competence and virtue. She had earned her title for her ability to take command at the ground level, as well as her proactiveness in wiping out monsters in profane lands to push back the frontier and create more land for people to live in.

However, she was also someone who had sided with the Northern Federation during the Great War. While Euphinia had traveled around trying to bring an armistice, Elciel had been among those leading the force that launched a blitz attack on the town where Euphinia was staying. It was that very attack which had taken her life.

Later, Adel had taken Elciel’s life for revenge. She did not expect to meet her again here, of all places.

“That’s right. *The* War Saint who everybody respects and looks up to. She’s even one of the Eminents to boot, so I thought she’d be extremely virtuous or something. But I was dead wrong. She had the coldest look on her face as she watched monsters slaughter my men. And when I was the only one left standing, she invited me to become one of her soldiers and fight for her. I had a feeling I’d come to regret serving her, so I turned her down.”

“That’s quite a story. I’m sorry to hear that,” Adel said, then gave a fiendish laugh. “However, this is a great opportunity.”

Mash looked at her in confusion. “What’re you saying? You know what it

means to fight a Saint, right? She might even bring out the Divine Beasts she's contracted with!"

"That's just what I want. I must kill her here and now so I won't have to worry about her again in the future!"

"You're being ridiculous! Or at least, that's what I'd normally say. After seeing what you can do with your ki, I'm not so sure anymore. But it really is going to be dangerous. She's no easy opponent."

"Oh, trust me, I know."

She fully understood how difficult it would be to kill Elciel, having done it once before. Moreover, Adel was now significantly disadvantaged compared to the first time around. First, she did not have the spelltools she had used in that fight. Salamander's Tail wasn't bad, but it was nothing compared to the black full-body armor that she once wore. Not only did that armor give her the ability to see despite her blindness, it had also been extremely tough and enchanted with weight reduction. When boosted with Ki Amplification, it even mitigated the weight of her own body, allowing her to move as fast as a gust of wind. As such, her preferred fighting style at the time relied on overwhelming speed and unpredictability. The discrepancy between how she looked and how she moved did also give her an edge of sorts. And of course, the weapon she had used was at least as powerful as Salamander's Tail.

And now, Adel was in a woman's body, with a noticeable decrease in muscle mass. Ki Convergence could boost the power of her punches and kicks, but there was no arguing that she was dishing out less damage than before. That said, the amount and effectiveness of her ki had not changed, so the situation wasn't entirely hopeless. And regardless, ignoring someone who would eventually harm Princess Euphinia was simply not an option.

"Hmm, but with Elciel out and about, it would indeed be dangerous to wander around as a group. Let me think. If I do start fighting, it'd take... Then maybe I should first..."

Adel continued to mumble to herself for a while, then nodded decisively. "All right, I'll go ahead by myself. First, I'll destroy the legs so this place can't go any further. Then I'll take Elciel's head! All of you, stay in hiding for now. When the

place is in an uproar, look for a good chance to escape and take it!”

The fight with Elciel was very likely going to take quite a while. If the Moving Coliseum’s legs were destroyed, the facility would remain stuck in Wendill, and Elciel wouldn’t be able to escape on it. This would then allow Adel to take as long as she needed.

Mash nodded. “Sounds good to me. One thing, though: take me with you. I simply can’t, in good conscience, let you do everything on your own. For what it’s worth, I was good enough to catch Elciel’s attention. Let me show you what she saw in me!”

“I appreciate that, Mash. Let’s go!”

“Thank you. You guys heard what Adel said. Wait and see for a while, then get outta here as soon as the commotion starts!”

Adel and Mash dashed out of the jail, leaving the other slaves behind. This section was little more than one long corridor connecting the holding area to the arena. It had been built this way so that even if a slave managed to escape, catching them again would be easy. Even Adel herself was only familiar with this area.

While running, Adel asked, “Do you know where the power source is?!”

“Sorry, I only know this sealed-off area!” Mash replied. “But this facility moves on many legs, so it’s probably somewhere near the base!”

“That makes sense. In that case, the fastest way is to catch someone and force them to take us there!”

“Ha ha ha! That method seems a bit at odds with how you look, but I agree it’s the most effective!”

Unfortunately, the two of them failed to encounter anyone before reaching the arena entrance, which was currently blocked off by a thick stone wall. There was no way forward.

Mash clicked his tongue. “They even went out of their way to seal us in!”

“I’ll destroy it. Step aside!” Adel produced blades of blue flames with Salamander’s Tail.

*BOOOOOOOM!*

But before Adel could swing her weapon, the stone wall caved in from the other side. The two escapees looked on in surprise as a large form crashed through the hole and came to a stop in front of them.

“Is that...a Divine Beast?!” Adel gasped.

It was a massive beast with a canine head, covered in red and black fur. The flames that burst sporadically from its body clearly displayed the staggering power of the anima it radiated.

“It is!” Mash confirmed. “It’s Cerberus, one of the Divine Beasts Elciel uses!”

Also called “the gatekeepers of Hell”, Cerberi were distinguished and renowned among Divine Beasts. Adel did not recall Elciel using one when she’d fought her, but all Eminents contracted multiple Divine Beasts, so there was a possibility Elciel simply hadn’t used it at the time.

The Divine Beast shakily got to his feet, growling threateningly as he studied Adel and Mash.

“It’s not attacking us,” Mash noted. “And look, he’s hurt.”

Sure enough, the creature was bleeding heavily from wounds all over his body.

“No idea what’s going on, but if he’ll let us go...” Adel carefully lifted Salamander’s Tail.

The Divine Beast crouched lower, wary of the two. At the same time, he also shot quick looks at his back, as if he was looking out for something.

An unfamiliar voice rang in Adel’s head. “Grr, they hemmed me in! Just when I thought I’d gotten away!”

Adel’s eyes widened. “Was that the Divine Beast speaking just now?! Mash, did you hear him?!”

“No, I didn’t. Wait, if you heard the Divine Beast, does that mean you’re a Saint too?!”

“Uh, not to my knowledge.”

However, Adel was indeed now a woman, and she had seemingly heard the Divine Beast speak. There was a possibility that her new body had the potential to be a Saint.

“Hold on, you can hear me?!”

There was the voice again. Adel now knew for sure she had not imagined it.

“Y-Yes! I can hear you!”

“Then I still have a chance of living through this! Saint, please form a contract with me and let me hide in your shadow! I’m swallowing my pride to beg you. I can’t die yet, not until I obtain the black fire that the legends of my clan speak of!”

Previously, Euphinia had told Adel a little bit about the relationship between Saints and their Divine Beasts. Namely, that a Divine Beast who contracted with a Saint could become one with her by assimilating into her shadow. Calling forth a Divine Beast in this state was called “summoning.” And while resting in a Saint’s shadow, Divine Beasts would quickly heal.

This effect was likely what the Cerberus facing Adel wanted. He was hurt so badly that his life was probably already at risk.

“You want to exchange a contract...with me?” Adel asked puzzledly. “What do you mean? Aren’t you with Elciel?”

“Not anymore, as of just now. Elciel’s turned into a completely different person lately. When I asked her to terminate our contract, she tried to turn me into an anima crystal. Just because I no longer agreed with her!” Cerberus exclaimed indignantly.

When Divine Beasts died, they left behind gems called “anima crystals,” which were considered the most valuable core that could be used for a spelltool. Monster materials and jewels could also serve as cores, thanks to techniques that infused them with a Divine Beast’s anima, but their quality was nothing in comparison to actual anima crystals.

Due to that large gap in performance, some people referred to spelltools with anima crystals “prized spelltools” and those without “junk spelltools.” However, because of how valuable anima crystals were, so-called junk spelltools made up

the vast majority of those in circulation.

Each prized spelltool required the death of a Divine Beast, but even a Saint could create junk spelltools. As the latter was much easier to mass produce, military forces around the world were mainly armed with junk spelltools.

As it turned out, Salamander's Tail was powered by an anima crystal from a Salamander, an honest-to-goodness Divine Beast. Consequently, it was considered a prized spelltool.

In short, Elciel had basically given up on Cerberus and decided to reduce it to an anima crystal to be used in a spelltool. This was cruelty, plain and simple. Cerberus's anger was indeed justified.

"Hmm, I get you," Adel said slowly, "and I don't mind hiding you, but this is my very first time hearing the voice of a Divine Beast. I can't guarantee that the contract will go well. Also, I won't be helping you escape. After all, the two of us are here to fight Elciel. We can't very well turn tail and run from our target."

"What?! You plan on fighting Elciel with just the two of you and no Divine B —?!"

Cerberus was interrupted by the deafening sound of an explosion from the direction of the arena. In the next instant, a massive boulder the size of a full-grown adult crashed through the opening in the wall that Cerberus had broken through. This was clearly an attack, but from where Adel was standing, she couldn't see who had launched it.

"Watch out!" Adel cried, quickly circling around the Divine Beast as he whirled around in surprise. Just before the boulder reached her, she bisected it with one swing of Salamander's Tail. The two halves whizzed past and smashed into the walls, making the passage shake violently and filling the air with thick clouds of dust.

"Adel, you okay?!" Mash shouted.

"I'm completely fine," Adel replied. When the dust settled, she appeared entirely unhurt, and her weapon burned strong and bright with blue flames.

"How did you do that?!" Cerberus exclaimed. "I can't sense that much power just from the spelltool!"

“We’ll talk later! First, we have to take care of whoever’s attacking us!” Adel shouted, promptly taking off towards the broken wall. However, before she managed to clear the passage, she found herself facing a barrage of stone projectiles. Though much smaller than the boulder just now, they were so numerous they nearly filled the passage. Even Adel couldn’t dodge them all.

“Not a problem!”

Adel raised Salamander’s Tail overhead and spun its two blades as fast as she could, effectively creating a wall of flames that deflected everything it came into contact with. Without slowing for even a beat, she continued charging forward until finally emerging into the arena. When her field of vision suddenly opened up, she found herself facing a giant made of black rock and covered in blue markings. It towered so high she had to crane her neck to look up at it.

Mash caught up with her. “That’s Titan! It’s a Divine Beast!”

Titan fixed its gaze on the two of them, then unleashed an ear-splitting roar as it pulled back a fist.

If Adel were alone, she could easily avoid the incoming punch. She could even push Mash out of the way while doing so. But Cerberus was practically staggering out of the passage, and protecting him on top of everything else was beyond even her.

“In that case... STRETCH!” Adel pointed one end of Salamander’s Tail towards Titan, and a blade of flame grew at an unimaginable speed. The extending blade pierced the top of the giant’s right shoulder and lopped off its entire arm.

“ROOOOAAAARRRRR!”

The Divine Beast jerked back and roared in agony. With that, the punch it had been about to throw was no longer a problem. Adel had forestalled her opponent’s first move by moving even faster.

“Whaaaat?! You can even cut the body of a Divine Beast?!”

“I’m not done yet! I’m finishing it off!”

As Mash stared in dumbfounded amazement, Adel used the momentum of the first swing to now target Titan’s torso. However, right before her blade

made contact, the giant form warped, turned into a black shadow, and then disappeared.

Adel frowned. “Did it return to Elciel’s shadow?”

“That’s right,” Cerberus confirmed. “And you can bet Elciel knows where we are now.”

“So she’s coming here. Cerberus, make your choice now. I don’t mind trying to form a contract with you, but if you think fighting Elciel a fool’s errand, you’re free to use us as decoys and run away on your own.”

“I think I’ll choose the contract after all. I’m not much for running in my current state anyway, so I’ll take my chances with you. You just might prevail against Elciel! I can at least create anima for your companion to use.”

“All right then. Let’s give it a try. However, I have a condition. Even if the process goes well, this is only a temporary contract. After we kill Elciel and escape from here, I must return to my liege’s side. *She* is a true paragon of a Saint. At that time, please be with her instead and protect her!”

“Very well, but only if this liege of yours is truly worthy of my service!”

“No worries on that front. She is someone who will go on to achieve things far beyond what I can even imagine. Now, if we’re all decided, let’s form the contract. What should I do? Teach me.”

“It’s quite easy. It’d be different if you were trying to do it against my will, but in this case, I want this too. Simply relax, open your heart, and accept me inside.”

“Like this?” Adel took a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders, but she wasn’t sure she was doing it right.

“Next, and I’m sorry for the coarse analogy, but...I’ve heard that it helps to think of the man you love and touch me as if you were touching his face.”

“That...might be a bit difficult. I don’t have such experience.”

Which was only natural as, before returning to the past, Adel had been a man with no inclination towards liking other men. Though Adel was now a woman, it did not mean her preferences had suddenly changed as well. She was still

herself in that regard.

“Hmm? Such innocence is surprising, given your appearance. I have heard that Saints strive to have as many children as possible to pass their abilities on to the next generation.”

“Well, I had no intention of becoming a Saint in the first place. That said, there is someone I respect and adore from the bottom of my heart. Would it do for me to think of that person?”

Due to having been blind, Adel had no idea what Euphinia looked like. However, she could never forget the princess’s voice, her compassionate personality, and the warmth of the hand that had reached out to Adel when she had been at rock bottom.

Suddenly, Adel realized that because she was no longer blind, she would actually be able to see Euphinia when meeting her. Currently, Adel’s physical age was around fifteen or sixteen. Euphinia was roughly six years younger, which meant she was nine or ten. Surely, she was the most adorable girl in the whole world. Adel looked forward to seeing her so much, the mere thought made her heart skip a beat.

Keeping these thoughts in her mind, she approached Cerberus.

“That would do. Now, think of bringing me to your heart.”

“All right.”

Cerberus pushed his nose into Adel’s open palm. The moment she felt it against her hand, it began to glow softly, and its rough texture gradually turned soft and warm. When Adel opened her arms to embrace Cerberus’s head, the light spread to envelope the Divine Beast’s entire body, which then turned into particles of light that rushed into her chest.



“The light went into you!” Mash exclaimed. “Are you okay?”

Adel nodded slowly. “I feel something in my chest that wasn’t there before.” Despite being a distinctly foreign existence, it felt faintly warm and wasn’t uncomfortable at all. Spontaneously, she brought her hands to her chest and groped the soft bulges there. These felt much stranger, to be honest.

“In fact, it’s no big deal compared to...these.”

When Adel weighed the experience of turning into a woman against the sensation of accepting a Divine Beast, the latter felt trivial.

“Uh...what are you doing?” Mash awkwardly averted his eyes. “You, uh, like your own chest that much?”

“Oh, my apologies. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“I-If you say so. Anyways, that was my first time witnessing a contract form between a Saint and a Divine Beast. It was a beautiful sight, one I don’t think I’ll forget any time soon.”

“I’m not sure if I did it right, though.”

“Oh, no worries. Look at this.”

*Fwoosh!*

A ball of fire the size of Mash’s head appeared above his hand.

“I feel Cerberus’s fire anima flowing out through you. And as you can see, I can now cast spells. I can finally be of help!”

“I see. If there’s a Sanctuary, that means the contract was a success.”

When a Saint entered a contract with a Divine Beast and became one with it, the Divine Beast’s power could be converted into anima, which other people could sense and use. The techniques to utilize this power and bring about supernatural phenomena were commonly referred to as “spells”. An area filled with usable anima was called a Sanctuary, and the size of a Sanctuary was determined by the power of the Saint and Divine Beast.

Deploying a Sanctuary through a Divine Beast in her shadow normally required skill on the Saint’s part, but in this case, Cerberus was cooperating on

his own accord.

“All right, now we’re ready,” Adel declared. “There’s no point twiddling our thumbs waiting for Elciel to show up, so let’s go ahead and destroy the coliseum’s legs first!”

“I’m all for it, but how exactly are we supposed to do that?”

“We’re going up!”

The arena, which was so spacious that even Titan’s presence hadn’t made it feel crowded, was enclosed by high walls that were in turn surrounded by concentric tiers of seats that rose even higher. The tallest point was at least ten times the average adult’s height.

Mash studied the empty stands and nodded. “Got it. The wall’s a bit high, but I’ll go first to check for traps.”

“No need. We won’t be walking!”

Adel swung Salamander’s Tail, and the whip wrapped itself around one of the pillars encircling the highest tier of seats with a sharp crack. Although the distance was too far to reach as a blade, the spelltool’s length could be greatly extended through Ki Amplification when it was a whip.

“Hang on tight, Mash!”

“R-Right. Okay!” Mash wrapped his thick arm around Adel’s waist.

“Up and away!”

The whip, which had been stretched to its limit, retracted in the blink of an eye, pulling the pair all the way up to the top tier of seats.

“All right! That went well.” Adel peered over the wall and pointed down. “Look at that.”

The two commanded an unobstructed view from the top of the wall. As it turned out, the Moving Coliseum was currently making its way through a forest. Many legs wriggled busily underneath the structure, raising a din.

“We’re destroying those legs, Mash! Then the coliseum will stop!”

“But we’re really high up. How will we get d—”

“I’ll use the whip again! I’ll carry you so you can cast your spells!”

“W-We’re doing that again?”

“Why? Is there a problem?”

“N-No, never mind. Okay, I’m ready. Go for it!”

Adel nodded in acknowledgement, but then froze upon realizing that she physically couldn’t carry out her plan. She had wanted to grab Mash around the chest and jump down, but her arms weren’t long enough. There was a significant mismatch between the actual size of her current body and what she had been used to.

Puzzled, Mash asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Uh...sorry, can you crouch a little?”

“Sure.”

“All right, that’s good. Now we’re off!”

Adel held Mash around his chest with her left hand and leaped off the coliseum’s outer wall. Salamander’s Tail in her right hand stretched its whip form again, serving as their lifeline.

Just as planned, the two descended all the way to the legs. From this point on, it was up to Mash. While a Saint was maintaining a Sanctuary, she herself was incapable of casting any spells. This was why Saints needed to rely on materialized Divine Beasts and knight escorts for protection. However, this didn’t completely apply to Adel, since her fighting style did not involve casting spells in the first place. What she used was ki, which technically wasn’t even considered magic due to not needing anima.

Ki Amplification worked as intended, and Adel had managed to pull off the move. However, this meant Salamander’s Tail was occupied, and she didn’t have another spelltool on hand.

“How is it, Mash?!” Adel asked loudly over the sound of the wind rushing by.

“What?! It’s...uh...big?” Mash replied awkwardly. The sensation he was feeling on his back was occupying all of his attention, and he was unable to think of a more appropriate adjective.

“Where?!” Adel demanded. “Which part is big?!”

“Wh-Where? Well, the entire—”

“It’s probably a core part of the mechanism! Think you can destroy it somehow?!”

Mash started. “Oh, er, right! Um, I see a shaft connected to several legs! If I destroy that one part, all those legs should stop too!”

He pointed to where multiple legs were attached to a base that was in turn supported by a single shaft. It was indeed a clear structural weak point, but it was quite thick and didn’t look all that easy to break.

“That just might work! Think you can do it, Mash?!”

“No worries! That’s what I’m here for!”

Mash made several hand signs in quick succession. Adel wasn’t familiar with the process, but apparently these hand signs were necessary for casting spells. They were faster than chanting, and therefore more suitable for use in battle.

“GO!” Mash shouted, thrusting both palms forward.

*Kieeeeeeeh!*

With a high-pitched shriek, a bird made of fire appeared out of thin air, larger than even Mash’s own sizable form. He had cast an expert spell that scaled according to the caster’s ability, but he himself looked taken aback by the size of the bird.

“Wh-Why is it so huge?! Uh, go! Charge into that support beam!”

As ordered, the bird of fire shot forward at top speed.

*BOOOOOOOOOM!*

A massive explosion went off upon contact. The shaft was pulverized, and the attached legs crashed to the ground.

“Nice job, Mash! I knew I could count on you!”

Adel had been weak when she met Mash for the first time. Naturally, she had yet to learn how to use ki, and had been nearly entirely reliant on Mash’s support. The difference in strength between them had been so great that she

had no way of gauging exactly how powerful he was, so all she knew was that he was “very good at fighting.”

Now, she could tell that he was so much better than the average knight that he could probably be a captain leading a whole squad of knights. No, he was probably strong enough to be a commander in charge of an entire knight order. If he were to join the Holy Tower Church, he would merely have to say the word and he would be instated as a Saint’s knight escort. Adel could see why Elciel had made Mash an offer.

“No, that was all you!” Mash gushed. “I’ve never seen that spell be so powerful! Despite having just become a Saint, your Sanctuary is more powerful than any other I’ve worked with. We might actually have a chance to take Elciel down!”

“I’ve been serious about doing so from the start, with or without a Divine Beast!”

“So you have. But now, our odds are even better! All right, I’m going to destroy the other legs!”

“Please and thank you!”

Mash proceeded to send birds of fire hurtling toward the shafts supporting other bases connected to legs. Soon, he had done so much damage that the Moving Coliseum was tilting over and no longer able to walk straight.

“Oof, the shaking... Adel, you okay?! Maintaining the Sanctuary is tiring you out, right?! Especially with the amount of anima you’re producing! Let me know when you need to rest!”

“I’m fine! Don’t worry about me! Go for it; you only have a few more bases to go!”

In truth, Adel was feeling somewhat fatigued. It was her first time both deploying a Sanctuary and having someone use the anima in it to cast spells, and it was actually quite draining. However, stopping now was entirely out of the question. Knowing what she did about future events, Adel was adamant that the Moving Coliseum had to be stopped and Elciel killed. She would not stop until she was back by Euphinia’s side.

However, contrary to Adel's intentions, her and Mash's offense was brought to an abrupt halt as, without warning, the two of them started falling.

"Wh-What happened, Adel?!"

"I don't know! I didn't do anything!"

Salamander's Tail had gone slack like a string that had snapped. The pair looked up in alarm and realized that the pillar the spelltool had been wrapped around had been chopped clean off. They were falling because the spelltool was no longer anchored to anything.

A tall woman with lavender hair and a dignified aura stood beside the pillar, looking down at them. Her features were beautiful, but the emotions rushing through Mash's and Adel's heads blew all other impressions away.

The two shouted in unison, "ELCIEL!"

It was none other than Elciel, the War Saint hailed as one of the seven Eminents who stood at the pinnacle of the Holy Tower Church.



“You stay right there!” Adel howled. “I’ll cut you down where you stand!”

“Wait, Adel! We’re still falling!”

“Hold on tight, Mash!” Adel adjusted her grip on Salamander’s Tail, holding it in two hands. “We’re landing!”

One end of the whip shot towards the ground, solidifying into a pole. With a thud, it plunged into the ground with the intention of softening Adel’s fall. However, it bent until its end slipped out, leaving Adel and Mash helpless in the air again.

“Adel!”

Mash enveloped his partner’s body with his big form in the moment before impact. The momentum sent them bounding a few times until they finally came to a stop.

“Ugh! I’m sorry, Mash! You all right?”

“Mhm. Remember, they fused me with a monster. I’m much tougher than the average hum— Ah, *I’m* sorry! This isn’t what you think!” Mash hastily jerked his hand out from between Adel’s breasts and leaped back.

Adel paid him no mind. “No time to be distracted, Mash! Heads up!”

*Boom boom boom boom boom!*

As it turned out, the two of them had landed directly in Navarra’s path. The giant structure charged forward with unsteady steps, clearly out of control. It flattened trees and threw up giant sprays of water from the nearby lake, creating a huge tumult. If nothing was done, it would soon lay this entire part of the forest to waste.

Several men were holding on for dear life near the coliseum’s entrance, screaming at the top of their lungs.

“Ahh!!!”

“Wh-What’s going on?!?!?! Shit, shit, shit, we’re gonna dieee!!!”

“And we only just finally got out!!!”

On closer inspection, they were gladiator slaves under Mash’s care who had

been told to make their own way out. Apparently, they had been successful.

“We have to save them!” Mash cried.

“No worries. I got this!” Adel strengthened her legs with Ki Convergence and charged straight toward the staggering giant.

“What are you doing?! That’s dangerous!”

“Stay back! You’re gonna get trampled!”

“No, wait, look!”

As if the stomping legs weren’t enough, debris from uprooted trees and the destroyed legs were flying everywhere, every projectile as deadly as the next. However, Adel dodged each that came her way with movements too fast to see.

“Damn, she’s fast! How’s she doing that?!”

“No wonder Radan didn’t last a second against her!”

“Whoaaaa! That’s not just luck, right?! My eyes aren’t playing tricks on me, right?!”

The slaves were still shouting in surprise as Adel slid right underneath the coliseum. She kept pushing further in, weaving between the rampaging legs.

“Being able...to see...sure is...a blessing!”

At first, Adel had been a bit overwhelmed by all the information that her newfound sight had given her. However, when she got a bit more used to it, she realized how much easier it was to maneuver and make sharp turns compared to when she only had sound, presence, and Night Vision’s blurry view to go by. It was all the more useful in this moment, where she had to evade so many things all at once.

Swordmaster Adel wouldn’t have been able to move like this. Rather, his fighting style had been rougher and more straightforward. That said, he had been much faster and stronger, so he would have instead opted to charge straight in and use brute force to chop down the legs. In short, Adel currently preferred technique over power, but it wasn’t a particularly big deal when the end result would have been the same.

Based on the damage Mash had already done, and the angle at which the entire structure was tilting, Adel had set her sights on a group of legs on the far side to her right. She reached them in the blink of an eye. Although Salamander's Tail could extend its range, doing so proportionately lowered its power. Adel needed to get up close and personal.

"If I destroy this group, it'll tip over!"

*Slash!*

The double blades of blue flames sliced clean through all the legs in one swing. And just as predicted, Navarra fell onto its side. It rolled into the lake beside its path, raising a massive geyser of water.

*Splaaash!*

"Perfect! Just as planned!"

If the coliseum had crashed while still on land, the slaves would have been in huge danger. It was fortunate that there had been a lake nearby, as landing in the water softened the impact. One could say that the slaves had the devil's luck.

"Hell yeah! We're saved!"

"Whoo! Air smells so much more delicious as a free man!"

"That's 'cos we're in a forest, duh. Of course the air smells delicious!"

The slaves continued their banter even as they clambered onto land.

Mash approached Adel and gave her a pat on the shoulder. "Thank you, Adel! Thank you for saving them!"

"It's all good. But keep your guard up. When Elciel surfaces, your men might get caught up in the fight. The real ordeal starts now."

"Right!" Mash bared his teeth with a grim look, then called out to the cavorting men. "Listen up, you lot! Don't celebrate just yet! Quickly get up here and hide! Elciel's coming, and she'll kill you without a second thought! Don't waste the effort Adel put into saving your asses!"

"Y-Yes, Boss!"

“Roger!”

“Eep! I don’t want to die right after getting my life back!”

The slaves screamed and dashed away from the shoreline, scattering to take cover behind trees and boulders.

Seeing how spooked they were, Adel decided to give them a bit of reassurance. “There’s no need to be afraid! I will take care of her! That’s a promise!”

“Thank you, Boss Lady!” the men shouted in unison.

Adel frowned. “Hm? Why did they call me that?”

“Looks like they’ve acknowledged you,” Mash laughed. “Let’s just say, they know that hanging onto the coattails of those with strength is the key to a long life.”

“Shrewd bastards.”

“Can’t deny that, but they’re all good men at heart.”

“I can see that. And at the end of the day, we’re all equally victims of Navarra.”

“Mhm. Okay, enough talk. Elciel might be coming up any moment now!”

Mash raised the scimitar that Adel had seized from Radan and directed his attention toward the lake.

“We’ll attack her the moment she shows her face!” Adel similarly scowled at the water’s surface as Salamander’s Tail assumed its double-bladed form.

There was no need to waste time with Elciel. She was not someone to leave alive. Mash and Adel had every intention of charging at her as soon as she showed her face. And so they stood at the ready and waited.

But night passed and morning came, with Elciel still nowhere to be seen.

# Chapter 2: Profane Land

*Splash!*

A man's face broke the surface of a lake in the middle of a forest. He turned to the shoreline and waved an arm. "Boss! Boss Lady! There isn't a single person inside! The place is empty!"

"Got it! Thanks, Fisher! Come on back up!" Mash shouted back.

In the end, Elciel never emerged from the sunken wreckage of Navarra. Neither did the other jailers and research personnel who should have been onboard as well. It made no sense at all. Adel's group had decided to investigate when the sun came back up and they could see again.

Thanks to part of Fisher's body having been replaced with that of a snake monster through Navarra's experiments, he could stay underwater for longer and swim faster than the average person. There was no one better equipped than him for underwater exploration, and so the task had fallen on his shoulders.

"Yessir! Oh, and, heh heh heh, I helped myself to a little something!"

Fisher produced bottles of wine that had been tightly sealed, as well as cheese, sausage, and other edibles that were none the worse for wear after having been submerged in water for a night.

"Hell yeah! Nice job, Fisher!"

"You did a great job for once!"

"It's time to party! Whoo!"

"I can't even remember the last time I had a drink! Damn, this is so good!"

"Bro, you're drinking water..."

"Don't tell him! If he can't even tell the difference, this wine would be wasted on him! Bwa ha ha ha!"

"You might be right, but...you're drinking water too."

Mash watched the former slaves erupt into merrymaking, and sighed. “Geez. What a ruckus.”

“A little fun never hurt anyone,” Adel smiled wryly. “What bothers me is the fact that there was no one in the Moving Coliseum. It’s safe to assume someone helped all of them escape.”

“You think it was Elciel’s doing?”

“Who else? I’m absolutely sure she’s still alive. That said, there’s nothing we can do about it if she’s not here. We’ll have to kill her another time.”

“What about Cerberus? Think he can help track Elciel down?”

“I’ve been trying to talk to him, but he’s not responding. He’s definitely still inside me, but I think he’s in a really deep sleep. He must have been really wounded.”

“I see. Say, Adel. What’re you going to do now? You have anywhere to go?”

“I’m returning to my liege’s side. Fortunately, we should still be in Wendill. I’ll make my way out of this forest and head for the royal capital.”

“Who is your liege anyway?” Mash asked.

“Princess Euphinia of Wendill. She is high-minded and wise, never puts on airs, and treats everyone with kindness. As if that isn’t enough, she is an extremely talented Saint!”

“The princess?! So you’re a knight directly serving the royal family?! No wonder you’re so good at fighting!”

“Well, that’s not quite right... I *am* the Princess’s escort knight, but not right now.”

“What does that mean? Are you trying to restore your name and regain your place after having been framed for something?”

“No, that’s not it. Hmm, I guess you could say...I’m applying for the position to serve Princess Euphinia! Yes, that’s the best way to put it!”

“I don’t quite get it, but you’re basically going to petition to enter the princess’s service? Does that mean you’re from a family of nobles or knights?”

“Not at all. I’m an orphan. I have no idea who my parents were.”

“Hold on, you sure you’re gonna be fine? Does the Wendill royal family hire commoners so easily?!”

“Hmm? Of course! The princess is someone who would never discriminate based on one’s birth! Her ability to gauge one’s true value is keener than a hawk’s eye, and her magnanimous heart is wider than the largest ocean!”

The amount of confidence Adel oozed as she threw back her chest made Mash falter a little.

“I-I see. Even if that’s the case, isn’t what the king thinks a bigger issue? He decides who gets assigned to the princess’s protective detail, right?”

“Hmm... You’re right. At the time, I...”

In the previous timeline, when Euphinia had first made Adel an escort knight, many people had objected, including the king. However, at the time, Euphinia had already become fully acknowledged by the Holy Tower Church as a Saint, and therefore had the influence to insist that she was well within her rights to choose her own guards.

Even so, Adel’s ensuing relationship with those around had not been smooth sailing. Although the princess herself treated him with the same kindness she did everyone else, Adel’s appearance—he had lost both eyes and was scarred all over—induced terror with his mere presence. The female servants were particularly scared of him. This was why he eventually made a habit of presenting himself in his suit of black armor—the armor was intimidating in and of itself, but it was a slight improvement as it hid his entire body.

However, such worries were suddenly rendered insignificant when the Great War broke out. The kingdom of Wendill was invaded by the Northern Federation and literally erased from the map. As a result, Euphinia became the princess of a fallen country.

Adel wondered what Euphinia’s current standing was in this timeline. Regardless, there was one thing she knew with full certainty.

“In any case, what I have to do doesn’t change! We’re going to see her right away, Mash! Princess Euphinia is the only person I’d ever accept as my liege!”

Adel was determined to use this second chance to live out his days in happiness by Euphinia's side. She had traveled back in time and become a woman for that very purpose, after all!

"Wait, I'm coming too? When you said you'd be applying for royal service, I thought this was where we would part ways."

"You're not getting out of this, Mash! Let's serve Her Highness together! There's no one else I'd rather have my back!"

"B-But I..."

"You come from a family of knights, right? Then your lineage shouldn't be a problem."

"There's a much bigger issue at hand, isn't there?! Do you *see* my face?!"

Adel patted Mash's shoulder.

"Don't worry. Princess Euphinia isn't bothered by such trivialities. We also have a Divine Beast to offer as tribute, so we'll be able to make our case with both accomplishment and lineage in hand."

"Are you sure that's how it works? Your princess, uh, sounds like an interesting person."

"She is a noble person with an open mind, free of prejudice!"

"If you say so. Well, either way, I have nowhere else to go, and I owe you my life. If you hadn't come along, the guys and I would probably have all died in the coliseum, either to the experiments or the jailers' games. I'd be more than happy to come with you if you want us along!"

The two exchanged a firm handshake.

"Thank you, Mash! I look forward to—"

"Bwa ha ha ha! Dude, Fisher! We're outta wine! Dive back in and get us more!"

"I told you, what you're drinking is water!"

"Yeah? You want more? Come here! This here is a spring of wine!"

*Splash!*

“Whoa! You’re right, this tastes heavenly!”

“He *still* seriously thinks that’s wine?!”

“Hold on, that’s actually wine?! Let me at it too!”

“Me too!”

“Me three!”

“I’m saying it *isn’t*! Are you all daft?!”

“What am I ever gonna do with them?” Mash asked, sighing as he watched the former slaves having a grand time jumping in and out of the lake.

“They’re not exactly useless,” Adel said. “They each have things they’re good at. However, whether or not they’re suitable to be Her Highness’s retainers is another story. They’re...not exactly well educated or well mannered.”

Adel had yet to remember everyone’s names and abilities. Just like Fisher, who had gone underwater, the rest also possessed abilities or features that made them particularly well suited for other situations. After all, that had been the whole point of the experiments performed on them in Navarra. However, the way they acted when in a group would certainly raise more than a few eyebrows.

“That’s true,” Mash admitted. “They could definitely be mistaken for bandits or highwaymen.”

“And we can’t have rumors about Her Highness being the head of a gang of bandits.”

“Fair enough. It’d be different if they had the minimal level of manners needed for court service, but...”

“Well, I can’t promise anything, but how about we still ask Her Highness if she could take them on? If the answer is no, we can find occupations for them elsewhere. Either way, going to the capital seems like a good idea, since that’s where people and opportunity gather.”

Even Adel could not advocate the former slaves to Euphinia with full confidence. However, she was willing to at least make sure they had the ability to sustain themselves going forward.

“R-Right. I suppose that’s true. I’m really sorry they’re such a handful.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure there’s a reason we met. All right, let’s rest up a little more and then head off.”

“I admit I am feeling a bit tired after keeping watching throughout the night. And in the first place, I never got the chance to properly rest back in the Moving Coliseum. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Mash sat down beneath a large tree and leaned back, closing his eyes.

“Now, as for myself...” Unlike Mash, Adel still had energy to spare. She looked around, trying to think of something to do to pass the time, and noticed the slaves still partying at the water’s edge.

“Hya ha ha ha! This is amazing! There isn’t a single speck of dirt left on my skin! I feel so refreshed!”

“That’s ’cos the water’s so clear! I feel like both my body and my heart’s been washed!”

“Ah.” Adel looked at herself. After everything that had happened since the moment she woke up in Navarra, she was now covered in dust. She had also worked up quite a sweat, so her skin felt grimy and gross. “I should probably get clean as well.”

Since she had time, Adel decided to freshen up too. Right away, she stripped down to her underwear. When she did so, she absentmindedly rubbed her behind and realized for the first time that her underwear was uncomfortably tight. Her chest was also feeling constrained by her bra, which was similarly a size or two too small.

“Hmm... May as well take my top off.”

Adel was somewhat hesitant to get entirely naked, but she didn’t really mind baring her chest. It would give her some release, at least.

When she grabbed the hem of the garment, however, someone shouted behind her, “Whoa ho ho! Boss Lady! Thank you! Thank you!”

She turned around, frowning. “Keep it down. I’m just washing myself. There’s nothing to see, so don’t make a fuss.”

After glaring at everyone in turn, Adel turned back and finished taking her top off.

The next thing she knew, Mash was screaming her name at the top of his lungs and rushing toward her at top speed. Right before he reached her, he whirled around and spread his arms, as if hiding her from the other men's sight.

"Don't you guys dare look! Turn around!"

"Y-Yes, boss!" several men shouted, complying.

"What's the matter, Mash?" Adel asked, sounding bewildered.

"What do you mean 'what's the matter'?! A young woman shouldn't be revealing so much skin in front of so many men!"

"Young woman? Who, me?"

"Do you see another woman around here?! Of course I'm talking about you! I'm sorry to say this, but you really need to learn some decency and—!"

Suddenly, a girl appeared from the forest. The instant she laid eyes on the group, she screamed.

"Ahhh!!! Wh-Who are you people?!"

Without missing a beat, the former slaves approached her.

"Heh heh heh, you're a cutie. C'mon, join us for a bit."

"It's just a friendly invitation. Let's chat and have some fun!"

"We may not look it, but we know how to have a good time!"

The girl appeared to be about the same age as Adel, around fifteen or sixteen. She had blue eyes and blonde hair done up in ponytails that swung a little every time she moved. Together with her attractive and somewhat childish features, she gave off a lively and friendly atmosphere.

At least, she would under normal circumstances. But when she had taken a moment to connect the dots between where she was, what these men were wearing, and the way they spoke and behaved, a grim look came over her face.

"Bandits?!"

She could hardly be blamed for reaching that conclusion—in fact, it was entirely reasonable. That by itself wasn't a problem.

"There are bandits living this deep inside profane lands?! You have some nerve! As a knight of Wendill, I won't let you get away!"

What *was* a problem was that the girl wore a suit of light armor bearing the royal crest of Wendill...and she was armed. She swiftly took hold of her spear and pointed it at the former slaves. Her stance made it clear that she definitely knew how to use her weapon.

Mash hurriedly stepped in between the girl and the men. "No, please wait a moment! We're nobody suspicious... Okay, I admit we might *seem* suspicious! But I promise you we're not bandits, and we have no intention to cause you harm!"

Considering that he would be joining Adel on her quest to become a knight of Wendill, Mash very much wanted to prevent the situation from escalating any further. Unfortunately, his entrance only served to make the girl even more wary.

"Wh-What are you... You're a monster?! Wait, no, human?! Are the profane lands a place where anything goes these days?!"

Adel realized that Mash jumping out had been a mistake. Someone familiar with him would know that he was a well-mannered and gentle soul, but the girl clearly had no intention of having a proper conversation with a lion-faced man. As such, Adel decided to try defusing the situation herself and stepped forward in front of Mash.

"Wait a moment! At the very least, please put down your spear and listen to us!"

The girl's eyes widened. "Come this way!" she said sharply, grabbing Adel's arm and pulling her back. "I've got you now, okay? You poor thing, I can't imagine what you've been through. But don't worry, I'm here to protect you now!"

She turned back to give Adel a reassuring smile, but her lips were pressed tight and her eyes were moist, as if she was holding back a rush of emotions.

Adel looked puzzled, but Mash seemed to understand the girl's expression. He clutched his head, crying, "Ahhh! Now we're in for it!"

The girl glared daggers at him and the former slaves. "You brutes! How could you kidnap such a cute girl and lay your hands on her?!"

She had seen a group of men who looked like bandits, and a girl who had been stripped nearly naked. The conclusion she had come to was self-evident. On the verge of tears, it was clear her heart was actually going out to Adel. She was a person with a big heart who could truly sympathize with those in need of help.

"No, this isn't what you think!" Adel said in a fluster. "I was just trying to bathe—"

"I'm on your side; you don't have to lie to me! I told you, I'll protect you!"

Interrupting this heated conversation, the former slaves called out in plaintive voices.

"Boss..."

"Boss Lady..."

"Aren't you making the situation worse? What're you doing?"

"You all have no right to talk!" Adel and Mash shouted in unison.

Having lost her patience, the young girl declared, "I'm done talking! Raise your wea—?!"

Before she could take a single step, however, Adel pinioned her arms from behind. "My apologies! I know it is highly disrespectful to touch a woman without her permission, but I see no other way!"

"Um, that's not what bothers me! Please, let me go! Oh wow, your boobs are so big... Hey, this actually feels kinda... No, what I mean to say is, this is dangerous! You might get hurt if I throw you off like— Huh?! Th-This can't be. I can't move! How are you so strong?!"



Adel was using Ki Convergence to make her arms strong enough to restrain the girl. She was a proper knight of Wendill and a skilled fighter, but she stood no chance against Adel's superhuman strength.

"Please, all we ask is that you calm down and listen!"

Suddenly, the sound of rustling filled the air. Trees and bushes all around started shaking violently, signaling the arrival of another party.

Adel's head swiveled, on high alert. "What's coming?!"

"Look sharp, you all! Something's coming!" Mash barked.

"Yes, Boss!" the former slaves shouted.

A wolf as tall as an adult male burst out of the shrubbery, growling menacingly. Its eyes gleamed with a hair-raising red glow, and the horn on its head had the sharpness and length to pierce several people in one thrust. The miasma surrounding the beast's form was so thick that it was visible as a black mist.

Another one landed right in front of Adel and the female knight.

"Horned wolves?!" the knight exclaimed. "It's dangerous! Stand ba—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Adel was already in motion. Still holding onto the female knight's arms, she raised her foot into the air and unleashed a side kick that caught the closest wolf square in its jaw.

The monster crashed to the ground with a whine of surprise and pain, its horn snapping from the force of the impact. It did not get up again.

"Interesting. I'm surprised how high my foot—"

Adel's current body was a lot more flexible than her previous one had been. However, she had no time to be impressed, as she suddenly lost her balance and staggered forward as the female knight slipped out of her grasp.

Adel's ki had weakened as a result of shifting her to her foot. She could have split the ki across multiple limbs, but the effectiveness of ki was determined by concentration. If she spread her ki throughout her entire body, Adel's strength would be comparable to a man with bulging muscles, but that was it. The most basic form of Ki Convergence focused everything on a single point, and Adel had chosen to attack with her full strength on this opponent she was encountering for the first time.

"Wow! You just...with one kick?! Th-Thank you."

"There's no need for thanks. I'm sure you would've taken care of it even if I did nothing. But now you understand that I wasn't being attacked by these men, right?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry." The girl caught her breath and looked around.

"You called this profane land? That explains the monsters!" Mash repeatedly parried the horn of the other beast in an impressive display of martial prowess,

before slitting open its throat.

A third horned wolf leaped out, sending the former slaves running about like headless chickens.

“Ahh! Heeelp!!!” they screamed.

The female knight chuckled a little. “With how much stronger you are, there’s no way they were taking advantage of— Wait!” Understanding and horror came over her face. “Th-That means you...of your own will?! With *all* these men?!”

“No!” Adel protested vehemently. “I was just bath—”

Mash threw Adel’s top to her. “Put your clothes on already! It’s ’cos you go around getting naked without a thought that people get the wrong idea!”

“Apologies. I’ll be more mindful.”

“Also, I need to save my guys! Please allow me to use magic!”

Adel nodded while getting dressed. “You got it.” She resonated with Cerberus, who was still sleeping within her, and deployed a Sanctuary. Anyone who knew how to use magic could sense anima filling the vicinity. This included the female knight.

“Sanctuary?! You’re a Saint?!” she exclaimed. While Mash was using fire magic to finish off the monster in the distance, the girl practically prostrated herself before Adel. “I-I-I am so, so sorry! I had no idea you were a Saint! Oh, and these must be your attendants and escort knight! Please forgive me for my disrespect!”

The girl’s attitude made Adel even more surprised than her. “I...see. So this is how people react.”

In this world, Saints had extremely high social standing, sometimes even given the same treatment as kings and queens. Melulu was merely acting based on her awareness of the stark difference in station between a Saint and a mere knight like herself.

One reason Saints were given such high status was their ability to bond with Divine Beasts and deploy Sanctuaries, which were crucial for both magical combat and technological development. However, they served another role

that was even more crucial to the entire world at large.

The second and more important reason was that Saints were the only people who could erect Holy Towers, the namesake of the Holy Tower Church. In this world, land was naturally filled with miasma, which led to the appearance of monsters like the horned wolves that had just attacked Adel's group. Holy Towers served to purify land in a certain radius, making it habitable. Places not influenced by a Holy Tower were collectively referred to as "profane land."

An inland country like Wendill was almost completely protected, but Holy Towers became more sparse with greater distance from Alderford, the holy capital of the Church. Generally speaking, people could only live in lands blessed by a Holy Tower. As such, it was said that the history of this world began with the Goddess erecting the Central Tower in Alderford and has continued to this day with Saints slowly driving back the frontier to carve out the current world map.

Creating and maintaining hospitable land required the power of Divine Beasts, and only Saints had the ability to communicate and bond with them. Saints had also originally developed magic for combat, as a way to protect themselves while out in profane land. It was easy to see, then, why Saints were so highly revered. This was all the more so in Wendill, the country in which Alderford was located.

Adel, however, was not officially a Saint. She had the ability to converse with and form contracts with Divine Beasts, but she had yet to be acknowledged by the Church.

"First, please get up. I'm no Saint, so you don't have to treat me like one."

"But you just deployed a Sanctuary! That's a power only Saints possess."

"I may have the ability, but the Church hasn't acknowledged me, and I don't plan on asking them to."

Adel considered every part of her, including her abilities, as belonging to Euphinia. Being accepted by the Church meant being bound by duty to the Church, and she had no intention of serving two masters. Euphinia had been—and would always be—her one and only liege.

“I see,” the knight sighed. “You’re so talented, it seems like a bit of a waste.”

Adel shrugged. “Anyway, that’s why you can speak to me as equals.”

“As you command— I mean, sure.”

“I’m Adel Astal. And you? By your outfit, I’m guessing you’re a knight of Wendill.”

“Oh, I’m Melulu. Melulu Sedis. Nice to meet you.”

“*You’re* Melulu Sedis?!”

Mash looked over, reacting to Adel’s surprise. “You know her?”

“Uh, no, not personally. I, uh, have heard her name.”

Adel was pretending otherwise, but she actually knew the name “Melulu” very well. To put it simply, Melulu had been Euphinia’s previous knight escort. According to the princess, Melulu had died prior to Adel’s release. The incident had weighed heavily on her, and was one of the reasons why she had treated Adel so well.

From the stories Euphinia had told Adel, it was clear she and Melulu had been close. In fact, Adel had even felt a little jealous of how happy Euphinia sounded. This was the first time the two were meeting in person, but Adel already held a lot of respect for Melulu.

Melulu blinked. “Really? I’m that famous? Um...I don’t think the stories about me are flattering, though. I’ve messed up more times than I can count at the palace.”

“Ah, I might have heard wrong, then. Sorry, please don’t mind me. In any case, this is Mash. He’s with me. His face might be scary, but he’s a good guy once you get to know him.”

“N-Nice to meet you, my lady,” Mash said.

“Nice to meet you too. I apologize for jumping to conclusions earlier.”

“As for the rest, they’re, uh...” Adel suddenly found herself at a loss for how best to introduce the former slaves. She looked to Mash for help. She didn’t mind talking about the Moving Coliseum of Navarra that was currently sitting at

the bottom of the lake nearby, but not only was the story quite long, the telling would also touch on the dark side of the Holy Tower Church and could be construed as criticism of the Church. Even though Adel was facing someone she felt she could trust, she found herself hesitating.

Mash returned Adel's look. "I suppose you can say that these men are my...henchmen? Not that we're bandits, of course! Um...mercenaries! Right! We're a band of traveling mercenaries. And we're conducting training exercises in this profane land. Profane land is just perfect for training! Especially for us, since we have Adel, who can deploy a Sanctuary when we're in over our heads."

Although Mash came up with the excuse on the spot, it actually sounded rather reasonable, and Melulu seemed to buy it.

"Ah, so you're mercenaries. It's true this area was left as profane land on purpose for Saints and knights to train in. I guess we can't fault mercenaries for wanting to use it too."

"What about you?" Adel asked. "Even for a royal knight, isn't it a bit dangerous to be here all alone? In the first place, shouldn't you be with Princess Euphinia?"

Adel's aim was more to steer the conversation away from her group than dig deeply into Melulu's situation. However, it was true that there must be a reason Melulu was alone out here in the middle of nowhere. As Princess Euphinia's knight escort, she should have been at the princess's side.

"What?! How'd you know?! Am I actually famous?! But you're right. Or at least, that's the plan. Princess Euphinia did say that she wanted me to become her knight escort once she's officially sworn in as a Saint. But the thing is, my family are just merchants, not nobles or knights, so..."

Melulu's expression became clouded. She left it unsaid, but she had likely been the target of much harassment and hostility in the palace simply for being a commoner. Though Euphinia was not bothered by one's lineage, the same could not be said of everyone around her. And since Melulu was going to be the knight escort of a princess who would be a Saint, the envy and spite directed at her had surely been that much more intense.

"I see. They assigned you an impossible mission so you'd get killed before Her

Highness could appoint you as her knight escort after officially becoming a Saint."

Adel never got to hear the full details, but she knew that Melulu had been killed before she herself got to meet Euphinia. And there was no guarantee that today wasn't that day.

"N-No, of course not! I got separated from the main force because I'm slow and clumsy, that's all! It... No, that can't be!"

Melulu shook her head vigorously. However, the blood drained from her face as a relevant memory came to mind.

"The main force...for what?" Adel asked. "To kill a monster?"

"Yes. You know the horned wolves just now? An aberrant called a queen horned wolf has shown up. A task force was put together to kill it before it stepped out of profane land and attacked nearby villages. I'm supposed to be with them, but..."

"I see. An aberrant monster."

Generally, aberrant monsters were much larger, stronger, and more vicious than their normal counterparts. Most monsters would never leave profane lands, but aberrants were different. There were past cases of some being powerful enough to invade purified land and destroy Holy Towers, turning habited areas back to profane land. Truly, there was no respite or end to the struggle between man and monster.

"Mash." Adel sent her partner a look. He nodded in understanding.

In any case, Melulu's current situation was dire, and she needed help. Adel personally respected Melulu as her predecessor, and above all, saving Melulu would make Euphinia happy. Sparing Euphinia the grief of losing Melulu was now a priority in Adel's mind. And to top it all off, Melulu was probably the fastest way for Adel to meet Euphinia.

"Melulu, I have a suggestion."

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

"Would you hire us? We're mercenaries, after all. As long as we're

compensated, we'd be more than happy to help you kill that aberrant."

"You'll help me?! I'd really appreciate it, but...I don't have any money on me. If you'll let me pay you back later, I can ask my family."

"I don't mind being paid afterward, but it isn't money that I want."

"Not money? Then what do you want?"

"Please arrange an opportunity for me to meet Princess Euphinia. We can't be mercenaries forever. Instead, I want to serve the princess who is high-minded, unpretentious, kind, and treats everyone with enveloping warmth akin to the sun! She is the only person in this entire world who I would acknowledge as my liege!"

Seeing Adel's passion, understanding dawned in Melulu's eyes. "Ohhh, *now* I get it! I was wondering how you know so much about her. You're one of Princess's diehard fans!"

"Sure, you could say that. No one adores her more than me. No one!" Adel puffed out her voluptuous chest with confidence, inadvertently making it jiggle.

"Oh, I can't take that lying down! Princess is super cute, super elegant, super smart, and super kind! I love her too!" Melulu puffed out her own chest with the same vigor, which also jiggled in close competition.

"It seems we are kindred spirits."

"Ha ha, looks like it! Oh, now I get it. When Princess goes out to town, I'm always guarding her. That's where you know me from, right?"

Of course that wasn't it, but this misunderstanding worked in Adel's favor.

"Sure, I'll talk to Princess for you!" Melulu said. "You're technically a Saint, even though you're not sworn in. That means we'd be hiring a Saint with the salary of a knight. That's a really good deal!"

"Ohhh! I hadn't even thought of that!" Adel exclaimed with admiration. "Emphasizing that point might give me an edge!"

Mash, too, seemed impressed. "You sure know how to talk someone up!"

"Well, my father is a merchant, so I have a tendency to think of things in

those terms. I'd feel reassured having Adel come back to the castle with me. Since she's a fellow Princess fan, I'm sure we'll get along swimmingly!"

A bright smile came over Melulu's face. As it turned out, she was an expressive girl with a natural charm. Now that she had let her guard down, it seemed her real character was finally coming through.

"I couldn't agree more," Adel nodded. "Well then, we have a deal. Thank you for accepting us!"

"Same here!"

Adel and Melulu exchanged a firm handshake, then the former chuckled. "And sorry, but it looks like the aberrant's already dead."

"Huh?! Wh-What do you mean?! Did the main force take it out?!"

"What're you talking about, Adel?" Mash asked.

Instead of replying, Adel shouted at the former slaves who were now supposedly her mercenary subordinates. "There's a big fight coming! Run that way if you don't wanna die!" She pointed to a spot behind her and to the left.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"I don't wanna dieee!"

"H-Hey, how about we jump in the lake?"

"Oh, that's a great idea! Here I gooo— *glub glub glub*! F-Fisher! Save me! I-I'm drowning!"

"What kind of idiot jumps into the water if he can't swim?!"

Melulu couldn't believe the chaos she was seeing. "Uh...are those guys really mercenaries? How are they still alive?"

Neither Adel nor Mash had an answer for her. Despite how they were acting, the men were all former experimental subjects of Navarra, which meant they had more fighting experience than most. However, the opponent this time was simply way out of their league.

"Forget them! Stay sharp!" Adel shouted, pointing in front and to the right this time.

That instant, something erupted from the ground with a deafening boom, throwing trees everywhere. What emerged was a massive shell with the brilliance of a black jewel. The neck and limbs extending from the shell were covered in tough-looking scales, and the creature's face was grim and terrifying to all who beheld it. Razor-sharp blades that would make short work of horned wolves protruded all over its body and limbs. And its tail was forked, ending in a pair of snake heads.

Put simply, it was a colossal tortoise with a black lustrous shell and snake heads for tail ends. Adel recognized it. In fact, she knew it very well.

"It's Genbu!" she shouted.

"Wh-What is with that giant?! It's on a whole other dimension!" Melulu exclaimed. "The aberrant is now the least of our— Huh?! Is that the queen horned wolf in its mouth?!"

Sure enough, a wolf-life monster was breathing its last between Genbu's powerful jaws. The form was several times larger than the ones that Adel's group had killed earlier, but Genbu was so much bigger that he could probably swallow it in one gulp.

"Your target's dead and we didn't even have to lift a finger! What a stroke of luck, right, Melulu? Don't forget to uphold your end of our deal!"

"Huuuh?! That's the least of our problems right now! That other monster is going to kill us!"

"You're wrong. That's no monster. There's no miasma coming from it."

"Ah, you're right. Then what..."

Mash beat Melulu to the punch. "It's a Divine Beast!"

Though it might be disrespectful to point out, both Divine Beasts and monsters looked similarly inhuman. The way to discern between the two was that the former blessed people with anima, while the latter sought to kill people and was always clad in miasma. Divine Beasts helped humans because they had been created by the Goddess in the age of yore, whereas monsters were created by the Evil One. The two were of different lineages.

“But why is a Divine Beast attacking us here?” Mash wondered, his voice hard with wariness.

“It’s *her*,” Adel replied. “Genbu is *hers*!”

Elciel had four powerful Divine Beasts under her command that were collectively known as the Four Guardians. Adel had no memory of Elciel using Cerberus, but she very vividly recalled the Four Guardians. It was these four Divine Beasts who had razed Sidel to the ground, killing Euphinia in the process. Afterward, when Adel fought Elciel, these four had stood up to protect her to the bitter end. Whenever Adel thought of Elciel, the Four Guardians were practically inseparable.

“Who is ‘her’?” Melulu cried. “Why are we being attacked?! Divine Beasts don’t normally attack people for no reason!”

“Not unless they have a master who’s clearly after our lives,” Adel laughed. “Regardless, we have to retrieve the queen horned wolf’s body to prove its death.”

Mash started to complain. “Is it just me, or has the difficulty of our mission just shot—”

Cutting him short, Adel shouted, “There’s another one! In the sky!”

A large shadow fell over the group. They looked up to see another Divine Spirit, smaller than Genbu but still large enough to carry several people on its back. Its front half resembled a hawk, while its back half looked like a horse.

Mash cried, “It’s a Hippogriff! Watch out, they’re really nimble!”

On Hippogriff’s back sat a woman whose violet hair streamed in the wind. Her stately face was taut with focus.

“She’s finally shown herself!” Adel bared her teeth. “I wouldn’t have it any other way!”

There was no way that Elciel would sit back and do nothing about the coliseum being destroyed. She had probably been using all this time to evacuate the other laboratory personnel. Now that she was done, she had immediately returned to deliver swift justice. Adel couldn’t be happier with this

development.

“You look like you’re just raring to go, Adel! Somehow that gives me courage too!” Mash roared.

“Well, none of that courage reached me!” yelled Melulu. “Th-That’s Saint Elciel up there, right? I’ve seen her before! I-I-If we kill her, we’ll be responsible for killing an Eminent! G-G-Guys, that’s a bad idea!”

“Can’t you see? She attacked *us* first! We’re just trying to retrieve the queen horned wolf’s body, as per our mission. This is legitimate self-defense!”

“E-E-Even so...”

“Don’t worry! Lucky for this, this is profane land! Once we bury her, no one will be any the wiser!”

“Adel, you’re mad—”

“Raaawr!!!” Genbu roared in intimidation, stomping feet as thick as trees several centuries old. The ground shook so violently that Adel and Melulu were thrown a few centimeters off the ground.

“Eeep!”

“Run awaaay! It’s gonna eat us!”

“Where do we even run to anyway?! Right, the lake!”

“I must dive deeper! All the way to the bottom!”

“*Glub glub glub*! I-I can’t breathe! I’m gonna dieee!”

If nothing was done, it was only a matter of time before someone died.

Melulu laughed weakly. “Ah ha ha, I’m on *their* side for once. Can we run away too?”

“No, don’t leave my side, Melulu! Trust me, I’ll protect you! You’re too important to lose!”

“O-Okay! Though it feels weird to have a Saint protect me.”

Normally, it was the job of a knight escort to put their life on the line for a Saint.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m a quack Saint anyway. As for my ability, however... Thank you for waiting! Come on out, Cerberus!”

Cerberus had been clamoring to be let out from within Adel. He had told Adel that the aberrant was dying soon and warned her of Genbu’s approach. This was why it had seemed like Adel was able to predict these things in advance.

“*Kiiiieeeeeeeeee!*” Despite being smaller than Genbu, Hippogriff carried itself with just as much majesty.

A ring of light appeared from Adel’s shadow, and out jumped Cerberus, looking much better than he had before.

“Whoa!” Melulu exclaimed. “Your Divine Beast seems really powerful!”

“He’s healed quite a lot,” Mash observed.

Cerberus kept his eyes warily trained on Genbu. “Adel, I’ll take care of this one. You focus on Elciel.”

“The Four Guardians are strong! You sure you’ll be fine alone?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? They may be strong, but among us Divine Beasts, they’re known as outcasts with no vassals and no clan! I can’t let my earlier defeat stand, not when I have my entire clan on my shoulders!”

“I see. The one who hurt you so badly...”

“Was *her*! And just to let you know, it wasn’t one-on-one! I’d never lose in a fair fight!”

“If you say so, then I’ll put my trust in you. Mash! Melulu! This Cerberus says he’ll keep Genbu at bay for us! In the meantime, we’ll take Elciel down!”

“Got it!”

“O-Okay!”

The two nodded. In the next instant, Cerberus and Genbu roared and slammed into each other. Getting caught up in their struggle would be a bad experience, to put it lightly.

“You two, follow me!” Adel retreated a distance away, then set her sights on Elciel’s Hippogriff. “Elciel! Your luck ran out the moment you met me here!

Attacking us all the way out here in profane land works in our favor! You won't be leaving here alive!"

In response to Adel's challenge, Elciel smiled coldly. "I do not know who you are. However, you will pay for your sins."

"Sins?" Adel barked a laugh. "You may not know me, but I know all about how sinful *you* are. I'll bury you before you commit any more!"

"And I am living proof of your sin!" Mash added. "We will never forget everything that happened in the Moving Coliseum of Navarra! I will avenge my fallen comrades today!"

Elciel shrugged. "That was merely the product of a fool who discarded everything for curiosity's sake. It is true I took advantage of it, but...well, it was hardly for nothing. Everything was for the sake of expanding the horizons of our world and reaching the limits of what is possible."

"No matter how lofty the ideal, you can't bring back the dead!" Mash roared. "Someone has to pay!"

Adel pointed an accusing finger. "And that's you, Elciel!"

"Then we must all do what we must," Elciel said simply.

It was clear the conversation was over. All that was left was the reckoning.

"Mash! Think you can hit her?"

With how high Hippogriff was flying, Salamander's Tail wouldn't deal any significant damage even if Adel could make it reach. Ki Amplification became less effective the more spread out it was. In light of this, there was no choice but to rely on Mash and his spells. If he shot Elciel down, then Adel could close in and finish her off.

Adel did not have the strength and powerful spelltools from before the time jump. However, with the help of Cereberus, the deployment of a Sanctuary, and Mash's aid, she was confident she could defeat Elciel once again.

"I'll give it a try! Go!"

*Kieee!*

A bird of fire appeared before Mash's hands.

"Spell signs...for the Fire Bird spell?! And it's huge! You're incredible, Mash!"

"Thank you. But we'll have to see if it actually reaches Elciel!"

The three on the ground watched the fire bird rush at Hippogriff with incredible speed. However, the deft Divine Beast evaded it with little trouble. The bird circled around for another pass, but the result was the same. By this point, enough time had passed for Elciel to form hand signs of her own. She thrust out her hands, and a tempestuous vortex of wind slammed into Mash's attack, canceling each other out.

Adel's eyes widened. "What?!"

"Did she just use magic?!" Mash gasped.

"How?!" Melulu exclaimed. "She's deploying a Sanctuary, isn't she?!"

The sight of Elciel using magic was a first even for Adel. It was common knowledge that maintaining a Sanctuary required so much effort that Saints could not cast spells using the anima produced by that Sanctuary at the same time.

Elciel had summoned both Genbu and Hippogriff, meaning she had a Sanctuary deployed. But there was no doubt that she had also used magic; everyone had witnessed it. Was she, as an Eminent, just that powerful? Having fought her before, Adel knew how skilled she was. However, she was now using an ability that she hadn't before, and that was cause for concern.

"Looks like I won't be able to take her down myself," Mash admitted. "Melulu, can you help?"

Adel added, "I beg you as well, Melulu. I can't reach Elciel from down here."

After a short pause, Melulu nodded. "Okay! I'll do it. Enchant! Grant me the power of fire!"

Her spell took effect, and brilliant red flames sprang up around her body. Enchant magic, which amplified the caster's abilities, seemed to be her specialty.

"And then...!" Melulu raised her spear with one hand, turned her body to the

side, pulled back her shoulder, and assumed a throwing stance. “Go!!!”



With a yell, she threw her spear at Hippogriff. Thanks to her bolstered strength, the weapon flew at incredible speed, making a shrill sound as it soared. Adel and Mash were so impressed at the intensity of the attack that a “Whoa!” left their lips at the same time.

“Huh?! What just...” Melulu, however, seemed surprised at what she just did. “Ohhh, it’s because of the power of Adel’s Sanctuary. You might be as talented as Princess!”

“Y-You think so?” Adel recalled Mash also praising her Sanctuary, but she herself was not familiar with such matters. She fought solely with ki, which worked in an entirely different way. As such, she never had the opportunity to see things from the perspective of those using a Sanctuary.

Mash cupped his hands and shouted encouragingly, “You’re doing great, spear! Please land!”

However, at the very last moment, Hippogriff did a barrel roll. The weapon passed by harmlessly and landed in the forest a long distance away. Looking for it would be arduous, to put it mildly.

Adel sighed. “Ah, pity. It missed.”

“It was so close though! It was a good idea.” Mash shook his head, “Let’s change gears and think of what else we can do.”

“No, it’s fine!” Melulu said, her bright face a stark contrast to Adel’s and Mash’s. “I just have to do it again!”

She raised her hand, and her spear shot out from the forest to rest back in her palm.

“It came back?!”

“I see, your weapon has an ability!”

Melulu throwing her spear had certainly seemed like a bold move, as it carried the risk of leaving her without a weapon. The fact that she had the means to get it back so easily explained why she hadn’t hesitated to do so.

Melulu nodded. “Yep! This is Sylphid’s Spear. It’s a wind spelltool!”

One look was enough to tell that Sylphid's Spear was powered with an anima crystal, which made it a prized spelltool.

Even while speaking, Melulu was drawing her arm back for another throw. And with a loud whistle, her weapon was off again.

"I'll match you!" Mash also launched another bird of fire.

Gradually, the two started coordinating their attacks. Elciel and Hippogriff continued dodging and shooting down what they could, but before long, Melulu's spear drew a little blood. She was getting used to the Divine Beast's movements.

"I think I got this! This...should do it!"

Melulu accurately predicted the path Hippogriff would fly and threw her spear one last time. It flew straight and true, piercing the Divine Beast squarely in the torso. Or at least, it would have, if not for Elciel. She threw the wind spell she had prepared to shoot down Mash's birds at the spear. Or rather, multiple wind spells. She threw one from each hand, at the same time.

"Double casting?!" gasped Mash and Melulu in unison.

This was a technique so difficult to pull off it was considered one of the ultimate trump cards for casters.

Mash murmured, "Just who is she?!"

"Sh-She's a Saint who can cast spells *and* use double casting?!" Melulu was equally shocked.

Adel, however, was unfazed. "Doesn't matter!" she barked. All that mattered was that Elciel was someone who would harm Euphinia in the future, and therefore someone who must be killed here and now. That, and the fact that she and Hippogriff seemed to have changed up tactics and were now diving down at Adel's group.

Elciel had probably been waiting for Genbu to defeat Cerberus. However, the attacks from Melulu were becoming too accurate to ignore, so she wanted to first take the female knight out of the picture. But Adel had been waiting for that the entire time.

“Melulu! Heads up!” Mash shouted. “She’s coming for you! Get out of the way!”

Hippogriff was making a beeline for Melulu, razor-sharp beak held steady. Any normal person who stood in the way would be completely run through, if not completely torn in half.

“No, there’s no need,” interrupted Adel. “Melulu, you stay behind me!” She stood in front of the other girl, shielding her from Hippogriff’s assault. “I promised to protect you! This is where I will sever dreadful fate!”

She lowered her center of gravity to steady herself and held Salamander’s Tail at the ready. Hippogriff bore down on her, filling the air with a shrill cry, but she held her ground.

“Burn!!!”

At the very last moment, Adel shouted and thrust Salamander’s Tail forward, but it was no longer a mere blade. Blue flames roared from the spelltool in what could only be described as a horizontal column of fire, swallowing Elciel and Hippogriff whole. Both were roasted with intense heat, their bodies carbonizing at a visible rate.

“Wh-Who...are...you?!” Elciel cried in between screaming, even as the corpse of her Divine Beast crumbled beneath her.

“Does it matter? I don’t see the point in introducing myself at this stage.”

“I...will remember you! Next time...the others will—”

It sounded like Elciel was hinting that there were others she was connected to. Adel was surprised at first, but then she grinned. “Let them come. It’d save me the trouble of looking for them.”

Anyone who was with Elciel was very likely involved with Euphinia’s demise. And Adel had already made up her mind to end the life of every single person who wished the princess harm.

“Whew, that’s that,” Adel sighed, looking down at the charred remains of the War Saint. “Now I can set off without worries and go to Princess Euph—”

Suddenly, a wave of dizziness hit her, forcing her to her knees.

Mash cried, “Adel! What happened?!”

“Did you get hurt?!” Melulu asked anxiously. “Where?!”

However, Adel waved them away. “No, I’m not hurt. Just fatigued. I used too much ki.”

One way to use ki was to spend time gathering it and release it all in one big attack. Just now, that was exactly what Adel had done while Mash and Melulu were trying to shoot Hippogriff down. Thanks to the time they had bought, Adel’s attack had been powerful enough to kill Elciel with one hit. This strategy was only possible thanks to her allies.

However, as a result of spending all that ki in one go, Adel was left so exhausted she was on the verge of passing out.

“I’m sorry, but take it from here. Most of the danger should be gone...”

When Elciel had died, Genbu also disappeared.

“Well done, Adel! That bastard Genbu turned tail and ran!” Cerberus came over with a skip in his step, but he soon turned transparent and was absorbed into Adel’s shadow.

It was safe to say that victory had gone to Adel’s group. They had successfully gotten rid of one factor that would have been directly responsible for Euphinia’s death. However, this was merely the first. There were still many others, including Mad Emperor Tristan from Torust, the man who would be leading the Northern Federation. Killing Elciel here should have changed the future, but not even Adel knew how things would play out.

In any case, her only goal now was to return to Princess Euphinia’s side. The first step on this journey had gone well. Knowing this, Adel let herself slip into blissful slumber.

# Chapter 3: Reunion

Welna, the capital of Wendill, was a place filled with energy and life. However, there was no denying that it paled a little compared to Alderford and the capitals of the Four World Powers. As a result, many perceived Alderford the heart of Wendill and Welna merely a satellite city. It was a glorified inn town and sightseeing destination for pilgrims. The stretch of road connecting Welna and Alderford was lined with beautiful and vibrant flowers, giving Welna the nickname of “The City of Flowers.” This road itself was a major tourist destination, with many on their way to Alderford stopping by Welna just to take in the sights.

The relationship between Wendill and the Church of Holy Tower was basically that of Welna and Alderford writ large. Being surrounded by the Four World Powers, Wendill’s hopes of growth through expansion were nil. Its survival relied solely on the authority of the world’s greatest religious organization. The Four World Powers all knew that if they made advances on Wendill, they would be internationally condemned and be taken advantage of by the other Powers.

As such, maintaining the status quo was one of Wendill’s top priorities. In the previous timeline, Wendill had failed and ended up being obliterated, with Welna razed to the ground. When the Great War finally ended and Wendill was restored, Euphinia was no longer part of the world.

This must not happen again. Once again, Adel shored up her resolve to ensure that this time, Princess Euphinia would get to live a long and happy life.

The palace grew larger and larger up ahead as Adel was lost in her thoughts. Thanks to her time as Euphinia’s knight escort, she knew Welna like the back of her hand. However, this was her first time seeing the city with her eyes, as she had been blind the first time around. The clamor of the streets and the fragrance of the flowers evoked waves of nostalgia in her chest even as the novelty of the sights took her breath away. It was a strange feeling.

From within the shade of the covered wagon they were riding, Melulu asked, “Have you been to Welna before, Adel?”

Adel closed her eyes languidly while gazing at the flowers passing by. “I have. It brings back memories...but it’s all so new. I did not know it was such a beautiful city.”

Mash and Melulu exchanged puzzled looks, but before they could say anything, they were interrupted by the commotion behind them.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! Look at how pretty the flowers are!”

“Hell man, you can throw flower viewing parties any time, any day here!”

“I’m always down for a party! Someone, get the alcohol!”

Both Mash and Melulu roared, “No drinking!”

“We’re heading to the palace! Behave yourselves!” Mash added.

“And keep your voices down!” Melulu hissed. “You’re scaring the nearby pilgrims!”

Mash acting as the former slaves’ guardian was nothing new, but after spending the past few days with the group, even Melulu was learning how to handle them.

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Several hours later, Adel and Mash were standing right outside the king’s audience chamber, having been led here by Melulu. They had left their subordinates in one of the gardens in the palace. They wanted to get the men employed too, but to do so, they had to first get themselves accepted.

“Please let this go well...” Mash was hunched over with nerves. His face was hidden deep inside a big hood to avoid causing a ruckus in the palace, but he knew he would have to eventually reveal himself during the audience. The thought of how people would react was making him anxious.

“Don’t worry!” Melulu said reassuringly. “I’ll explain everything and make sure everyone knows you’re not a bad person! At the very least, Princess would understand.”

“R-Right. I’m counting on you.”

Adel stood next to them, her heart racing. Beyond this door was Princess

Euphinia, the person that she so dearly wanted to serve. She had finally returned to the place she belonged. Furthermore, on account of having been blind before, this would be her first time seeing Euphinia's face. The amount of time she had spent listening to the princess's voice made this occasion that much more momentous.

"Oh, Princess! I am coming to you now!" Adel's eyes were sparkling like well-polished diamonds.

Melulu giggled. "Her inner fan's on full display."

"So it is," Mash chuckled. "This is a rare change from how she normally goes around all tough and stoic."

"I guess she really does love Princess. Adel, you're so cute!" Melulu rubbed Adel's head, but the other girl was too occupied to notice. "Ha ha ha. She's completely in her own world. Does that mean I can touch her wherever I want?"

Watching Melulu poke Adel's chest and behind and otherwise doing things that no man could ever get away with, Mash sighed. "What are you doing at a time like this?"

"You wanna try, Mash? Adel won't notice if you do it now!"

"Like hell I can!"

"Ha ha ha, I was just joking. If you actually tried, I'd have socked you in the eye. Adel's really good at fighting, but she always seems kind of unaware of the fact that she's a girl. It makes me feel like I have to watch out for her."

"Right?! She *does* need someone watching out for her. And you're the only person I know who can do it, Melulu. Please take care of her. I owe her my life."

Mash and Melulu's lively conversation continued until a guard called out, "Lady Melulu and companions, thank you for the wait. You may now enter!"

The door opened, revealing a massive audience chamber. Melulu walked in, with the other two following behind, proceeding down the long path to the other end of the room as the crowd on either side buzzed with reactions.

"So these are the mercenaries who killed the aberrant monster."

“My, what a beautiful girl!”

“What’s more, I hear she’s a Saint.”

“That explains it. Truly, what charm she has!”

There were voices and presences here that Adel would have recognized had she not been so fixated on the ten-year-old girl in a sky blue dress sitting next to the king’s throne. The girl had silver-colored hair tied on both sides with ribbons and had skin so fair and smooth it stood out even from afar. She was clad in an aura so pure it was as if the air around her was continuously being purified. Upon approach, her graceful features took Adel’s breath away. Her eyes were big and blue and shone with the brightness and magnetism of actual jewels.

*So this is Princess Euphinia’s appearance!* Adel thought. *How adorable she is! How flawless! It is exactly as I imagined... No, it is many, many times more sublime!*

At the moment, Euphinia was still a child. In four or five years, however, she would grow into the person who had brought light and meaning to Adel’s life. Adel found the princess so dazzling that she could not tear her eyes away. Her heart raced even faster, and tears welled up at the corner of her eyes.

Euphinia, noticing Adel’s ardent gaze as the group approached the throne, smiled in greeting. This proved to be the last straw. The tears that Adel had been holding back burst forth like a broken dam.

“Adel?!” Melulu gasped.

“What happened?” Mash asked with worry. “You okay?!”

“I’m...fine. Don’t... Don’t mind me.” Adel had to summon everything she had to come forward and kneel before the royal family.

“Is something the matter?” Euphinia stood up and came down to stand in front of Adel, peering worriedly into her face.

“Y-Your Highness! No, embarrassingly, I am overcome with emotion at beholding your blessed countenance!”

“Um, Adel is apparently a fan of yours,” Melulu explained from the side. “That’s why she’s feeling overwhelmed at meeting you in person.”

The princess sighed with relief, her expression innocent and pure. “So that’s what it is. You surprised me a little. I thought I had hurt you in some way.”



“I-I apologize for my unruly display!” Adel was aware that from Euphinia’s perspective, Adel was but a stranger who had walked in and then started crying profusely the moment she made eye contact. Euphinia’s bewilderment was understandable.

“Here, please use this.” The princess took out a handkerchief and handed it to Adel.

“Y-You honor me too much, Your Highness!” Adel gushed, sobbing even harder.

The king cleared his throat. “Euphinia, that’s enough. Return to your seat.”

“Yes, father.” The princess nodded and obediently did as she was told.

After studying the group, the king said, “I have heard the reports. Melulu, despite having gotten separated from the main force, you managed to fulfill your mission and return safely. You have done well.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty! Your praise honors me!”

“This mission was also meant as a test of whether you have what it takes to serve as Euphinia’s knight escort. Your achievement speaks for itself.”

“You mean...”

“Indeed. As soon as Euphinia is officially sworn in as a Saint, you will be appointed her knight escort. Devote yourself to protecting her from this day forward.”

“Yes, sire! The honor is all mine!”

Euphinia beamed. “I’m happy for you too, Melulu! I’ll be counting on you!”

Melulu beamed back with equal enthusiasm. “Yes, Princess!”

The king turned to Adel and Mash. “And you two are the mercenaries who aided Melulu, I take it. What are your names?”

Adel lowered her head. “I am Adel Astal, Your Majesty.”

“I am Mash August, Your Majesty,” Mash said. Seeing the puzzlement on the king’s face in regards to himself still having his hood pulled forward, he continued, “Unfortunately, my face is rather unsightly. May I reveal it to greet

Your Majesty properly?”

By first asking permission, Mash was hoping that the king, as well as everyone else present, would have the time to brace themselves.

The king nodded. “You may. You will not be reproached for your appearance.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Mash pulled back his hood, and commotion filled the air.

“What?! Is he a monster?!”

“But he could speak!”

“Protect His Majesty!”

Seeing that there were those who were about to draw their swords, Mash raised his voice a little. “Please, I ask for understanding! I am human! My appearance is merely the result of inhumane experimentation that had been performed on me! My head was swapped with that of a monster, but I am still fully myself!”

Surprisingly, Euphinia spoke up on his behalf. “I-It’s all right, everyone! My Divine Beast tells me this person is not evil. There is no cause for alarm.”

“Your Highness...?”

“If Her Highness says so...”

“So he isn’t a threat?”

Euphinia was famous far and wide for her exceptional talent as a Saint. Despite her young age, her words carried weight. The way she spoke with the composure of someone beyond her years on a daily basis also made her sound all that more persuasive.

“Euphinia, thank you. Everyone, compose yourselves. I said mere moments ago that this man would not be reproached for his appearance.” The king lowered his head to Mash. “I apologize for my retainers’ disrespect.”

The princess followed suit. “We are deeply sorry. Please forgive us.”

“Please, there is no need for this! I fully understand the effect that my appearance has on people. I don’t take it to heart.” Mash bowed meekly, then

whispered to Adel. “She’s just like how you described.”

“I know, right?” Adel grinned.

This was a younger Euphinia, but she was every bit the Euphinia that Adel knew. She was just as wise, full of grace, and kind as how Adel recalled.

The king cleared his throat. “The culling of aberrant monsters is crucial to the livelihood of our nation and our citizens. You two, your cooperation is greatly appreciated.” He turned to look at a few other faces. “The fact that our main force failed to contribute in any way, however, is most regrettable.”

Those that he looked at quailed under his gaze. It was clear these people had been involved with the mission in some way.

“In any case, your accomplishment calls for a reward. Would three times your usual asking rate be satisfactory?”

The offer was a very generous one. Unfortunately, what Adel wanted was not money. She elbowed Melulu in the side.

“Your Majesty! These two have told me that what they seek is not a monetary reward!”

“What do they want, then?”

“Instead, they wish to cease being mercenaries and devote themselves in service to our country!”

The audience chamber buzzed with surprise.

“They want to enter royal service?!”

“How could mere vagabonds be our equal?!”

“However, they do have talents that would be useful.”

Opinion was split, with roughly seven out of ten expressing disapproval.

“Hmm...” The king frowned. He had yet to express what he himself thought of the request, but he could hardly ignore how his retainers were reacting.

At the moment, all that the king knew about Adel was what she had achieved and that she was a strange person who had suddenly burst into tears for no reason during their first meeting. However, Adel was just getting started. She

was determined to convince everyone here of her value. And so, she elbowed Melulu again.

“Your Majesty, Your Highness. I truly believe that this person’s request would benefit the kingdom greatly. The thing is, Adel here is no mere mercenary. She has the ability to summon Divine Beasts and deploy a Sanctuary. In short, she is a Saint. It was thanks to her powers that I was able to kill the aberrant monster.”

Interest sparked in the king’s eyes as he looked at Adel. “I have never heard of a Saint leading a mercenary group. Is what Melulu said true?”

“With your permission, I can summon a Divine Beast right here,” Adel replied.

“That would indeed be the easiest way to prove your claim. I grant you permission.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Come on out, Cerberus!”

A ring of light appeared in Adel’s shadow. It grew in size, then turned into a pillar of light from which Cerberus’s massive form appeared.

“I’m not a show, you know,” he grumbled with a sigh.

“Incredible!”

“I-Is that a Cerberus?!”

“It’s a legendary Divine Beast! How did a mere mercenary encounter one, much less form a contract with it?!”

“Ha ha ha!” Cerberus rumbled with satisfaction. “That said, it feels good being held in awe! Laud and exalt me, humans!”

“What a valorant Divine Beast you have!” the king exclaimed, his attention fully arrested. “What do you think, Euphinia?”

“I agree, father. I feel a very powerful Sanctuary filled with anima. Additionally...”

“Yes?”

The regal look on the princess’s face gave way to an innocent and adorable smile. “Cerberus is much cuter than the texts give it credit for.”

Honestly, Adel did not understand how Cerberus was “cute.” If that was what Euphinia thought, however, then Adel was most certainly not one to object.

The same could not be said of everyone present.

“What?! Did she just call me...cute?!” Cerberus snarled indignantly.

Euphinia, who had the same ability to hear Divine Beasts as Adel, jumped a little. “I’m sorry! Did I offend you?”

“How can I not be offended?!” Cerberus growled. “You called me cute, of all things! You... *mfffh*!”

Before he knew it, his muzzle was tied up with Salamander’s Tail.

Adel gave him a death glare. “Shut up, Cerberus. I won’t forgive any disrespect directed at Her Highness, even from you. Just accept the compliment she gave you.”

“Mmmmm!”

“I-It’s fine, Adel. Let him go.”

“As you wish.”

Euphinia smiled at Adel, then asked Cerberus timidly, “I’m sorry for what I said. By the way, can you tell me your name?”

“I am Cerberus, the guardian of the gates to Hell! To not recognize my appearance shows a lack of education!”

“No, that’s not what I was asking. ‘Cerberus’ is the name of your species, right? What I want to know is *your* name.”

Euphinia was not looking at Cerberus merely as a legendary Divine Beast, but as an individual. Adel was overcome with emotion again; the princess was still every bit the same person she recalled! Or rather, it was more appropriate to say that the princess had been, even from such a young age, the same person she knew.

Cerberus snorted. “My name is not worth naming.”

“But then I wouldn’t know what to call you,” Euphinia pressed.

“Just ‘Cerberus’ would do.”

“That’s your entire clan and not *you*, though. Will you please tell me your name?”

Running out of patience, Adel snapped, “Give up and tell Princess your name. You’re wasting time.”

Ceberus seemed to overcome a great internal struggle before finally caving in. “It’s...Pudding.”

Adel and Euphinia exchanged looks, then both burst into laughter.

“Ha ha ha ha! That is a good one!” Adel chuckled.

“It’s a very cute name!” Euphinia agreed.

“Don’t laugh!” Cerberus howled. “My mother named me after her favorite thing when she served a Saint here!”

Still giggling, Euphinia said, “I’ll make sure you get to eat as much as you want, then, Pudding.”

The king, who had been left out of the conversation due to not being able to hear what Cerberus said, asked, “What’s this about pudding?”

“Father, this Cerberus’s name is Pudding.”

“Pudding, you say? Wa ha ha ha! What an endearing name!”

Alongside the king, the retainers also burst into laughter.

“I SAID, DON’T LAUGH!” Cerberus roared, making the air shake with his anger.

The king flinched, then cleared his throat. “Th-That is indeed a powerful Divine Beast you are bonded with, Adel. This shall serve as proof of your power.”

Confirming that she had piqued both the king’s and the princess’s interest, Adel spoke up. “Your Majesty! I look up to Princess Euphinia, who carries the future of this country on her shoulders, with every fiber of my being! If I may be so bold, I wish to be of service to her!”

“In other words, you want to be her knight escort as well?”

Adel nodded with conviction. “It is my life’s wish!”

Returning to Euphinia's side as her knight escort was Adel's one and only goal. This time, she would ensure that Euphinia would live a long and happy life.

"Mmm... A knight escort who also has the powers of a Saint..."

Just as it seemed like the king was about to accept the offer, someone in the hall spoke up.

"Please wait a moment, Your Majesty!"

"Knight Commander Belzen, you have something to say?"

Belzen was a large man with a well-trained body who appeared to be in his late twenties to early thirties. Adel did not recognize him, but this was not unusual, as this was still four or five years before her own acquaintance with Euphinia. In the same vein, she knew nothing about what would happen that would make this person leave the palace within the next few years.

"If all that Adel has is her talent as a Saint, she is unsuitable as a knight escort!" Belzen declared. "A knight escort has to be the princess's sword and shield. To do so, the most important requirement is fighting prowess!"

"Can she not simply order her Cerberus to fight on her behalf?" the king countered.

"That would not do! There might be situations where she is ill-disposed to summon her Divine Beast!"

"Is that not where Melulu would come in? The two of them can work together."

"That would not do! I am questioning the suitability of Adel's individual abilities for the post!"

The king frowned. It was clear that the knight commander was against Adel's appointment and intended to thwart it with every pretext he could think of.

However, the approach the knight commander took was actually in Adel's favor. This was the perfect opportunity for her to shut down a dissenting opinion and make herself even more favorable in the king's and Euphinia's eyes.

"If I may," Adel spoke up, "I have experience as a mercenary, which has given me confidence in my sword arm. If it is no bother, I would be more than happy

to display my abilities in an actual match.”

“What valiance in such a young woman! We would be remiss in not accepting her offer,” Belzen smirked. “Your Majesty, as knight commander, I wish to test Adel. Please give permission.”

“Hmm... Very well. Just make sure you don’t overdo it. We don’t want to injure a guest.” The king did not look entirely onboard with the idea, but for some reason, it seemed he could not firmly oppose the knight commander.

Belzen turned to Euphinia. “Your Highness, this is a matter of serious import that would affect your noble self. Please give permission.”

The kind-hearted princess, who was averse to violence, looked at Melulu with worry. “What do you think, Melulu? About having someone else serve alongside you?”

“I could not ask for a better ally than Adel,” Melulu replied, speaking clearly. “What’s more, she has treated me very well, and hasn’t discriminated against me for my lineage or upbringing.”

“In that case, I also give my permission. As my father said, however, please make sure no one gets hurt.”

Both Belzen and Adel shouted, “Thank you, Your Highness!”

Even though Euphinia had directed her words to Belzen, Adel made a point of replying too. After all, it would be up to her to make sure no one got hurt.

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Soon, Adel's group reached one of the palace courtyards.

"Now, Adel. Show us what you can do." Belzen turned to his subordinates. "Men, in position!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" Three men stepped forward to stand before Adel. They towered over her, as she wasn't particularly tall, even for a woman.

"Since you are so confident in your own abilities, I take it you would have no trouble facing three opponents at once."

Adel grinned, unfazed by Belzen's smirk. "I'm afraid this won't do, Commander Belzen. Let me be straight with you: this isn't enough."

"What?!"

"Overwhelming fighting prowess is a must for someone who would serve as Princess Euphinia's knight escort. Three opponents is nowhere near enough for me to demonstrate what I can do!"

"The nerve!"

"Bear in mind that I have successfully killed an aberrant monster in profane land. Can these three men do the same? I suspect not. There's no need to go easy on me. Fight me as if I were an aberrant myself!"

"You asked for it! Squad One, step up!"

More than ten people with impressive builds encircled Adel. They nearly hid her from sight.

"Belzen!" the king protested. "This is far too—"

"Your Majesty, you heard Adel. This is by her own request," Belzen countered.

"Your Majesty! There is no cause for concern! I shall overcome this challenge and prove myself worthy!" Adel threw out her chest and crossed her arms confidently, but the gesture came off less intimidating and more just captivating.

"Uh, did she just raise the bar for me too?" Melulu sighed. She was already a knight escort, but was nowhere near as powerful as Adel.

The mercenaries who had been standing by in the garden added to the

clamor.

“Whoa, she’s facing *that* many?! Hey, boss lady! Don’t lose!”

“Looks like you’re having fun! Let me join in! Bwa ha ha ha— Ouch!”

“You absolute moron! You take one step in there, you’ll be knocked flat in a second!”

Those who had come from the audience chamber were taken aback at the men.

“Wh-Who are these people?!”

“Bandits! There are bandits in the palace!”

Some knights were so alarmed, they were even ready to draw their weapons. Melulu tried her best to cover for the former gladiators.

“Wait a minute! I know how they look, but they’re the mercenaries who follow Adel and Mash! They may be uncouth, and I can’t vouch for their character, but they do listen to their leaders!”

“If Adel is accepted as a knight escort, do we have to allow them into the palace as well?”

“Th-That must not be! The palace will be sullied!”

“Uh-oh, this isn’t good,” Mash said. Revealing the men this early may have been a mistake. It had to happen eventually, but in this case, later was probably better than earlier.

“Oh, are you Adel and Mash’s companions?” Euphinia asked sweetly. “Would you like to come here to get a better look?”

The princess was someone who treated everyone respectfully and amicably, and the former gladiators were no exception. Unfortunately, the reaction to this considerate gesture was the opposite of what she hoped.

“No, Your Highness!” Adel shouted. “There is no need!”

Mash hissed. “Don’t come near! In fact, go further away!”

“Or just hide! Make sure people don’t see you!” Melulu barked.

Euphinia's face clouded. "I don't think you should be saying such things to your friends."

All three felt a twinge of guilt shoot through their chests. "A-Apologies, Your Highness!" they shouted, moved by how easily the princess accepted the men. She truly had a big heart. Then again, Adel had been in basically the same position as them in the first timeline. Accepting these former gladiators was nothing compared to taking one on as knight escort. In any case, thanks to the princess, the presence of the former gladiators was allowed.

Belzen cleared his throat. "In any case, let us begin!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" The knights surrounding Adel raised their swords and spears.

"Just to be clear, Adel, you are not allowed to summon your Divine Beast and have it fight on your behalf! We are testing your own fighting prowess to determine whether you have what it takes to protect Her Highness!"

"But of course!"

"However, just as my knights will, you may use magic! Magical warfare is a core aspect of protecting Saints, after all."

"That puts Adel at too much of a disadvantage!" the king protested. "Adel herself is a Saint. I doubt she has much training in the usage of spells."

He was right, generally speaking. Saints could not use magic while they had a Sanctuary deployed. They could use the anima that another Saint was providing, but they had to dispel their own Sanctuary to do so. In other words, the only way they could use magic was to not use their own abilities as a Saint.

Elciel seemed to have defied this logic during the fight in profane land, but she was very much an exception. As such, instead of learning how to cast spells, most Saints put all their effort into improving what they could do as Saints, such as forming contracts with more powerful Divine Beasts and refining their skill at deploying Sanctuaries.

Of course, Belzen was aware of this. Though he gave both sides permission to use magic, this was effectively a massive advantage for his subordinates.

"It's fine, Your Majesty! In fact, I'm all for it!" Adel shouted. The more

disadvantaged she appeared in the eyes of the audience, the more impressed they would be when she won. This rule ultimately worked in her favor.

“Hmm... What a valiant girl. V-Very well, proceed.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” Adel bowed to the king, then turned to Belzen. “However, I do have permission to at least use a spelltool, yes?” She produced Salamander’s Tail, the weapon she had grown familiar with, in its natural whip form.

Originally, this weapon was not suitable for actual combat. Radan had mainly used it to tie up prisoners in Navarra. And unlike Cerberus, Salamander was a low-tier Divine Beast. A Salamander anima crystal, therefore, was not all that powerful.

Belzen inspected Salamander’s Tail, then nodded. “You have permission. I expect a fair fight from both sides!”

*So much for “fair,”* Adel thought. She didn’t say it out loud, though, as she was hiding her own cards.

“With that decided...Princess Euphinia, would you mind deploying a Sanctuary for us to use?”

“Of course.” The princess nodded solemnly. She closed her eyes, calmed her breathing, then raised both hands. “Sanctuary!”

Before the time jump, Adel had possessed very little talent for magic and could barely feel Sanctuaries. But now, she clearly felt herself being enveloped in a comfortable and relaxing sensation.

Voices exclaimed in surprise.

“How wonderful! Her Highness’s Sanctuary takes my breath away every time!”

“How pleasant!”

Mash, who was experiencing this for the first time, nearly jumped out of his skin. “Th-This is unbelievable! Just how huge is this Sanctuary?!”

Mash and Melulu had both praised Adel for how powerful her Sanctuary was, but its range was only slightly over the average of a dozen meters. Euphinia’s

Sanctuary was massive in size, being hundreds of times larger than Adel's. Even beyond the palace, it covered more than half the city of Welna. Naturally, the Holy Tower Church evaluated her highly, and there were many who believed she would eventually become an Eminent. That was, until the Great War had broken out and Wendill was destroyed...but that was a story for a different time.

"What's more, the element of this Sanctuary is almighty!" Mash gasped as he generated a small flame, an icicle, a tornado, and electric sparks at the tip of his fingers in turn. "It's my first time meeting someone who can do this. It's simply incredible. No wonder Adel is so smitten with her."

An almighty Sanctuary allowed casters to use spells from all elements. The Sanctuaries that Adel deployed with Cerberus were filled with fire anima, which was why Mash and Melulu had only used fire spells in the fight against Elciel. If Adel was to form a contract with another Divine Beast, she could then deploy a Sanctuary with anima of a different element.

Sanctuaries generally depended on the characteristics of the contracted Divine Beast. But Euphinia's ability to create a Sanctuary was so overwhelmingly powerful that hers were always almighty and had a massive range, regardless of the Divine Beast.

This wasn't entirely a good thing, however. The sheer size of what she was working with made it impossible to control. When two Saints were on opposite sides of a fight, they could allow only their allied knights to tap into the anima they were producing. Elciel had done this during the fight in profane land, which was why Mash and Melulu could not use wind magic. Unfortunately, Euphinia could not make this distinction. If she were to deploy a Sanctuary on a battlefield, she would be granting both allies and enemies access to almighty anima. It wouldn't be much of an advantage for her own side.

It could be said that Euphinia's Sanctuary was the perfect illustration of her own benevolent, magnanimous personality. At the same time, this was a major reason why knight escorts who could fight without anima would be a huge boon to her.

When making incursions into profane land and facing monsters who did not

know how to cast spells, however, Euphinia's support was far more valuable than that of any common Saint. And originally, pushing back the frontier of profane land and carving out more land for people to live in was the main duty of Saints. Their Sanctuaries and anima were not meant to be tools for human conflict.

"Are you ready, Adel?!" Belzen asked.

"Any time."

"Very well! Men, don't hold back just because she is a young girl! You would be dishonoring her! Ready... Fight!"

With a loud battle cry, four knights charged at Adel, one from each cardinal direction. The rest stayed back and either started chanting or forming hand signs. Adel felt sorry that the fight was taking place within Euphinia's Sanctuary, the one Sanctuary that seemed to embody the idea that this power was not meant for fighting between humans. But this was Adel's chance to show what she could do, and she would not pull her punches.

"In this situation..."

To start, Adel used Ki Convergence to close in on the knight in front of her in the blink of an eye, giving him the fright of his life.

"What?! So fas— Ugh!"

In the split second he froze with surprise, Adel's ki flowed from her foot to the knee that she drove deep into the knight's abdomen. Treating ki like a constantly moving force was the key to effectively using Ki Convergence.

"Here's another!"

In turn, the way that ki flowed also affected the way Adel fought. This time, she made the ki descend from her knee to her foot, following up with a side kick that sent the knight flying. He crashed into two others at the back who had been chanting, and the entire group went down with groans of pain.

Before the casters could regroup and continue their chanting, Adel was already in the air, bearing down on them. They had been so occupied with their fallen comrade that they had completely taken their eyes off her.

“Don’t look away during a fight!”

One more kick from Adel, and the two were also out for the count. In a split second, three men had already been taken out of the fight. Those in the audience couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

“She’s so fast!”

“And I don’t sense her using anima!”

“How can her kicks be so powerful?! What’s going on?!”

Paying the gallery no attention, Adel leaped up again. The remaining three of the four who had charged at her at the start were closing in, so she vaulted over their heads and took her distance.

“Yes!”

“Good work making her reposition herself there!”

“Now we’ve got her!”

Those who had finished chanting could not believe their luck. As it happened, Adel was now standing exactly where she’d started. With her in that position, the casters had a clear line of sight and didn’t have to worry about friendly fire. This was the perfect opportunity.

“GO!” they shouted, simultaneously throwing fireballs, icicles, and balls of lightning her way.

In the face of the barrage, Adel grinned. “Sorry, I took this position on purpose!” Her positioning was not a mistake, but a strategy. After all, if she was at an equal distance from all the casters, and they all launched their attacks at the same time, it meant she could deal with everything in one go.

“Rah!” Adel used Ki Amplification on Salamander’s Tail, revealing how she could change the whips of red fire into two thick blades of searing blue flames several meters long. She spun the weapon around, slicing through all the incoming projectiles.

“Whaaat?!” the knights gasped with disbelief.

“You’ve no time to be surprised!”

The blades extended into poles. In exchange for being far less deadly, they reached the ring of knights. Letting out a battle cry, Adel gathered ki in her hands and spun her weapon so fast that knights were sent flying one after another like marbles.

When Adel stopped, not a single knight was left standing.

“Hmm, I suppose that will do.”

Honestly, Adel had hoped the knights would put up more of a fight. After all, these were the men she would be working with to protect Euphinia when she was accepted as knight escort.

“Against those numbers! Unbelievable!”

“And she made it look so easy!”

“The sight was simply...”

“Breathtaking!”

It seemed there were some among the audience who had become completely infatuated with the way Adel fought.

Adel looked at Belzen. “Is this enough of a demonstration? Or will you face me yourself?”

“No, no! This is definitely enough.” Belzen turned to the king, chagrin on his face. “Your Majesty...Adel is more than capable of serving as Princess Euphinia’s knight escort.”

The king nodded in satisfaction. “Indeed. That fight was both impressive and beautiful. It reminded me of my late wife. Adel, you have done well.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty! Your praise honors me!”

“Now, are there any other objections? If not, we will accept Adel as a knight, and when Euphinia is officially sworn in as a Saint, she—”

A woman wearing clerical vestments in her late twenties shouted, “Please wait a moment, Your Majesty!” She had not been in the audience chamber earlier, but Adel recognized her voice and aura.

“Ah, Saint Claire.” The king turned to her. “Do you have something to say?”

Claire was the person who led all the Saints dispatched to Wendill, her official post being Mother Superior of the Saints Detail of Wendill. Despite her beautiful features, there wasn't a hint of the gentleness that one usually associated with the title of Saint. She was always cool, intellectual, and businesslike. If anything, she seemed more like a scholar. Besides fulfilling her duties as Mother Superior, she also served as Euphinia's Saint mentor.

"I came to take a look when I sensed Her Highness's Sanctuary, and I cannot believe what I am seeing! A Saint's Sanctuary and anima is not to be used for human conflict! And to make a spectacle of it? What is the meaning of this?!"

The king shifted uncomfortably. "Uh, it was Belzen who—"

"S-Saint Claire, we must train for all sorts of situations—"

"I have asked time and time again to be consulted for requests to use Sanctuaries in non-emergencies! Princess Euphinia may be a princess of Wendill, but her powers as a Saint belong to the Goddess and are therefore under the jurisdiction of the Holy Tower Church!"

"She's not officially part of the Church yet, though," the king pointed out.

"Exactly what I wanted to say," Belzen agreed.

"That's all the more reason that Her Highness should only use her powers under the supervision of a proper Saint! Her powers are not to be used for personal self-interest!"

Euphinia approached her teacher and bowed. "My apologies, Mother Superior."

"Your Highness, the Goddess has blessed you with incredible talent. Never forget that this power comes with commensurate responsibility. You are too young to be sworn in as a Saint, but you can overcome this hurdle by demonstrating that you carry yourself in a way befitting a Saint. Please be conscious of yourself at all times!"

"Yes, Mother Superior," Euphinia replied, looking dejected.

After thoroughly scolding everyone else too, the woman turned to Adel, her face growing even more stern. "As for you! Your name was Adel, yes?"

“Yes, Mother Superior. I will be serving Her Highness as knight escort in the future. It is a pleasure to—”

“You will do no such thing. As Mother Superior here, I cannot allow it.”

Adel’s eyes bulged at the blunt refusal. “Wha...?! Wh-Why not?”

“Saints are strictly forbidden from being involved in worldly matters! Serving any particular government is absolutely out of the question. This is specified in our creed in no uncertain terms. Why else do you think we have the deployment system?!”

Saints did not serve countries or kings directly. Instead, they belonged to the Holy Tower Church, which deployed them to countries upon request. Adel did not know the full details of their teachings, but she knew that it was their stance to draw a clear line between state and church.

However, this only applied to Saints belonging to the Church. “I know of the system, but I am not a part of the Church. As such, your objection does not apply to me.”

“That makes it even worse!”

“How so?”

“Who was your teacher? Has she given you permission to do this?”

“No, I have no teacher. I only realized I had this ability recently.”

“I see. That certainly speaks to your wealth of talent. I cannot censure you for what you did not know, but now I will tell you. All Saints *must* be with the Church. The abilities of a Saint are gifts from the Goddess and do not belong to individual Saints. At the moment, there are only 121 of us in the world. And as of late, the number of new Saints being born has been in decline. In light of this, we cannot allow even one to go around doing whatever she wants. Considering your current situation, I have every right to castigate you as a recusant.”

“In other words, the very existence of Saints not affiliated with the Church is a sin?”

“That is so. If you do not take on a teacher and get officially initiated, we are duty-bound to apprehend you. Allowing Wendill to take you on as a knight is

absolutely out of the question.”

Adel was speechless. This was all news to her. In the first place, she had never met a Saint who did not belong to the Church. During the Great War, all systems of law and order had broken down, and all the Saints had moved about at their own discretion. After the Central Tower collapsed, Holy Towers around the world began to lose their powers. A lot of territories reverted to profane land, and the Church fell into complete turmoil, losing the ability to maintain any semblance of control.

When Wendill had its hands full dealing with the fallout, the Northern Federation suddenly blamed it for the Central Tower’s collapse and invaded. With Elciel’s help, the Federation destroyed Wendill and secured Alderford. The League of Southern Nations retaliated, and thus it became a world war.

Adel never learned the reason why the Central Tower collapsed in the first place. Regardless, the Great War had yet to come, and this was currently a time of peace and order when there would be severe consequences for what Adel wanted to do.

The king looked crestfallen. “So, that means we cannot accept Adel as a knight escort? That is a true pity. I was starting to value her skills.”

A Saint not affiliated with the Church was a recusant and therefore could not be employed as a royal knight. An official Saint of the Church would be forbidden by the Church’s creed from becoming employed by a particular government. Either way, Adel would not be able to become a knight escort.

“Wait, Your Majesty!” Adel protested. “There is still a way! I would be more than happy to pass my Cerberus on to Her Highness! If I do so, I wouldn’t be a Saint anymore! I’d be a mere mercenary!”

“What a stroke of brilliance! And you just demonstrated that you are more than able to fight without relying on your abilities as a Saint. In that case—”

“You will do no such thing!” Claire cried, once again in objection. “Doing so would be akin to selling off your Divine Beast. That is sacrilegious in the extreme! It is absolutely out of the question!”

Even Euphinia frowned at the idea. “Um, Adel, I think that would be making

light of Pudding's decision to form a contract with you."

Of course, Adel could not go against Euphinia's will. That was nonnegotiable.

"What a pickle..."

Adel staunchly refused to serve anyone other than Euphinia. While she was wracking her brains, Claire offered a proposal.

"If you insist on serving Wendill, first join the Church, then apply to be deployed here. I'd have no complaints about that. I will be applying once again for Princess Euphinia's initiation sometime soon. I wouldn't mind also adding your application at that time."

"Hmm..."

Honestly, Adel wasn't too keen on this suggestion, as it would leave her bound to the Church rather than Euphinia specifically. She had zero loyalty to the Church and its teachings, and she couldn't care less about anything other than the princess.

In the first place, the Church was not quite the model organization that Claire was making it out to be. Case in point, countless people had been captured and experimented on in the Moving Coliseum, a facility run by none other than Cardinal Navarra, a bigshot in the Church. Adel and the former slaves knew better than anyone how the prisoners there had been treated. There was no refuting that the Holy Tower Church held the most authority in the world, but its shadows were equally as deep.

Claire either did not know about this facet of the church or was pretending to not see it. Adel sincerely hoped it was the former, so she would not have to doubt Claire's humanity.

"That means I can go to Alderford with Adel and take the ceremony with her!" Euphinia said all of a sudden, smiling brightly. "I'd love that!"

"Of course, Your Highness!" Adel nodded, not missing a beat. Euphinia's will was absolute.

◆◇◆

The next day found Adel walking down a hallway in the palace, frowning in

obvious displeasure. “Tch! What even is the point of this?!”

The reason for her foul mood was the elegant, flowery dress that she had been stuffed into. Her hair had also been done up with great effort. As the saying went, clothes made the person. When she peered in the mirror, she was so surprised at how well the dress suited her that she shivered in fear and embarrassment. Also, the dress was extremely hard to move in. All in all, she was feeling very uncomfortable at the moment.

“Come on, don’t click your tongue out loud,” giggled Melulu, who had helped Adel get changed on Claire’s orders. “Saint Claire said this is a part of your education as a Saint.”

In the end, everyone had decided to accept Claire’s suggestion, and Adel had been given permission to stay in the palace as a guest in the meantime. No one doubted Euphinia’s talent as a Saint, but she had yet to be officially initiated because she was only ten years old. Claire intended on applying for an assessment again, and promised to apply for Adel too while doing so. If the application was accepted, Euphinia would become the youngest Saint in the history of the Church. This would be a huge honor for Claire too, as she had been Euphinia’s teacher.

Adel did not know how old Euphinia had been when she became an official Saint in the previous timeline, but she had no memory of anyone mentioning Euphinia being the youngest Saint in history. If she was accepted this time, it would be earlier than it was supposed to be. This would make Adel as proud as Claire. Originally, she had wanted to be Euphinia’s knight escort, but the princess had suggested doing the ceremony together, and Adel simply couldn’t refuse.

In light of everything that had happened, Adel’s request to become a knight escort was shelved, and she was treated as an apprentice Saint. Everything was out of her hands now, and she could only wait to see how things played out. And in the meantime, Claire was giving her a crash course.

“What about this outfit is ‘education?’ Does wearing this help me deploy Sanctuaries faster? All it does is restrict my movement!” Just when Adel lost her temper, she accidentally stepped on the hem of her dress and fell over.

“Aaargh!”

“Aha ha ha. That’s what happens when you walk so roughly and take such big steps.” Melulu offered Adel a hand up.

“Sorry for the bother.”

“The key is to walk quietly and slowly. If you do, you’ll naturally come across as elegant.”

“Like I said, why should I? This doesn’t improve my summoning. I have so much to learn as a Saint. I don’t know how to create a Sanctuary that differentiates between friend and foe. I don’t know how to erect and maintain Holy Towers. And I don’t know how to create spelltools. Why can’t I work on *those*?!”

“Everything starts with looking the part. As a Saint, you need to look elegant. Don’t be embarrassed, your outfit suits you really well!” Melulu indicated toward the passing maids and soldiers murmuring amongst themselves.

“She looks so pretty in that dress...”

“She’s so beautiful I can’t look away!”

“What a precious sight!”

Melulu smiled at Adel. “See? You’re drawing everyone’s eyes.”

“Is that supposed to make me happy?” Adel grumbled. “This is all a farce. It’s meaningless.”

“Geez, you sure have a lot of complaints today. Ah, we’re here.”

“Where is ‘here’?”

“Princess’s room. Your Highness, it’s Melulu! I’ve brought Adel!”

“Come in,” said a voice from inside.

“Excuse us!” Melulu opened the door.

Adel gasped. “So *this* is...”

In the previous timeline, Adel had of course been in Euphinia’s room many times, being the princess’s guard. He did not know what the room looked like,

on account of having lost his eyes, but he knew the layout like the back of his hand. And he knew this unique smell of parchment and ink very well. Save for the side with windows, shelves lined every wall of the room, giving it the atmosphere of a large personal library.

“It’s so nostalgic, yet so new...” Adel murmured. “How strange.”

Adel had spent many days enveloped in this smell, standing in a corner in complete silence, listening only to the sound of Princess Euphinia turning pages. Some might have found it dull and insipid, but for Adel, it was a time of tranquility free of all worries. And because he had been wearing a full suit of armor, he would sometimes be mistaken for part of the room decor.

“Nostalgic? What do you mean? Isn’t this your first time here?” Meululu asked puzzledly.

“Mm? Ah...I meant, the smell of books.”

“That’s unexpected. You read, Adel? You don’t look like the type at all.”

“Welcome to my room, Adel.” Euphinia popped out from between some shelves. The moment she laid eyes on Adel, her eyes sparkled. “I knew it! You look wonderful!”

“Thank you, Your Highness! Your praise honors me!”

“I chose that dress, you know. It suits you so well.”

A bright smile came over Adel’s face. “Is that so? No wonder it looks so magnificent and feels so comfortable!”

Her dress had been picked by Euphinia, and she got to wear it and show it off to Euphinia *and* receive her praise! There was nothing else to do but bask in every moment of it!



“Wow, I’m impressed with how fast you changed your tune. Didn’t you say the dress was hard to move in and it was meaningl—*mfgh*!”Adel swiftly clapped a hand over Melulu’s mouth.

“What’s the matter?” Euphinia asked.

“Nothing, Princess! My heart is overflowing with gratitude!” Adel tried to kneel to express her thanks, but Euphinia stopped her.

“No, don’t do that. You’ll get your dress dirty. The way to express thanks is...like this.” The princess plucked the edges of her skirt and spread them, then curtsied. Her actions looked very natural thanks to plenty of practice, but due to her being so young, it came across as adorable rather than sophisticated. The sight left Adel feeling more thankful than ever for having been sent back in time with her eyesight restored.

“Um, so...like this?” Adel tried to mimic what she had just seen. “‘Thank you very much.’”

“Yes, that’s it. You’re a natural! Mother Superior has given me permission to teach you court etiquette, so prepare yourself for a hard time!” The determined face that Euphinia made was the epitome of cuteness. However, it was entirely doubtful whether she, being as kind and amiable she was, could actually give someone a hard time.

“Thank you, Princess! I am at your bidding!”

Euphinia giggled. “Since you’re here, would you like some tea?”

Euphinia liked books, tea, and confectionaries that went well with tea. She led her guests through shelves of books to the window wall, which had sofas and a table perfect for enjoying a cup of tea alongside a good book.

“Please allow me, Princess!”

Melulu looked at Adel with surprise. “You know how to make a cup of tea?”

“See for yourself!”

During Adel’s time as Euphinia’s knight escort, he had been invited to join the princess for tea quite a few times. Through this opportunity, he had learned how to prepare tea even without sight. Naturally, it hadn’t gone well at first,

but it proved to be good training for sharpening his senses. He even knew exactly how Euphinia liked her tea. Steeped until it was a little too much, then sweetened with plenty of sugar. With newfound eyesight, it would be a piece of cake.

Euphinia sat on the sofa and took a sip, then beamed. “I love it!”

“Thank you! I’m happy it suits your taste.”

“Look at you, Adel!” Melulu laughed. “You’re not a lost cause after all!”

“Hey, I know manners! I just wasn’t used to this dress, that’s all,” Adel said confidently while also sitting on the sofa.

This made Melulu sigh. “Never mind, I take my words back. This is going to be an uphill battle.”

“It’s definitely going to need work. Mother Superior would be quite cross if she were here...”

“A thousand apologies, Princess! What am I doing wrong?”

“Wait, you don’t know?!”

“I’m asking because I don’t.”

“Aha ha ha. Melulu, tell her.”

“Yes, Princess! Adel, your legs! You’re sitting with them wide apart. Bring your knees back together. This is basic!”

Not only was Adel sitting with her legs wide open like a man, she was even leaning back and had her arm thrown out, looking very comfortable. It made sense that this was her natural way of sitting, as she had been an adult male, but this was now something she had to fix.

“Ah, I’m sitting wrong. I let my guard down.”

“Most wouldn’t go that far even when they let their guard down, but... Oh, forget it. Come on, knees together, slant your legs a little. Sit up straight. Stack your hands on your knees.”

“Ugh, this feels so uptight.”

“Just bear with it. There you go. Now you look proper enough to not

embarrass Princess.”

“Oh, if you’re worried about me, don’t be! I don’t feel embarrassed at all.” Euphinia said, smiling.

“Princess...” Adel felt moved by her liege’s kindness. Then again, Euphinia had accepted Adel even when he had been blind and scarred all over. The current Adel was nothing in comparison.

“But Princess, if you say that, you’re not giving her a hard time at all.”

“I-Is that so? But Adel, it’s true that when you appear in front of others as a Saint, you are expected to carry yourself a certain way. Mother Superior was right. I’m sorry it makes you feel uncomfortable, but can you try just a bit more?”

“Your wish is my command, Princess! I will ensure that I carry myself as one suitable to be by your side when we attend the ceremony together!”

“I have every faith in you, Adel.” Euphinia took another sip of tea.

Adel followed suit, feeling overjoyed at being able to drink tea while beholding the princess’s smile. She sighed contentedly. “Exquisite.”

Melulu shook her head. “Nu-uh. You went back.”

“What?”

“Your feet are spread again because you were distracted by the tea. Don’t let your guard down!”

“Ugh.”

“Ha ha ha, Adel will get the hang of it. I’m...sure she will.”

“Adel, remember that when you do something wrong, it’s me and Princess who will get scolded by Saint Claire. So please, get it together.” Melulu paused to make sure Adel got the message, then changed the topic. “By the way, Princess, despite how she looks, apparently Adel is a reader. She said the smell of books made her feel nostalgic.”

“Is that true?!” Euphinia’s face lit up.

“Y-Yes, of course.” Although it was a misunderstanding, Adel couldn’t bring

herself to clear it when seeing how happy Euphinia was.

“What kind of books do you like, Adel?”

“Um...ones like *The Rise and Fall of the Holy Kingdom*. Especially Volume One. The one on the founding.”

“Oh my!” Euphinia’s face was filled with the joy of finding someone who shared similar interests. “That’s my favorite too! What a coincidence!”

Of course, this was not a coincidence. In the previous timeline, Euphinia had mentioned that she loved reading, and she had read aloud for Adel many times. This was the only experience Adel had with books. Euphinia had read her many books, this one the most often.

“Wait a minute!” The princess excitedly got up and fetched a thick book with a vivid red cover. “Here, I have a copy! I’ve read it so many times that it’s a bit ragged now.”

“This...brings back memories.” Adel recognized it. It was nostalgic, yet fresh. A strange feeling. “May I take a look inside?”

“Of course.”

“Interesting,” Adel murmured. A few pages in, there was a map of the Holy Kingdom. It was her first time seeing the map, as her only experience with the book had been listening to Euphinia reading it out loud. However, she recalled learning that compared to the current era of the Four World Powers, the world map had been significantly larger during the Holy Kingdom era several centuries ago.

Melulu peered in. “It’s so much bigger than what we have right now.”

“That’s right,” Euphinia nodded, her face clouding over. Despite being only ten years old, she already had the air of a historic scholar. “The Holy Kingdom era was the moment in history when we humans had the most territory. A lot of it reverted to profane land between the collapse of the Holy Kingdom and the rise of the Four World Powers.”

Melulu turned to a recent map framed on Euphinia’s wall. “I’d say we’ve lost about a third, give or take.”

“We lost territories when we were busy fighting each other, right?” Adel said. “Not so much because monsters have the intelligence to strategize, but because we humans failed to maintain the land.”

“That’s exactly it,” Euphinia agreed.

The princess had nothing to add because her analysis was exactly what Adel had just shared. This, too, was no coincidence. In truth, Adel was simply reciting verbatim what Euphinia had told her in the previous timeline. Even though Adel was the older one between the two, she thought of Euphinia almost as a teacher, as she herself had never had an education.

“The reason why I particularly like the story of the founding,” Adel continued, “is because it is basically a hero’s tale. The founder went around uniting people and building a new kingdom with them. It is filled with hope and momentum, making it an enjoyable story even in and of itself.”

Euphinia smiled. “So it is.”

“Also, it features Saint Melmea, the Eminent who Princess looks up to,” Melulu added.

Melmea was a famous historic figure who had aided the Holy Kingdom’s founder and purified huge swathes of profane land. It was said that she erected an unbelievable number of Holy Towers and had the ability to create junk spelltools with monster parts that were a match for prized spelltools made with anima crystals. And just like Euphinia, the Sanctuaries she deployed were filled with almighty anima, and were large enough to cover an entire city. Many soldiers had not just survived, but prevailed thanks to her blessing.

“Indeed. She was an incredible person, far more than we could ever imagine.”

“Your Highness, your ability is in no way inferior to Saint Melmea’s,” Adel said reassuringly. “If you put your mind to it, I’m sure you have the ability to achieve feats that rival hers!”

If the Great War had never happened and Euphinia had never lost her life at a young age, the possibilities of what she could have achieved were endless. When the war broke out and her home country was obliterated, she felt compelled to run about, trying to find a way towards peace. However, in doing

so, she had to give up her own hopes and dreams. Adel had no way of knowing what Euphinia truly wanted to do with her life. This time, she would do everything she could to thwart this tragedy so that the princess could grasp the future she wished for. Maybe it was the same path that Saint Melmea had trodden ages ago. Maybe it was something else. Whatever it was, Adel wanted to support Euphinia with everything she had.

"Some people call you Saint Melmea born again," Melulu chuckled.

Euphinia shook her head. "That legacy is too heavy for me to bear. If we really have to draw comparisons, though, I think Saint Elciel is much more suitable."

It was widely known that normally, Elciel devoted herself to clearing out profane land and erecting Holy Towers. The similarity of her passion to Melmea's did indeed make many see her as a hero. Euphinia venerated Elciel for doing what she did in this age when the Four World Powers were more occupied with keeping each other in check than pushing back the frontier.

Knowing all this made Adel resent Elciel all the more. After all, not only did the Eminent trample on Euphinia's respect, she would even go on to kill her. When Euphinia learned that Elciel was siding with the Northern Federation army that had laid waste to Wendill, it was as if her world had come crashing down.

Of course, Elciel had yet to commit all the atrocities that Adel remembered, but because she had been involved with the Moving Coliseum, Adel felt safe to assume that Elciel was up to no good even at this time. The fact that she had attempted to scout Mash meant she was likely trying to create supersoldiers to send into profane land. If Euphinia learned of this, how would she react? In any case, this was still a betrayal of Euphinia's trust and respect.

*Again, I'm extremely relieved that we managed to kill Elciel at the very start,* Adel thought.

A guilty look came over Melulu's face. "Ah, Saint Elciel. Right..."

"What do you think, Adel?" Euphinia asked. "Do you also see the similarities between Saint Melmea and Saint Elciel?"

"I'm afraid I do not know this person personally. However, it doesn't matter.

No one is more suitable than you, Your Highness!”

“Y-You truly think so?”

“Ha ha ha. Well said,” Melulu murmured under her breath.

“Did you say something, Melulu?”

“No, I didn’t, Your Highness.”

“Hmm, if you say so. Right! Adel, while we are on the topic of this book, there is something I’d like to ask you. Do you mind?”

Seeing the serious look on Euphinia’s face, Adel immediately nodded. “Of course. Ask me anything, Your Highness.”

“Your match against the knights of the castle was truly impressive. Are you perhaps... Do you remember how the founder was portrayed in this book? He supposedly could run like the wind, and his fist could shatter rock, even without using spelltools or magic. Also, the moment he picked up a spelltool, even if it was only designed to generate a small fireball, it would shoot giant balls of crimson flame.”

What Euphinia had just described was very similar to the effects of Ki Convergence and Ki Amplification. It was said that the founding king of the Holy Kingdom knew how to use ki. Of course, this was no coincidence. The first time around, Euphinia had informed Adel that he fought with ki.

Many other great names in history were also said to have been ki users. Consequently, many assumed that the authors of historical texts only added that characteristic as a way to give those figures more prestige. There was no way to prove or disprove that Adel was indeed using what the founder king had used, but because Euphinia had said the two were the same, Adel had accepted it as fact.

“It is as you suspect, Your Highness. I use ki. Some might think it questionable, but—”

“Oh, no! I saw it with my own eyes, so I believe you! After all, you won the fight without using anima. Or rather...it’s true that you did not use the anima generated by my Sanctuary. Many people have forgotten this, but were you

using the anima that we all supposedly possess within ourselves?”

“Yes, Your Highness. ‘Ki’ is the anima within us.”

Unfortunately, people seemed to have lost the ability to sense ki, which made it impossible to tap into. This was why mentions of people pulling off superhuman feats without relying on anima had become relegated to mere myth.

Euphinia looked at Adel with excitement and deep respect in her eyes. “That’s incredible! And not only can you use ki, your Sanctuary is also very powerful!”

“In other words, Adel is basically the founder king with the abilities of a Saint?” Melulu laughed. “How greedy!”

“That’s right, Melulu! I don’t think even the Eminents can do what she can!”

“That...is probably true. Speaking of Eminents, with what happened... Ugh, my head hurts.”

“Are you feeling unwell, Melulu?”

“I’m fine, Your Highness! Aha ha ha...”

“By the way, Adel, why did you want to become my knight escort? I am not yet an official Saint, and I don’t think I’m important enough to be served by someone as capable as you. If you asked, I’m sure you could serve my father or brothers—in fact, any of the Four World Powers would be more than happy to have you as a chief vassal.”

Melulu cut in. “Princess, it’s a bit crude to pose that question.”

“It is?!” Euphinia gasped. “I’m sorry!”

“Princess,” Adel said in a serious tone, “I want to serve you because you are the light of my life. I have zero interest in anyone else. You are the only one I want.”

“I...see?”

“You can take her at her word, Your Highness. I can vouch that she is a diehard fan of yours. Right before meeting you for the first time, she got so excited I wasn’t sure she was going to make it.”

“All right. If Melulu says so. Adel, I promise that I will work hard to become someone worthy of you! Mother Superior taught me that with great power comes great responsibility, so I will also carefully think about what I ought to do with the abilities that I have! But for now, we will focus on getting through the initiation ceremony.”

“Yes, Princess! But may I say one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Rather than what you *ought* to do, I would rather you focus on what you *want* to do. The two are similar, but not quite the same.”

In the previous timeline, Euphinia, being the princess, had devoted herself to reviving the fallen country of Wendill. This was something that she had to do, not something that she wanted to do. Passion had been stamped out by duty.

“‘Ought’ is what others seek from you. ‘Want’ is your own dreams and hopes. It could be anything, like gathering all the books in the world, or opening a cafe that serves the world’s most delicious tea. What I’m saying is, please value what makes you, you. I will do everything in my power to ensure that your circumstances will allow you to do so.”

“What I...want to do. What makes me...me. No one has ever said this to me before.”

“I-I agree with Adel!” Melulu heartily slapped Adel on the back a few times. “She sure has a way with words!”

Adel continued. “Your Highness, I hold *you* in my heart, not your powers. How powerful you are doesn’t change anything. Please don’t mind me, and live your life to your fullest. Feel free to rely on me for anything you need.”

“Thank you, Adel! That is very reassuring.”

The smile on Euphinia’s face was so pure and adorable, Adel felt like her heart was taking flight.

“Adel, your legs are spread again! You let your guard down at the drop of a hat!”

“Urgh!”

But Adel still had a long way to go when it came to learning proper manners as a Saint.

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Two days later, Adel was once again walking down a hallway in the palace. But this time, she did so calmly, with elegant and measured steps, keeping both hands in front. This was the result of Euphinia and Melulu's instruction. However, Adel still found it a very restricting way to walk, and she had to concentrate to keep it up.

She was again wearing a dress that Euphinia had chosen "for her education." It made her feel so self-aware, whenever she passed by people looking her way and whispering among themselves, she couldn't help but wonder if they were laughing at something she was doing wrong.

Adel had spent a lot of time in this castle in the previous timeline. However, being unable to see body language, he had been rather obtuse to attention. In the first place, most people only ever looked at him with fear or awe. The vibe was completely different from what was now directed at her, and it was very disconcerting.

"Man...I can't wait for the initiation ceremony."

When it was over and done with, she would be free of all these lessons...or not. Even if she managed to become a Saint, got deployed to Wendill, and became assigned as Euphinia's knight escort, she would still be Claire's subordinate. Claire would very likely still continue Adel's schooling, and Adel would have no way of rejecting her.

Speaking of Claire, Adel did not know what had happened to her in the previous timeline after Wendill was destroyed. Perhaps she got away. Perhaps she died. Due to the difference in station between knight escort and Saint, there had been a certain distance between the two. As such, their current relationship confounded Adel a little.

"For now, I ought to finish my business and return post-haste."

At the moment, Adel was heading for the flower garden in the back of the palace. It was a massive area at least as large as the main palace building. This was where the flower that adorned the streets of Welna, the welnafare, had been first cultivated. As the national flower of the Middle Kingdom, the welnafare represented peace and harmony. It was quite popular for flower pressing, and its perfume was well-known around the world.

The palace garden was the birthplace of many other local plant-based products.

Adel had been here before, but he could only take in the smells and the gentle wind. Being able to see made it a whole new experience. When she walked through the archway entrance, colors graced the entirety of her view.

She let out a gasp. “So this is how it looked...”

No words could do the scenery justice. Welnafare in white, yellow, purple, blue, and so many other colors greeted her in neat, beautiful rows. As coincidence had it, there wasn’t a single cloud this day. Together, the clear blue sky and flowers painted a landscape masterpiece that was the most beautiful thing Adel had ever seen. Besides Euphinia’s smile, of course.

“To think such beauty exists...”

Adel’s heart leaped for joy with every step she took in the garden. She wasn’t aware of it, but there was a smile on her face. It took some time before she came back to herself.

“Wait, I had something I needed to do.”

Under Claire’s instruction, Adel was to adorn Euphinia’s room with flowers from the garden. It was supposed to be a part of her education as a Saint.

As one might expect from the “Country of Flowers,” Wendill highly valued its culture and the arts. A more cynical take would be that this was the only way Wendill could develop itself while being surrounded on all four sides. In any case, those serving the royal family in close proximity were expected to carry themselves a certain way. According to Claire, this was the same for both Saints and knight escorts. Adel couldn’t care less about being a good Saint, but she couldn’t dismiss this out of hand if it applied to knight escorts too.

“Now, time to find someone who works here.”

Adel was wandering around, searching for someone she could ask for some flowers, when she heard familiar voices.

“Bwa ha ha ha! Working in a beautiful garden ain’t bad either!”

“Even though we stick out like sore thumbs in a place like this! Ga ha ha!”

“No, think about it. We’re just digging dirt, which is basically slave work! In a way, this place *does* suit us!”

“You have a point! We’re real slaves, after all! Wa ha ha ha!”

Voices that sounded entirely out of place in such an elegant garden could be heard from the far end.

“You lot! I’m not saying you can’t talk, but at least keep moving those hands!”

“Yes, boss!”

Apparently Mash was present too. Adel headed over, drawn by curiosity and the hope that this group could give her flowers. She found the group of former gladiator slaves being excessively loud and rowdy while Mash supervised them with a troubled look on his face. It had been a few days since Adel had met Mash, but it was clear that nothing had changed.

“Looks like you’re having fun, Mash,” Adel chuckled.

“Adel! What’s with that getup?!”

“Princess chose it for me. It’s part of my training as a Saint.”

By this point, Adel had already come to terms with the dresses. After all, it was Euphinia who was choosing them for her.

“I...see. That’s definitely a new look. It suits you.”

All the men shouted, “Boss lady, you look cute as hell!”

“What they said,” Mash grinned.

“Thanks, I guess. How’s this place treating you guys?”

“Well, Her Highness was kind enough to tell us that she accepted us as we were. How does she have such a big heart? Especially at that age.”

Adel sighed. “I envy you.”

Unlike her, the former gladiator slaves had become officially employed by the palace. With Melulu’s and Adel’s recommendation, Mash would even be serving alongside Melulu as Euphinia’s knight escort. The rest of the men were now palace guards. Them being here probably meant the garden was their assigned post. In actuality, their work was less about being guards and more

about doing heavy lifting and other miscellaneous tasks. Even so, this was very favorable treatment for a group who would normally never get employed here.

The reason, of course, was because the king had taken a huge liking to Adel. The plan for her to become a knight escort had been derailed by Claire, so the next best thing was to keep her tied to Wendill by taking in her associates.

“Sorry, Adel. It’s like you’re shouldering all the burden for us.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I would much rather be a knight escort than a deployed Saint, but at least I still get to be with Princess this way.”

“Think you can arrange to be deployed here?”

“I don’t know how things work inside the Church, but I imagine it’d come down to Claire, since she’s basically head honcho of the Saints here. That’s why I’m even playing along with stuff like this.”

“Makes sense. Just saying, no matter what happens to you, I’m with you the whole way. If you’re going somewhere, let me know.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll never leave Princess’s side.”

“Thought you’d say that. So, what’re you here for? You need something?”

“It’s for Claire. She ordered me to get welnafare flowers from here and arrange them.”

“You got it.” Mash turned to his companions. “You heard her! Adel needs flowers!”

“Yes, boss!” the men roared back in guttural voices that completely ruined the atmosphere.

“Hey, Kamotsu! This is your area of expertise! You better not let the boss lady down!”

A man whose unique hairstyle resembled a chicken’s crest cackled loudly. “Ga ha ha ha! I’d die for her if I had to! Since she always gives us a good show!” Just like the others, his appearance was extremely crude and entirely unsuitable for this beautiful garden.

“You got guts! Now, make those damn flowers bloom like your life depends

on it!” someone shouted as everyone moved about busily. In the blink of an eye, a chair, knife, bucket of water, white cloth, and other things were all lined up. Additionally, Kamotsu himself had been thrown into the hole that the former slaves had been digging, and buried up to his neck. It looked like a scene of bandits torturing a captive.

Adel couldn’t believe her eyes. “What are they doing?! This is holy ground beloved by Princess! Don’t mess around here!”

Mash shook his head. “It’s not what you think. As it turns out, this place is a surprisingly good fit for these guys. For now, just keep watching.”

The men were taking something small out of the bag and forcefully jabbing them into Kamotsu’s crest-like hair, cackling loudly. Further adding to the impression that this was torture, someone grabbed the buckets and started dumping water on Kamotsu’s head.

“Take this! There’s more where that came from!”

“Hell yeah! Bring it on!”

Despite how this all looked, Kamotsu reacted with nothing but enthusiasm. And suddenly, to Adel’s complete surprise, welnafare flowers began to bloom in quick succession from the man’s hair.

“What on earth?!”

“All right, there we go! Nice going, Kamotsu!” With practiced hands, the men quickly cut off the flowers blooming in Kamotsu’s hair. In effect, they were producing flowers for Adel without harming any of those in the garden.

“Keep going! Keep going! Ha ha ha!”

Adel stared at the very not-beautiful display that was mass-producing very beautiful flowers. “How’s he doing that? Is he *growing* those flowers? Is this a spell?”

“Even Kamotsu himself isn’t sure, but this was probably the result of something they did to him in Navarra. Apparently he grows flowers really quickly like that.”

“Right, the experiments that gave all of us weird abilities.”

Another example was Fisher, who could swim like a fish and stay underwater for much longer than a normal person could.

“Unfortunately, not all those abilities are exactly good in a fight,” Mash sighed. “Kamotsu’s ability is useful here, but if we were still back in Navarra, they would’ve branded him a failure.”

Suddenly, clapping rang out as a gentle, bell-like voice exclaimed, “Oh my! What a wonderful ability! The flowers are so beautiful.”

“Princess!” Adel’s head immediately swiveled upward to see an elegant white horse with snow-white wings soaring in the sky. It was none other than Pegasus, the Divine Beast that Euphinia was contracted with.

“Good morning, Adel.” Euphinia’s delicate and calming smile somehow made everyone who saw it feel loved and accepted.

“Good morning, Princess!” Adel replied energetically.

Melulu, who was riding with Euphinia, chuckled. “Morning, Adel. You look cute as always. Are you getting used to it?”

“Please spare me. I doubt I’ll *ever* get used to it.” However, since it was Euphinia doing it to her, Adel had already come to terms with being dressed up and would not protest anymore.

“But it looks so good on you! Don’t you agree, Princess?”

“It does indeed. Adel, you always look beautiful in dresses.”

“Thank you, Your Highness! Your praise honors me to no end!” Adel plucked the edges of her skirt and curtsied.

“Yes, that’s good. You’re getting better at it!”

Melulu pouted. “Why do I get such a different response?”

“Getting praised by Princess is completely different from being praised by you. Obviously.”

Euphinia smiled and changed the topic. “By the way, Adel. Would you like to join us on Pegasus’s back?”

“Oh, good idea,” Mash said. “Go on. When we’re done here, we’ll give you a

shout. Since it's not like we can join you."

The heavenly horse shot Mash a look, then neighed loudly. However, Adel understood what the Divine Beast was saying thanks to being a Saint.

"You bet your lion ass that's right! Not only do you stink of man, you stink of monster too!"

Adel stumbled in surprise. "Was that Pegasus speaking just now?!"

"Oh right, you can hear him," Melulu laughed wryly. "I've always suspected that Pega's speech was a bit...unique."

Even Euphinia could not help but to avert her eyes a little.

"'Unique?!'" Adel exclaimed. "I-I mean, that's one way to put it, but..."

Naturally, Euphinia had been contracted with Pegasus in the previous timeline too. As such, Adel was familiar with Pegasus's presence. Her impression of the Divine Beast had been nothing more than a divine being who was faithful to Euphinia. In a way, she had even respected the beast, thinking him a comrade who was equally devoted to the princess.

This was Adel's first time hearing Pegasus speak. Adel was so shocked at his coarse manner of speech, it was like a blow to the back of her head. But moments later, she realized something.

"Oh! Now I get it!"

Euphinia had been unfazed by the former gladiator slaves' behavior and speech because she was accustomed to hearing far worse from Pegasus.

At the same time, understanding dawned in Euphinia's eyes as well. "So Pega wasn't strange after all! There are many people like him! I suppose there really are things you can't learn from books."

Her smile was so pure and innocent that no one could find it in their hearts to correct her misunderstanding. It was true that both the former slaves and Pegasus had no class, but the princess did not have the sensibilities to know this was a bad thing. Instead, she accepted them all, just as she accepted everyone else.

"Wh-What about Claire? What did *she* say about Pegasus?"

Knowing how strict Claire was on proper manners and class, she probably would have butted heads even with a Divine Beast.

“Pega apparently doesn’t like Mother Superior. He doesn’t let her ride him. In fact, he doesn’t even speak to her.”

“I have no business with both men and used-up hussies! Only virgins have the right to ride on my back! Heh heh heh!”

As expected, everyone else heard Pegasus’s words only as neighing. And based on what he said, Euphinia and Melulu, who were currently on his back, were virgins, and Claire was not. Which wasn’t surprising, considering how much older she was. She must have had her fair share of experiences. The Church even actively advocated for Saints to leave behind offspring.

Pegasus approached Adel and started sniffing her. “Now, now, let’s take a look-see. Adel, was it? You...”

“What are you doing?”

“Checking if you’re a virgin! I can tell by smell, heh heh heh. And you pass, Adel! Come on, press that meaty ass of yours on my back! And going forward, don’t you dare spread your legs for a man without my permission! If you hear me—”

The Divine Beast suddenly found himself muzzled with the fiery whips of Salamander’s Tail.

Adel grabbed his head and pulled it close to whisper in his ear. “Drop the attitude, you hear me? Don’t get so full of yourself just because you’re contracted with Princess. If you say anything inappropriate, I’ll make you regret it. Dial it down and—”

“Um, Adel?”

“Yes, Princess! What is it?”

“Sometimes, I don’t really understand what Pega is saying. Would you mind explaining it to me?”

“There’s no need! His words are bad for your education! In fact, I’d go as far as to say you should *never* listen to him!” Adel shook her head vigorously and

choked Pegasus even harder. When the beast started groaning, she loosened the whip so he could speak again, hoping that he had learned his lesson.

“BOOBS! Press them harder against my fa—”

“Stay quiet forever!”

The whip tightened again.

After this, Euphinia, Melulu, and Adel enjoyed a leisurely flight until Mash’s group got the flowers ready.

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That night, Adel was in the palace bath. Unlike the large communal bath, this one was open only to Saints and knights of high stations. It was small, but quieter with fewer people using it. Having received permission from Claire, Adel was here to wash herself off.

Adel currently had the place all to herself. She would have felt guilty seeing other women naked just because she herself had gotten a new body, and she couldn’t very well ask people to keep their clothes on when they were here for a bath. On the other hand, she couldn’t go to the men’s side either. Thus, the solution was to come here after everyone else had gone to bed.

She sighed, content. “This...isn’t so bad.”

An elegant fragrance filled the air, thanks to all the welnafare flowers floating on the water. These were the flowers that Claire had made Adel collect earlier in the day. Claire had recommended Adel put them in, saying that they helped alleviate fatigue and were good for the skin. Welnafare flower baths were well-known, so Adel thought this was a good opportunity to try it for the first time. She didn’t know much about skin care, but it was true that the gentle aroma and warm water felt better and more relaxing than normal baths. She was thankful for this, as Saint training always tired her out.

Adel leaned back against the edge of the bath and spread her arms, staring at the ceiling in a daze. From the toasty steam to the enveloping warmth of the water and the soothing scent of the flowers, everything here felt good. She caught herself almost nodding off.

“Oh no, I shouldn’t fall asleep here,” Adel mumbled.

“Ha ha. Yeah, that’s not a good idea,” a voice agreed, as an impressive female figure materialized from the steam.

“Melulu?!”

“Hey. Didn’t expect to find you here at this time. Mind if I join you?”

The girl’s smile was filled with youthful charm, but her body already had all the allure of a full-grown woman. For Adel, who had almost never seen a naked woman before—on account of having been blind—this was far too arousing.

“I-I’m sorry! I’ll get out!” Adel leaped out in a fluster. The visible world was still too stimulating for her. She didn’t think she would be able to get Melulu’s figure out of her head for quite a while. And thoughts of how alluring she was only made her feel more guilty. She felt like she was being underhanded and exploiting her situation.

“What?! No, wait!” Melulu grabbed Adel’s hand and pulled her back.

“Why?”

A forlorn look came over Melulu’s face. “It feels like you’re avoiding me. Do you hate me?”

This hurt Adel’s conscience too, but in a different way. “Um, I don’t, but...”

“Then stay with me! For just a while.”

“S-Sure, I guess.”

The guilt was still there, but Adel didn’t have a choice. She got back into the water, doing her best to not look in Melulu’s direction. Thankfully, Melulu chose to sit next to Adel. They were so close their shoulders were nearly touching, but this was preferable to being face-to-face. Adel would have seen everything, and she wouldn’t be able to avert her face without seeming rude.

“Are these welnafare flowers? They smell so nice. What brought this on?”

“They were left over after Mother Superior’s lesson. She suggested that I try using them this way.”

“So...these are the flowers that grew out of Kamotsu’s mohawk? Ew.”

“I suppose they are, now that you mention it. But flowers are flowers. Does it matter where they were grown?”

“You have a point, but... Sometimes you take the strangest things with a straight face, and other times the most normal things set you off. Why are you fine with those guys but get all embarrassed with me?”

Of course, the reason was because, for Adel, Melulu was a very attractive member of the opposite sex, and Mash and the other guys were members of the same sex who she didn’t need to hold anything back with. However, Melulu could only see Adel as a girl, and therefore everything about Adel seemed inconsistent.

There was nothing Adel could do to resolve the situation, though. She had a thousand questions about how she ended up this way, but what was done was done. She had to simply accept it.

In the previous timeline, Adel would still be locked up in Navarra. But not only had she already escaped this time, she had even destroyed the Moving Coliseum and killed Elciel. Both Mash and Melulu, who should have died, were still alive and well. Adel was more than happy to have become a woman in exchange for such fortuitous changes.

“I-I am not embarrassed!”

“Reeeally? You suuure about that? Let’s see how you take...this!”

Without warning, Melulu mischievously hugged Adel’s arm. The sensation of her rather sizable chest came through loud and clear through the direct skin contact. It was so soft and heavenly that Adel felt herself being sucked in.

“Wh-What are you doing?! This behavior isn’t appropriate for a girl your age!”

“Says the one who didn’t bat an eye taking off her clothes and bathing in front of Mash and the guys.”

“That’s different!”

“Aha ha ha! You’re funny, Adel. Wait! Could it be...”

“What?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. Well, I don’t mind, so it’s fine.” Melulu gave Adel a

mischievous, knowing smile, then let go of her arm.

Adel heaved a sigh of relief. *I'd come back in time to protect Princess Euphinia, but here I am being led around the nose. I need to train myself a lot more,* she thought, then cleared her throat.

"By the way, why are you here at this hour? Everyone else is asleep."

"I always come here late. It doesn't happen as much when I'm with Princess, but people give me looks in the palace. So I prefer to be alone, at least in the bath."

"What kind of looks?"

"I mentioned it briefly before, but I come from a family of merchants, meaning I'm a commoner. So, yeah. Some people accuse me of having bought my way into this position. And considering my father, I wouldn't be surprised if he actually *did* bribe someone without me knowing."

"Does that mean your family is supportive of you being here?"

"I guess you could say that. More specifically, my father wants me to make it big as a knight and then marry a noble, to bring noble blood into our lineage. He already has money, so now he's after prestige and fame. That's why he gave me really good tutors and fighting instructors. I had to work my butt off."

"I can definitely see the results of your effort. You're as good a fighter as Mash. That's very impressive, considering your age."

Of the knights that Adel had fought her first day here, none were Melulu's match.

"How old *are* you, Adel? We're not all that different, are we? I'm sixteen, by the way."

"I'm around there too...I think."

"You 'think'? What kind of life have you lived so far?!"

"It's nothing. Forget what I said."

"Oh, come on! Wait, what were we talking about again? ...Right! See, being a knight had also been my dream. So I accepted the really harsh training and

relied on my family's connections. Now that I'm actually a knight, though, I realize it's not all roses. And I didn't have anyone to vent to."

"Well...if all you need is a listening ear, I'm always available. Just let me know."

"Thank you. For some reason, I feel safe relying on you. Maybe it's because the way you act seems a little...manly?"

"I-I act manly?"

Adel's mannerisms being manly actually made sense, as she had been a guy. Her struggle was in acting feminine.

"Mhmm. In profane land, you promised to protect me. That was the first time someone had said that to me, so it made me happy. All this time, I'd been working really hard, trying to meet people's expectations. It made me think, 'Oh, so I *am* allowed to rely on other people.'"

"We are comrades who have a shared goal in protecting Princess. It is only natural for us to work together. That's all it is. In turn, I'm only here thanks to your support. See? It goes both ways."

"I know that now. It's been a huge help having you and Mash here. And because you two stand out much more than me, not as many eyes are on me anymore. Hide a tree in a forest and all that, right?"

"Here's to hoping everything stays peacef—"

Suddenly, Adel was on full alert.

*Splat... Splat...*

Melulu hadn't noticed it yet, but Adel was picking up the sound of wet footsteps approaching from afar. Thanks to her time being blind, Adel had heightened senses of hearing and smell.

"What's wrong, Adel?" Melulu tilted her head.

*Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat.*

The steps quickened, soon drawing close enough that even Melulu could hear them.

“What is that sound?!”

As Melulu’s cry reverberated in the room, human figures surrounded the two girls. However, despite their humanoid shapes, they were not actual people. Through the steam from the bath, they appeared to be puppets of darkened water.

“What is this?! Who’s doing this?!” Melulu demanded, standing up to prepare for a fight.

Instead of answering, the figures inched closer, holding spears and axes similarly made of water in their hands.

“They’re after either one of us or both of us,” Adel said, stepping out of the bath.

There were more than ten opponents. Adel’s mind raced as she tried to figure out how they had gotten so close without her noticing. Then she realized they had probably materialized nearby. That still left the questions of what they were and who sent them.

“Melulu, do you feel a Sanctuary?”

“Nope. And I don’t feel miasma either.”

In other words, this wasn’t a spell or a monster.

“That leaves...”

“Spot on, Adel,” Cerberus said. He had been in her shadow this whole time, and was now speaking directly into her head. “This is Kelpie, which is also called a water spirit. It’s a Divine Beast without a defined form. Getting a hold of them is a challenge. I’m surprised to see someone working with one.”

“According to Cerberus,” Adel said out loud for Melulu’s sake, “it’s a Divine Beast called Kelpie.”

“You mean there’s a Saint after our lives?!”

“There’s no cause for concern. All we have to do is defend ourselves. It’s not like all Saints are paragons of morality. The only perfect person is Princess, and that’s got nothing to do with her being a Saint.”

While speaking, Adel bonded with Cerberus and deployed a Sanctuary so that Melulu could cast magic.

“Thanks, Adel! I shudder to think what would have happened to me if you hadn’t been here.”

Adel found herself wondering if this was when Melulu died in the previous timeline. Without access to anima, she would have had to face a Divine Beast with no magic.

Suddenly, Adel felt Melulu’s back touching hers, as she had stood back-to-back with Adel out of wariness. Naturally, that meant direct skin contact. And since their backs were touching, so were their butts.

Adel let out a yelp. “M-Melulu, what are you—?!”

“This is no time to be embarrassed!” Melulu snapped. “Focus on the enemies in front of you!”

“R-Right! It’s starting!”

“Enchant! Grant me the power of flames!” Melulu’s body glowed with red flames.

“Make sure you don’t get hurt!”

“Got it! But don’t worry! Let me protect a Saint as a knight escort for once! Come to me, Sylphid’s Spear!”

Melulu’s spelltool weapon rushed in from the entrance. She caught it with a firm grip, spun it a few times, then settled into a battle-ready stance.

As Adel did not have a weapon, she decided to leave Melulu in charge of actually defeating the enemy. She herself would use Ki Convergence and footwork to stay defensive. Or at least, that was the plan, until Cerberus spoke up.

“Adel, don’t use me just for Sanctuaries! Summon me and let me fight every once in a while. I don’t want my body to get rusty!”

“Oh! That was an option, wasn’t it? Very well!”

Although Adel had remembered to deploy a Sanctuary, bringing Cerberus out

and having him fight didn't occur to her. In the face of an enemy, her knee-jerk reaction was to do something about it herself. She was still heavily influenced by her experience as the swordmaster known as the Dark Knight.

"Come out, Cerberus!"

Cerberus appeared with a fierce roar. "Get on my back, Adel. Wouldn't hurt to just sit back and watch others fight for you every once in a while like how the other Saints do it! This is now *my* prey!"

"You sound excited!"

"How can I not be? I only get stronger by gaining experience in fighting. That is how I will obtain the black flame that my clan tells stories of! I welcome every opportunity I have to fight!"

Adel leaped onto the Divine Beast's back. "Show me what you can do, then! Just make sure not to hurt Melulu!"

This was a good opportunity to take a good look at how Cerberus fought. During the fight against Elciel, he had proved powerful enough to keep Genbu, one of the Four Deities, in check. He would definitely put up a good show.

"Leave it all to me!" Cerberus charged into the ring of water soldiers with a speed that belied his great size. From Adel's perspective, it was as if her view had changed completely in a split second.

Several water soldiers failed to get out of the way in time and were dashed against the wall with great force. The others closed in on Cerberus from both sides. Surprisingly, they each had the speed and skill of a veteran knight.

"Too slow!"

Cerberus spun around, swinging his tail in a mowing attack that reduced even more soldiers to mere puddles. Two, however, managed to react in time by jumping. As they closed in, they raised their weapons into the air.

"You missed some!"

"Not a problem!"

The Divine Beast crouched for a split second, then pushed off the ground with all his strength. In the blink of an eye, he was far out of reach. It seemed as if he

was going to crash into the far wall, but he spun around adeptly and kicked off it with even greater vigor.

*Bam!*

When he charged into the two, they shattered with more force than Cerberus had displayed before.

*Ba-bam!*

Instead of slowing down, Cerberus kicked the wall again, using the momentum to attack other water soldiers. He repeated this several more times with the aim of wiping out all the enemies.

“You guys didn’t give me any time to show off again!”

Despite Melulu’s complaint, she had been a strong contributor to the fight. After quickly realizing the ineffectiveness of thrusting attacks, she had focused on making wide swings with her spear. The fact that she had been able to ascertain the opponent’s characteristics and change her strategy accordingly spoke volumes about her experience. Unfortunately, Cerberus was just much too fast.

“Good work!” Adel said approvingly.

“Wa ha ha ha! This wasn’t even a warm-up!” Cerberus crowed.

He had demonstrated the incredible destructive power and eye-popping agility that his large build and well-developed muscles hinted at. Adel was sure that if she were to spar with him, it would become a very interesting match indeed. As a fighter, she found her heart beating a little faster at the thought. Not as fast as when she thought of Euphinia, of course.

“I can’t say it was a comfortable ride, though,” Adel added.

The Divine Beast’s movements had been so fast and the turns so sudden, it was as if he was intentionally trying to throw her off.

“Nothing someone of your caliber can’t handle, right?” Cerberus protested.

“You’re the one who told me to sit back and watch like how the other Saints do it.”

Any normal Saint would have fallen off the first time Cerberus kicked the wall. And at that speed, she would have gotten hurt very badly.

“Hah! My Saint sure has a lot of demands!”

One swipe of his right leg, and the razor-sharp claws finished off the very last water soldier created by Kelpie.

“I-Is it over?”

“Nuh-uh. Stay sharp, Melulu. This is where it *really* starts.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have to capture the person behind this. Since a Divine Beast’s involved, there’s no doubt we’re dealing with a Saint. This is an absolute desecration of the duty born by those of the Church. We have to make her pay!”

“I hear you, but...I’m still a bit shocked that someone hates me enough to do this. Is me being here really such a problem?”

A wet sound echoed as Adel slapped Melulu on the back.

“Ow!”

“Get it together! We still don’t know that you are the target, much less that this is an attack by someone with a grudge against you. Maybe they’re after me...or maybe this is just a diversion while they go after Princess!”

“Wait, you may be onto something! It’s her we should be focusing on!”

“So, what is our priority?”

“Ensuring Princess’s safety!”

“Exactly! Let’s go!”

“Yep!”

The two girls nodded at each other. Before they dashed out, however, Cerberus growled in warning. “Things aren’t over yet here, Adel. Look!”

“What?!”

Adel turned where Cerberus was indicating, and saw the remains of the water soldiers gathering into one large blob.

“How big is it getting?!” Melulu exclaimed, readying her spear.

“I’m guessing all the soldiers were one single being from the start,” Adel noted.

It wasn’t that there were multiple Kelpies present. There was just one Kelpie who had split herself into many bodies.

“And it doesn’t look weakened at all. Just punching or cutting won’t do.”

“So it seems.”

Just as Adel was about to try coming up with a different strategy, Cerberus cackled. “Mua ha ha, this is exactly what I’ve been waiting for!”

“Oh? You have an idea?”

“Leave it to me!”

Adel nodded, then told Melulu, “Cerberus says he’s got something!”

“Is that true, Pudding?!”

“Don’t call me by that name!!!” Cerberus roared.

Mocking laughter filled the room. “Ha ha ha! Your name is Pudding?! What a cutie! Nice to meet you, Pudding!”

Adel didn’t recognize the voice. It didn’t seem to come from a specific direction, but there was little doubt the speaker was Kelpie.

“Silence! I’ll shut that mouth of yours in a second!” Cerberus lifted his head with great force as crimson flames leaked out from between the teeth of his large maw.

Adel shouted, “Wait, no!”

However, it was too late.

*BWOOOOOOOOOH!!!*

A stream of flames shot out with unbelievable intensity, swallowing Kelpie’s enlarged form and evaporating all the water within.

“Noooooooooo!”

The voice faded away as the body made of dark water disappeared without a

trace.

“Hmph! This is what happens to those who run their mouth. You’re not worth my time. So, Adel! What do you think? I finished Kelpie off like I said I would! You may now thank me! Wa ha ha!”

Instead of thanking him, however, Adel jabbed a finger at Cerberus’s puffed-up chest. “What were you doing?! I told you to wait!”

“I defeated Kelpie. What’s the prob—”

“Do you *see* what you did?!”

Being bathed in the full force of Cerberus’s flames had given the room a complete makeover, and not in a good way. The walls and ceiling were thoroughly blackened and looked as though they could collapse at any moment. And that was not all.

“Fire! There’s a fire!”

“The fire came from the bath!”

“It’s spreading! Put it out, quickly!”

The palace was at risk of burning down. To put it mildly, this was a very bad situation.

“Oh... Ha ha ha. Being too powerful comes with its own problems, it seems!”

“Enough with the smart comments! Help put out the fire! Take a mouthful of the bathwater and shoot it!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

“All right, I’m heading out too! Melulu, hurry!”

“Adel, wait! Your clothes! You have to put on your clothes!”

Thanks to Cerberus’s water jet, the fire was soon quenched. Euphinia, who had been woken up by the commotion, was confirmed to be safe and sound.

Upon reporting to the king, Euphinia, and Claire, the two girls who had been at the bath were told that none of the Saints deployed to this castle had contracted a Kelpie. Maybe someone did and was keeping it a secret, but there was no way to tell. As such, there was no way to pursue the lead.

Adel ended up being saddled with repairing the room that Cerberus had destroyed, until when she was to leave for her initiation ceremony. He was her Divine Beast, so the responsibility was also hers. The silver lining was that, thanks to being swamped with restoration work, she did not have to suffer any more lessons.

# Chapter 4: The Initiation Ceremony

Alderford was the capital of the Holy Tower Church, the world's greatest authority. The city was located within the borders of the Kingdom of Wendill, being only two days away from the royal capital Welna. The Church's presence protected Wendill from unwelcome advances from the superpowers that surrounded it on all sides. Put another way, Wendill was dependent on the Church. In turn, the Church enjoyed complete authority within its territory, a luxury that it would not have enjoyed had its host been significantly more powerful and ambitious.

This symbiotic relationship was a large reason why the two had always been on great terms with each other. And in the previous timeline, when Central Tower collapsed and the Church fell, so did Wendill.

In light of all this, there was certainly merit in visiting Alderford in the current time. A trip could be an opportunity to investigate if there was anything wrong with Central Tower.

Located inside a large basin, Alderford was surrounded by massive walls that made it much more defensible than Welna. And directly in its center stood Central Tower, a structure that towered over the fortifications, aweing all who beheld it. In fact, it was so tall, it seemed to touch the sky.

"So that's Alderford, the capital of the Holy Tower Church. And that's Central Tower," Mash marveled, taking in the entirety of the city from atop the edge of the basin.

Many pilgrims around him were reacting the same way. Some were even kneeling down and praying, tears of gratitude streaming down their faces.

Claire explained, "It is said that this crater was created by the shockwave that ensued when Almaz, the goddess who created both man and Divine Beast, thrust Central Tower into the ground."

"I see, the shockwave was so powerful it altered the topography of the land. That would have been a sight to see."

Despite his fierce lion face—of course, he had pulled his hood completely forward to avoid alarming those nearby—Mash was a calm and intellectually curious person. As such, he was giving Claire his full attention.

“She had to use all her strength to make Central Tower as secure as possible. After all, this was enemy territory for her. She spent the very last drop of her power to ensure that we could survive in this harsh and demanding land filled with the Evil One’s deep-seated hatred and the monsters that it created.”

“Ah, the Great Coffin Doctrine. Almaz fought the Evil One to protect the humans she had created, but the battle destroyed the world. Being severely wounded, she did not have the strength to create a new world, so she covered the corpse of the Evil One with dirt and vegetation as a place for the few surviving humans to live on. However, the Evil One’s bitterness and malice seeped through the ground as miasma, creating monsters. We were too weak and powerless to fight back, so Almaz bestowed us the knowledge of how to secure habitable land by driving Central Tower into the ground, and entrusted us with her servants, the Divine Beasts. Having run out of power, she then went into hiding. Is my understanding correct?”

Consequently, Divine Beasts were compelled to seek out Saints and form contracts with them, to fulfill Almaz’s order to protect humanity. The reason why only women could be Saints was that females were closer to the Goddess’s image.

The Saints and Divine Beasts developed the techniques for erecting Holy Towers by emulating Central Tower, and they discovered magic as a means to protect themselves when making forays into profane land. With these in hand, they had been dedicating their lives throughout history to safeguarding humanity’s continued survival on this world built on the Evil One’s corpse.

At least, this was history as told by the Holy Tower Church.

Claire nodded approvingly. “Very good. I see you are well read.”

The Mother Superior showed no signs of treating Mash any different because of his appearance. In fact, she had never given Melulu a hard time for being a commoner either. All she cared about was devotion to the Church and its teachings, and her standards were high for both herself and others. This was

why she was always strict on Adel, who seemed to deviate from other Saints in many ways.

“Bwa ha ha ha! Didja hear that?! The Goddess stabbed that tower there right into the ground!”

“Then she must be some massive woman with bulging muscles!”

“You’re describing a gorilla, not a woman! Is everyone worshiping a female gorilla?!”

“Daaamn, imagine praying to a freaking gorilla!”

“That sounds so stupid, I can’t even! Gah ha ha ha!”

It was only natural that there were palace guards accompanying the group, and these ones wore the uniform that reflected their affiliation. Unfortunately, even though their hoods were pulled forward too, there was simply no way to hide their crassness.

“You lot! Show some respect! Remember where we are!” Mash hissed at them in a fluster.

Adel, however, chuckled. “You guys might be onto something there.”

If the myth was to be taken at face value, the mercs’ conclusion made logical sense. Actually saying it out loud was irreverent in the extreme, but even Melulu and Euphinia found themselves looking away and biting back laughter.

“Adel! How could you be laughing?!” Claire cried in reprimand.

“Ah! I’m sorry, Mother Superior!”

“These men are your subordinates! I cannot stand seeing such impiety and such a lack of education from those following someone who is about to become a Saint! You are supposed to be a role model for them, not join them in laughter!”

“I’m very sorry!”

While Adel was busy apologizing, Melulu and Euphinia managed to regain straight faces. Adel’s mistake had been failing to control her laughter more than anything, really.

Before long, the group had descended from the ridge and entered the city. They made their way toward the massive cathedral that surrounded Central Tower.

“The closer I get, the more it takes my breath away,” Mash sighed.

“I totally get it,” Melulu agreed. “And somehow, seeing it always makes me feel safe.”

Claire smiled with satisfaction. “As you should. This is the physical testament of Almaz’s grace and favor. It will surely look over us and protect us to the end of time.”

“It does make one feel that way,” Mash nodded.

“Yes, Mother Superior!” Melulu smiled.

Adel did not agree, but she kept quiet. She knew for a fact that Central Tower would eventually collapse. There was, however, a more immediate issue: what she was seeing was very different from what everyone else was describing.

Appearance wise, Central Tower was indeed the upright beacon of purity and hope that Mash and Melulu described. There wasn’t a single scratch in the facade that rose all the way to the sky. At least, on the outside...

Its interior was another story, looking so deteriorated that the structure seemed ready to collapse at any moment. It was a miracle that it was still standing, considering how much miasma was packed into the channels where power flowed. If there was ever a reason for Central Tower’s collapse in the previous timeline, this was it. And it was going to happen very soon.

Confusion churned in Adel’s chest. She did not know why her perception of Central Tower was so different from everyone else’s, including Claire’s. Were her senses deceiving her? Or was Claire pretending to not notice? Why did it seem like no one else in the city was aware, with how impending the collapse was?

There had been no mention of this in the previous timeline. Adel had only heard that Central Tower had suddenly collapsed one day. Perhaps the Holy Tower Church knew something but was keeping it under wraps. If they had let the world know, would it have been possible to form some sort of cooperative

effort that could have prevented the collapse? In the end, Wendill had been blamed for everything that happened due to the lack of information, which then set off the sequence of events that eventually led to Princess Euphinia's death. One could say that this was the catalyst for everything going wrong.

Adel's head was filled with a torrent of thoughts. At the moment, all she knew for sure was that Mash and Melulu were seeing a different Central Tower from the one she was seeing. With Claire right there, it would be unwise to talk about this out loud. Adel wasn't sure whether she could even broach the subject with Euphinia.

Speaking of which, what was Euphinia seeing?

Spurred by curiosity, Adel turned to get a look at Euphinia's face, and caught the other girl looking her way. When their eyes met, Euphinia smiled. Adel felt her heart being cleansed by the angelic smile, but otherwise gleaned no information regarding what the princess was thinking.

Caution would be crucial here. That said, there was very little time to waste.

Adel's dream was to ensure that Euphinia lived a long and happy life. The fewer things she had to worry about, the better. Any problems that were about to crop up needed to be dealt with posthaste.

◆◇◆

"Aha ha ha ha."

"Oho ho ho ho."

Adel and Euphinia were standing by in a green room, accompanied by several other young Saint initiates. Everyone had already changed into white ceremonial garb and were ready to be called on at any time. Meanwhile, there was no shortage of topics to talk about, especially in light of Euphinia being a princess and soon the youngest officially initiated Saint in history. Thanks also in part to Euphinia's own cheerful and outgoing personality, the room was filled with the sound of lively conversation and elegant laughter.

During the ceremony, Mash and Melulu would be waiting in a different room in the large cathedral.

In the previous timeline, there had been no mention of Euphinia being the youngest Saint in history. This meant that she was being initiated much earlier this time. If this was an effect of Adel having come back to the past, Adel felt it was all worth it. She couldn't be prouder to have contributed to Euphinia's fame and esteem in such a significant way.

A man in vestment came in and announced, "Preparations are in order. Everyone, follow me."

The group of initiates filed out and were led down several passages. Before long, they were in a large circular space. The plaza had an open roof and was paved with dazzling gems embedded within smooth, reflective stone. The presence of Divine Beasts emanating from the gems made it apparent that they were all mania crystals. Each one represented the life of a Divine Beast that had ended. The fact that they were used in such numbers and as a mere part of the flooring vividly illustrated the vast trove of wealth and resources at the Church's disposal.

In the middle of the space, Central Tower stood proud and tall. This was the true heart of Alderford. By extension, this was also the heart of the entire world. The purification project that underpinned all of human civilization had begun at this very spot. There was no place more apt for initiates to be sworn in as official Saints.

"My, it's so beautiful!"

"What an honor it is to see Central Tower from so close!"

"I'll remember this day for my entire life..."

All the initiates were so moved that they had stopped in their tracks. In contrast, the closer Adel got to Central Tower, the more repulsed she felt. The structure was so close to exploding, she felt apprehensive about even approaching it.

Euphinia, who had been walking solemnly at the end of the line, suddenly called out to Adel in a soft voice. "Adel, a moment?"

"Yes, Princess? How may I help you?"

"This might be a strange thing to ask, but... Does Central Tower look the same

to you as everyone else?”

Adel’s eyes widened. “Do you also see Central Tower on the verge of collapse?!”

“I-I do! So you see it too! I was starting to think there was something wrong with my head. I’m so glad...” Euphinia heaved a big sigh of relief, then shook her head. “No, wait, I shouldn’t be glad. The Tower being in this state is definitely bad news.”

“Judging by your reaction, this isn’t your first time noticing it.”

“Every time I come to Alderford, I feel the wrongness within Central Tower. But for some reason, everyone else seems entirely oblivious.”

“Well, I feel it too, loud and clear. I wonder what makes us special. Even Mother Superior seemed none the wiser.”

“I’ve asked her once, but she scolded me, saying that I shouldn’t even think such blasphemous things.”

This was likely the reason Euphinia never mentioned this to anyone in the previous timeline, not even to Adel. Then again, Adel back then wouldn’t have understood even if Euphinia told him. He’d had opportunities to visit Alderford before the collapse of Central Tower. He couldn’t see, but he had definitely gotten close enough. And yet, he hadn’t sensed anything. The version of Adel from that time could not truly share the burdens that weighed on the princess’s shoulders.

Adel bowed deeply. “Princess, I’m truly sorry for having been unable to pick up on something that has been weighing so heavily on you!”

“No, no, that’s all right. This is your first time visiting Central Tower, isn’t it? It’s only natural that you didn’t know beforehand. Please raise your head.”

“Thank you for saying so, Princess.”

“Well, now we are partners in crime sharing a very big secret.”

“It’s an honor! No matter what it is, being able to understand something on your heart brings me endless joy!”

“Thank you, Adel. I don’t know when I can ever fully repay all the trust that

you place in me...”

“There is no need to, Princess. You have already given me far too much.”

After all, Euphinia had saved Adel’s life in the previous timeline. The Euphinia currently in front of her wouldn’t know it, of course, but that had no bearing on Adel’s feelings.

“Have I really? I don’t remember doing anything for you in particular, but...since you insist, I just might actually rely on you for support.”

“That would make me happier than anything in the world.”

“In that case...”

Timidly, Euphinia reached for Adel’s hand and grasped it. Her delicate hand was smooth and white like porcelain, very soft, very warm, and very small. Adel found herself wholeheartedly thinking that she had to protect this girl at all costs.

“Would you mind holding my hand for a while? With how it looks, standing in front of Central Tower scares me a little.”

“Please don’t worry. If anything happens, I will protect you.”

“Thank you, Adel. I know I can count on you.”

The princess smiled a little as some of the tension left her face.

“Everyone, please line up here!” the guide ordered as the group reached Central Tower. “Now wait a moment. The conductors for today’s initiation will be arriving shortly.”

It wasn’t long before a group emerged on the other end of the plaza. In the center was an old Saint with a kindly air, flanked by a young boy and a young girl who appeared to be her knight escorts. Besides the cleric leading them, there was one more person in the group: a tall woman with stately looks and pale purple hair.

Adel gasped softly. “What?! How?!”

There was no mistake; this was Elciel, the very woman that Adel had killed in profane land in an attempt to change the future. And yet there she was,

standing before Adel once again. And this time, Euphinia was present too.

“What’s wrong, Adel?” Euphinia asked, surprised at Adel’s reaction.

“Uh, it’s nothing. Sorry.”

The surest way to nip future trouble in the bud would be to attack Elciel right now and kill her, for good this time. However, doing so would turn everyone in the cathedral into enemies. Adel could not do so, as it would put Euphinia in danger as well. This left Adel no choice but to wait for Elciel to make the first move.

In the first place, how was Elciel still alive? Had the Elciel from before been a fake? If so, was this the real one? If there were multiple Elciels...what about the one that Adel had killed in the previous timeline?

Adel was so stunned, she was starting to doubt everything she knew.

Paying her no attention, the cleric announced in a solemn voice, “This is Eminent Theodora and Eminent Elciel. The two of them will be conducting today’s initiation.”

“My, *two* of the Eminents!”

“Both the War Saint and the Tower Saint are here to give us their blessing?!”

“What an incredible honor it is!”

The other initiates were wholeheartedly happy, not knowing any better. The Eminents were held up as seven paragons for all Saints, having been acknowledged by the Church for their exceptional ability. They were as renowned and revered, given as much esteem as actual kings.

Adel obviously knew the War Saint, what with her considering Elciel a bitter enemy. She had also heard of the Tower Saint. Theodora had been given this title because she possessed exceptional talent in creating and erecting Holy Towers, and she was known for having set up the largest number of them in history.

Purifying profane land and making it habitable was a crucial obligation of all Saints, and their most fundamental role. Even Adel accepted this. Theodora having erected the most Holy Towers ever meant that, in a very direct way, she

was the greatest contributor to the continued survival of the human species. This, together with the fact that she was still in active service at such an old age, almost made her a symbol of the Church as a whole.

Adel had heard that when the Northern Federation seized Alderford, Theodora had been captured and detained as a prisoner. Near the end of the Great War, the Church had managed to get back to its feet and restore a semblance of order. Supposedly, she had played a big part in the effort.

With how well she knew Holy Towers, surely she could correctly diagnose Central Tower too.

“Do you think the Eminents would understand?” Euphinia whispered to Adel.

“Asking now could be dangerous, Princess. If we are to ask, it would be best to do it after the ceremony, in a private setting.”

“That sounds prudent. Thank you for being here with me, Adel.”

“I do my best, but I’m afraid I still have a long way to go.”

At the moment, Adel was having trouble tearing her attention away from Elciel, whereas Euphinia was more concerned about Central Tower. Despite knowing this, and despite the trust that Euphinia was placing in her, Adel could not reconcile the two priorities, and she was aware it was an indication of her own lack of experience.

That said, protecting Euphinia would always be her top priority, no matter what. Never again would she lose her liege.

Suddenly, Cerberus’s voice rang in Adel’s head. “*Before you get too hotheaded, remember that I’m here too. Don’t hesitate to summon me. I’ll tear Elciel’s throat out with a single bite.*”

Adel nodded, silently thanking the Divine Beast for the reminder. Objectively, she had been a much more powerful fighter as Swordmaster Adel. However, she now had the abilities of a Saint and had Cerberus at her side. She also had Mash and Melulu, though they were currently in another room. If anything happened, they would surely rush over.

This was all to say, she was no longer alone. She was protecting Euphinia not

with the strength of one, but with a group. This was likely what the young boy who had sent Adel back in time intended.

Before long, the other group stopped in front of the waiting initiates. The two young knight escorts spoke up.

“Know that you are in the presence of an Eminent.”

“Pay your respects accordingly.”

The boy and girl appeared to be around Adel’s age. Their faces were extremely similar and they shared the same silver hair with pale blue traces. They were likely either twins or siblings.

The initiates, including Adel and Euphinia, paid their respects the way Saints did. Thanks to Claire’s lessons, even Adel managed to pull it off with no problems.

Theodora returned the gesture, then smiled warmly. “There’s no need to feel nervous. Welcome to Alderford Cathedral. Today, you will place your hand on Central Tower, which Almaz had thrust into the ground with her divine hands, to feel her overwhelming love. After that, you will declare your devotion to our calling to bring peace to all peoples without discrimination.”

Despite Theodora’s words, Adel was very doubtful whether she could feel love while touching a structure that seemed about to burst with miasma. If anything, she was more likely to feel the Evil One’s rage. If Euphinia got cursed or was harmed in any way from touching so much miasma, somebody would have to pay.

Continuing after Theodora, Elciel ordered, “Everyone, come closer to Central Tower. Step up one at a time, deploy a Sanctuary, touch the wall, and declare your dedication to our divine calling.”

The War Saint spoke with a dignity and grace that sharply contrasted her demeanor when she’d fought Adel’s group. When she met Adel’s stare, she merely smiled back, looking unfazed. It was hard to tell if she was good at acting, or if this was a different Elciel who knew nothing.

“How about we start from that side?” Theodora beckoned to one of the initiates.

Based on the ordering, Euphinia would be going second last, and Adel would be the very last. Adel had actually wanted to go before Euphinia so she could call an end to the ceremony if she sensed any sign of danger, but it was too late. So instead, she focused on staying alert, paying extra attention to Elciel. She was poised to summon Cerberus at a moment's notice, and had also secured Salamander's Tail to her inner thigh so she could draw it at any time. If a fight were to break out, she would be ready.

"Of course, Eminent."

The initiate who had been called first stepped forward and deployed her Sanctuary, which turned out to be less than a dozen meters in diameter. Compared to Adel's, it was a bit smaller and filled with significantly less mania. Without a standard to compare against, Adel could not tell how this person measured up against the average.

Theodora smiled. "Very good. Go on."

Was that an indication that she was all right for a new Saint? Adel thought she saw Elciel nodding a little too, though she remained silent.

With a nervous face, the initiate began reciting her oath. This had also been included in Adel's lessons, so her preparations were perfect.

"Very well done. Next person please."

Initiates took turns one after another under Theodora's guidance. Because everyone had to deploy their Sanctuary, it proved to be a good opportunity to observe other people's performances. As it turned out, the person who went first was quite a bit above average in this group. If Adel and Euphinia weren't here, she might have even ranked first or second. Theodora's comment of "Very well done" was not just her being polite.

All this went to show just how remarkably talented Euphinia was. As someone who aimed to be her knight escort, Adel couldn't be prouder.

As for Adel herself, she realized that, although she paled in comparison to Euphinia, she was objectively quite powerful. This explained why she had been allowed to swear in as an official Saint after only taking lessons for a few days; she more than met the mark when it came to raw talent. Little wonder Claire

had seemed so confident when applying.

But again, Adel did not actually want this. Even now, she resented the fact that officially becoming a Saint meant being burdened with obligations to the Church. However, she was glad that she had come with Euphinia. She shuddered to imagine Euphinia having to fend for herself against Elciel.

Finally, Theodora said, “Next, Princess Euphinia. Come up, please.”

Judging by the way Euphinia had spoken about Theodora earlier, the two were not previously acquainted. However, the fact that the Tower Saint called Euphinia by name meant she had at least heard of her.

“Yes, Eminent.” Euphinia stepped up nervously and deployed a Sanctuary.

“What?!”

“Wh-What is with this size?!”

“What’s more, it’s almighty!”

Everyone present other than Adel nearly jumped out of their skins. This was the same of the two young knight escorts.

“Am I dreaming right now?! How is such a Sanctuary even possible?!”

“I can’t believe it! This is even larger than what the Eminents can deploy!”

“Truly wonderful!” Theodora exclaimed, looking elated. “My student Claire had notified me in advance, but even that did not prepare me for this. Living a long life is worth it sometimes.”

Even Elciel’s eyes widened in surprise. Seeing this, Adel smirked a little, though this was more of a failed attempt to suppress a full grin. Triumph coursed through her body at the thought that her liege could shock even the Eminents. She felt on top of the world. Maybe it was strange how she didn’t care about being praised herself but got so happy when it came to Euphinia. But well, it was what it was.

“Come forward and touch Central Tower. And in your case, give thanks to Almaz for bestowing you with such talent.”

Euphinia nodded and stepped up. She raised a hand, but paused for a

moment. Unlike the other initiates, she saw Central Tower as a structure completely filled with miasma. Even though she wouldn't be touching the miasma directly, the thought still made her hesitate.

However, she managed to shore up her resolve and slowly reached forward.

*FLAAASH!*

The instant Euphinia's hand made contact with Central Tower, light exploded. White light and black light clashed, then rebounded and disappeared.

"AHHH!" Euphinia screamed as the shockwave sent her flying like a cannonball.

“Princess!” Adel swiftly slid in behind Euphinia’s back and caught her.

“Th-Thank you, Adel.”

“That’s what I’m here for!”



“Wait, look at that!” Euphinia pointed at Central Tower.

A crack had formed at the exact spot where Euphinia touched the structure. And from that crack, miasma was shooting out like compressed air.

“What is happening?! Look at Central Tower!”

“Is it breaking apart?! Why?!”

The initiates and clerics were shaken to their cores. They stared at the rapidly leaking miasma in a daze, their feet seemingly rooted to the ground. As they did not see the warning signs ahead of time, this phenomenon was as unexpected as a thunderclap from a clear sky. And this thunderclap heralded the end of their world.

However, despite their inability to act, the situation was moving fast. In no time at all, a humanoid monster with a horn materialized from the miasma, roaring fiercely.

“A monster appeared!”

“Is that an ogre?!”

One of Theodora’s escorts charged forward. “Don’t just stand there! Move, move, move!”

With a battle cry, he drew the single-bladed sword on his waist and swung at the monster’s neck. The pale blue glint on the blade of his weapon, a katana, indicated that it was a spelltool. Clearly, he had the skills to take full advantage of its abilities. One swing was all it took to behead the ogre.

“Impressive!” Adel smiled in appreciation. *Looks like he’s knight escort to an Eminent for a reason.*

Calmly, Theodora ordered, “Lute, continue taking down the monsters that appear. Myu, focus on protecting the Saints.”

“Understood, Grandmother!” the two replied.

The boy lunged at the next monster that appeared, as the girl rushed to the initiates. She jabbed her katana into the ground and chanted, “Castle of ice, protect us! Shield!”

A shining dome of ice mania sprang up around her, covering the initiates and clerics.

“Everyone, please summon your Divine Beasts and have them support Grandmother!” She turned to Adel and Euphinia, the only two still not inside the barrier. “You two, over here! Come in! Hurry!”

“No, there’s no need,” Elciel interrupted. A pillar of light shone from her shadow as she took one step, then another step in their direction.

The light took the form of a giant four-legged beast. When it faded, it revealed Byakko—a tiger with dark purple patterns on immaculate white fur, known as another member of her Four Guardians.

“ROOOOAAAAAR!” Byakko roared at Adel and Euphinia.

Elciel continued, “After all, the sin of destroying Central Tower is punishable by death!”

“No, it’s a misunderstanding!” Euphinia cried, shaking her head vigorously. “I didn’t do—”

“I’m here for you, Princess!” Adel stepped in front of Euphinia protectively and chuckled. “Thanks for coming at us, Elciel. You’re doing us a favor. I honestly couldn’t stand holding back while staring at your mug for another second! I’ve been shaking with the urge to kill you this whole time. If you stand before me, you get cut down. That’s all there is to it!”

“Adel, what are you saying?! She’s an Eminent!”

“Princess, she’s trying to frame you and kill you for something you didn’t do. If she wants your life, she has to go through me!”

Adel rolled up the hem of her skirt and drew Salamander’s Tail, immediately using Ki Amplification to turn it into two blades of blue flames.

“B-But...”

A grin came over Elciel’s face. “A word of warning: I’m different.”

“That’s an interesting thing to say.”

In other words, the Elciel standing before Adel at this moment was insinuating

that she was a different Elciel from the one who had been killed in profane land. At the very least, this one clearly felt the distinction. Adel didn't fully understand what was going on, but she took it in stride. All she had to do was destroy every single Elciel, starting with the one in her face.

"Please stop!" Myu cried. "This isn't time for fighting amongst ourselves!"

"Myu is right, Elciel!" Theodora chimed in. "And you already knew the state that Central Tower was in! How do you know for sure that Princess Euphinia is the cause?! For now, let's focus on propping Central Tower up! Lend me a hand, before it's too late!"

Apparently the two Eminents already knew there was something wrong with Central Tower. It seemed reasonable, then, to extrapolate that all the higher-ups in the Church were also in the know. If so, why were they keeping it under wraps? Were they afraid that the truth would fracture the organization? Adel had a thousand questions, but she clearly wouldn't be getting any answers now.

Central Tower seemed about to collapse due to the spreading cracks. Theodora's Divine Beast, a humanoid with snow white fur even more massive than Byakko and Cerberus, was propping it up, desperately trying to prevent the catastrophe. Theodora herself held both her hands against the structure, bringing all her strength to bear in an effort to suppress the leaking miasma.

"Hmph." Elciel looked at Byakko, then pointed at Central Tower with her eyes.

Euphinia and Myu sighed with relief. It seemed Elciel was burying the hatchet for now and was willing to help.

"ROOOAAAARR!"

But to their surprise, Byakko charged at Central Tower, claws as deadly as first-rate swords raised in attack. It swung at Theodora, whose back was turned as she desperately contended with Central Tower.

"Grandmother!" the escorts cried in alarm.

At the same time, Euphinia wailed, "Adel! Protect her!"

"On it!" Adel replied, already on the move. With all her ki at her feet, she exceeded even Byakko in speed, catching up in the nick of time. "Not on my

watch!” She unleashed a flying kick that landed cleanly on the side of Byakko’s head, adding her own momentum to the force of the attack.

As the Divine Beast crashed far away from Theodora’s position, the escorts sighed with relief.

“So fast!”

“Whew...”

Theodora smiled with gratitude. “Thank you, Adel.”

“I was merely carrying out my liege’s orders. There’s no need for thanks.”

Theodora turned to glare at the War Saint. “Elciel, is this why you were pushing so hard for us to accept Princess Euphinia this year?”

“I see no point in answering someone who will die today,” Elciel replied with an expressionless face.

This was news to Adel. “*She’s* the one who approved Princess’s initiation?!”

“Indeed,” Theodora nodded. “Claire has told us about Princess Euphinia’s abilities for a while now, but I wanted her to enjoy her childhood without being burdened by the duties and obligations of a Saint. Children should be allowed to just be children. That is why I’ve always been against the idea. However, I’m aware that me saying this now only sounds like an excuse.”

“I don’t hold it against you, Eminent—this is something that would have happened sooner or later anyway. As Princess’s knight escort, all I have to do is to protect her when she needs me. For now, I will deal with Elciel!”

Killing the War Saint was top priority right now. This incident had proved beyond doubt that she was deliberately aiming for Euphinia’s life. This was unforgivable in Adel’s eyes. Elciel had to die, or else Euphinia would have to live life constantly looking over her shoulder. Adel was determined to finish the job this time.

“In exchange, if we all survive, please help me convince Mother Superior Claire to let me officially become Princess’s knight escort!”

Of course, it wouldn’t hurt to earn some favor on the side. If Theodora really was Claire’s mentor, then it would be hard for Claire to refuse a request from

her.

“I cannot move from here! If I let go, Central Tower might collapse! I’m sorry for asking so much, but please protect my back!”

Byakko, who had gotten back on its feet right after being kicked, growled threateningly, looking ready to pounce again at any moment. If Adel stepped away, Theodora would be killed in no time.

“Understood, Eminent!”

“Lute! Myu! Call for reinforcements and take command!”

“Understood, Grandmother!” the escorts shouted, then split up.

“Emergency! Emergency! All fighting personnel, gather at Central Tower! Enemy forces are attacking Central Tower! To me! Hurry!”

“Initiates, please summon your Divine Beasts and order them to protect Grandmother!”

“Cerberus, come out!” Adel cried, following Myu’s order. As Theodora and Euphinia were separated by distance, two fighters would be needed to protect them both.

However, Cerberus did not appear.

“What’s wrong, Cerberus?! Why aren’t you coming out?!”

“*I-I don’t know either! Something’s blocking me!*” Cerberus sounded very perplexed.

“What?!”

At the same time, the initiates were also raising a commotion.

“I can’t summon my Divine Beast for some reason!”

“I can’t even deploy a Sanctuary properly!”

“M-Me neither!”

Myu looked at all of them with alarm. “Is this true for everyone?!”

“It’s a Sealing Sanctuary!” Theodora cried.

“What is that, Eminent?!” Adel asked.

“It’s a Sanctuary that inhibits the ability of other Saints to summon their Divine Beasts. If you aren’t powerful enough, you can’t shake off its effect.”

The large humanoid Divine Beast under Theodora’s control was still summoned, proving that she was indeed worthy of her title as Eminent. The same could not be said of the initiates, including Adel.

Adel grumbled, “This didn’t happen the last time, though.”

She had had no trouble summoning Cerberus during the fight in profane land. Had Elciel simply not used this ability at the time? Or had she grown more powerful since then? The current Elciel did claim to be “different,” after all.

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out in Adel’s head. “*Hya ha ha! In your case, it’s because I made dear Pudding drink a part of my body. Now I’m interfering with his ability to materialize! I got you good!*”

A fist made of darkened water appeared at Adel’s feet and raised two fingers.

“You’re...Kelpie! So that’s what the attack was for!”

In other words, the attack at the bath had been intended for Adel, not Melulu. And Elciel had ordered it all as part of her preparations for this day.

When Divine Beasts died, they turned into mania crystals. That day, despite having been roasted alive by Cerberus’s fire, Kelpie did not leave behind a mania crystal. Adel had suspected that Kelpie was still alive, but it showing up here was definitely unexpected.

Adel clicked her tongue. “What an underhanded move!”

“*Hey, I’m against violence!*” Kelpie giggled, quickly making itself scarce before Adel could hit back.

Byakko’s growling suddenly rose in intensity as it braced itself to go in for the kill. Matching its timing, Elciel turned to Euphinia and began forming the hand signs for an attack.

With Cerberus sealed, there was no way for Adel to deal with both threats. Mash and Melulu weren’t present, and the reinforcements that Lute was gathering wouldn’t arrive in time.

Catching on, Euphinia shouted, “I’m fine, Adel! Take care of Eminent

Theodora!” She then thrust out a hand. “Come out, Pega!”

Responding to her call, a white winged horse appeared. This proved that she was indeed powerful enough to shrug off the restraints of the Sealing Sanctuary.

“*UwAAaaaH! D-D-Don’t summon me at a time like this! I-I-I wasn’t born to fight! I was born to be sat on by cute virgins!*”

Unfortunately, Pegasus was already sniveling and cringing in terror the moment he emerged. His heartfelt protest left even Theodora at a loss for words.

Inside Adel’s head, Cerberus scoffed with exasperation. “*Wow, can he get anymore pathetic? If only I got summoned instead, I would have loved to take part in the fight.*”

Adel couldn’t agree more, but there was no time to waste commenting on Pegasus’s attitude. Instead, she ordered, “In that case, let Princess on your back and take her away somewhere safe!”

“*O-O-Okay! We’re running away! Let’s go!*”

“Yes please, Pega!” Euphinia swiftly mounted the Divine Beast. He took off without a second thought.

At the same time, Elciel had finished preparing her spell. Several lances of rock with deadly points appeared and shot toward the flying horse.

“*Waaaaaaah! Stop, stop, stop, please stop! I’ll even lick your shoes if you want! Noooooooo!*”

Pegasus was raising a ruckus like no other, but his movements were agile and nimble. Surprisingly, he managed to dodge every one of Elciel’s attacks.

“Not bad!” Adel’s inner evaluation of Pegasus improved a little. She fervently prayed that he could safely get away with Euphinia.

Furthermore, the commotion with Pegasus had bought Adel enough time. Reinforcements responding to Lute’s request finally arrived, rushing into the plaza with weapons in hand.

“Wh-What is going on here?!”

“Eminent Theodora, Sir Lute, what is happening?!”

“Eminent Elciel has gone mad and attacked Eminent Theodora as she was trying to prevent the destruction of Central Tower! Stop her at all costs! Take her life if you must!”

Adel sighed with relief, thinking that the reinforcements occupying Elciel’s attention would further help Euphinia get away. However, the princess took advantage of the opportunity to circle back around.

She landed in front of the initiates and held out a hand. “Everyone, ride on Pega with me! If you do, Lady Myu will be freed up to fight!”

After thinking hard about how she could contribute, Euphinia had come up with this idea. She wasn’t far off the mark. Myu was an experienced fighter. Her being freed up to join the fight would tilt the scales in a significant way. Euphinia was indeed wise beyond her years.

Myu smiled gratefully. “Thank you for the aid, Princess Euphinia!”

“A wonderful call, Princess!” Adel cried. “You did a good job assessing the situation on the fly and coming up with an effective strategy!”

Euphinia nodded with conviction. “I wanted to help out however I could!”

“*Wait a minute, I haven’t checked if they’re virgins yet! Hold on, some of them stink! Some of them are nasty! Noooo, don’t do this to me!*”

Everyone wordlessly agreed to ignore the background noise.

Knowing that Mash and Melulu would also be arriving soon, Adel decided to focus on Byakko.

Unfortunately, using Ki Amplification to gather ki for the big attack that had swallowed up Elciel and Hippogriff in profane land was not an option here. Doing so required standing still, which was only possible when Adel had allies like Mash, Melulu, and Cerberus keeping the enemy at bay. Consequently, Adel needed to fight a different way.

With a roar, Byakko finally lunged forward, swinging its right front leg in a swipe. Adel couldn’t back off, not with Theodora behind her. If she jumped up, Byakko would target her when she landed. The only choice left was forward.

And so, in the split second Byakko's leg lifted off the ground, she charged toward its chest. The claw passed by above with a swoosh, missing her head by a paper-thin margin. The tiger attacked with its left front leg, then once more with its right, only to get the same results.

Realizing that repeating the same attack would get it nowhere, the Divine Beast fell back to regain its bearings. Next, it lowered its front body, spread its claws as wide as possible, then started swiping indiscriminately as fast as it could. Rather than making aimed strikes, it intended to overwhelm Adel with more rapid attacks than she could dodge. Just one nail catching Adel would be enough to tear her soft body to pieces.

The sound of Byakko's claws gouging the stone pavement rang out in quick succession for what felt like forever. As long as Adel was still standing, it would not stop. She weathered this barrage of attacks with small, dainty steps, as if she were dancing in a ballroom.

The escorts, who had their hands full dealing with monsters coming from the miasma, could hardly believe their eyes.

"How is she doing that?!"

"What incredible movements! Is she really a Saint?!"

Even Cerberus was cheering Adel on. "*Good show, Adel! Keep it up!*"

"I have good eyes!" Adel replied.

In the previous timeline, Adel had lost both eyes, and so had learned to fight based on presence and sound alone. This fighting style had served him well, enabling him to successfully kill Elciel and earn the title of Swordmaster.

Upon becoming a woman, in exchange for losing muscle mass, Adel had regained her eyes. One advantage this gave her was the ability to clearly see incoming attacks. And she was further bolstering her sight with Ki Convergence. With her ki focused through her eyes and feet, she could perform the footwork needed to evade everything. She wasn't a categorically worse fighter than before; at the very least, she now had overwhelmingly superior perception and agility. Even so, it still took her full concentration to remain standing in the face of Byakko's relentless assault, and she had to keep Salamander's Tail in its

default state to prevent spreading her ki too thin.

“Though, I admit that I’m getting nowhere.”

Adel was on the defense, forced to wait for an opportunity to attack. When that opportunity came, she would need to use Ki Amplification on Salamander’s Tail, at the cost of her ability to dodge. As such, she needed to be very careful about when she made the shift. That moment would come soon, but Adel just wasn’t suited to such a passive strategy.

*In that case, I should take matters into my own hands!*

Suddenly, while evading Byakko’s attacks, Adel accidentally stepped into a deep rut created by Byakko’s furious onslaught.

“Ugh!” Adel lost her balance and fell to one knee.

Byakko’s eyes gleamed, seeing this as the perfect opportunity to finish her off. It stopped its indiscriminate attacks and pulled back, preparing to deal a decisive blow. It decided against a sideways attack, as the rut had gotten quite deep, and Adel was short enough to evade the attack by crouching down inside. There was nothing she could do against a vertical attack coming straight down, though.

But that was exactly what Adel wanted. “Right there!”

Instantly calculating where the attack would land, she cut off Ki Convergence and poured all her ki into Salamander’s Tail through Ki Amplification. As the weapon flared up with blue flames, she plunged one side firmly into the ground so that the other side stood straight up like a stake.

The next moment, Byakko’s claw crashed down, deeply impaling itself on the blade of blue fire. The beast roared with pain, reeling back in confusion.

Lute and Myu both shouted, “Bravo!”

“Much obliged!” Adel grinned.

She had effectively used Byakko’s attack against itself. This was the fighting style that suited her best now. Although Byakko had managed to free its paw, there was no doubt that this was a serious wound. As proof, the beast was unable to put its foot on the ground. Even if Adel had thrust with her full

strength, the wound would not have been anywhere as severe.

The key lay in counterattacking and relying on technique over strength. This was in stark contrast to how the Swordmaster in black armor had fought by constantly seizing the initiative with overwhelming force and speed. Adel felt like she was starting to understand the new approach she should take to fighting. This wasn't so bad. It worked, after all.

"Time to finish you off!"

Byakko was on guard now, but Adel had every intention of making the most of this opportunity.

Catching on, Myu took up position behind Adel. "I got this!" In doing so, she granted Adel the freedom to go on the offensive.

"Perfect! All yours!"

However, just as Adel was about to charge at Byakko, instinct prompted her to look to her side.

From her position up in the sky, Euphinia cried, "Adel! Incoming!"

At the same time, Cerberus also warned Adel in her head. "*Elciel's attacking!*"

Adel whirled toward Elciel and saw the War Saint forming hand signs in her direction. The soldiers gathered by Lute lay on the ground all around her.

"Tch! She didn't go easy even on her own people! So much for being a Saint!"

Instead of answering, Elciel activated her spell. The lances of rock that had flown at Euphinia earlier now targeted Adel, but in much higher numbers. It was clear Elciel had used double casting, the technique where she cast one spell with each hand.

"That still won't work on me, though!"

Once again, Adel buffed her eyes and feet with Ki Convergence, allowing her to see and evade the incoming projectiles.

"Ugh!"

Unfortunately, although Adel was fine, the same could not be said for those behind her. Elciel's barrage covered such a large area that it was also battering

the barrier that Myu had put up. In fact, Myu was likely Elciel's real target. If her goal was Central Tower's collapse, it was Theodora who she needed to kill, not Adel.

Right after the effects of Elciel's spell ran out, she promptly cast it again, giving Myu no time to reconstruct her barrier. Realizing what was happening, Adel shifted from simply evading to deflecting as many projectiles as she could. A few lances tore her ceremonial outfit and drew blood, but she stood firm.

Despite Adel's best efforts, a crash that sounded like breaking glass rang out, indicating the destruction of Myu's barrier. Myu screamed as she watched a lance fly directly at her face.

*Fwoosh!*

The next thing she knew, the attack shot off in another direction, enveloped in flames.

"Are you safe?!" Adel asked, holding what looked like a wall of blue flames. She was actually spinning Salamander's Tail in double bladed form with bolstered strength. This effectively served as a shield that protected the two of them from Elciel's assault. However, to maintain it, Adel had to stop sending ki to her eyes and feet.

"Y-Yes I am, thank you! I'm sorry! *You're* the one who's hurt!"

"Pay it no mind, this is a fight. Hurry, put up your barrier again!"

For some reason, Adel's smile made Myu's cheeks flush a little.

"Yes, of course. Shield!"

Once again, Myu's barrier sprang up. At the same time, Byakko started slinking around, looking for a chance to launch a pincer attack. Adel had her hands full dealing with Elciel's spells. If Byakko managed to circle around her, it had easy access to Myu and Theodora. Their situation was dire.

"I don't know how long I will last, but I'll delay Byakko!" Myu suggested. "Then you focus on protecting Grandmother!"

Adel looked up, then shook her head. "No, there's no need."

"Adel! Princess!"

“Wh-What is going on?! Adel, are you okay?!”

Mash and Melulu had arrived at the perfect moment.

Adel shouted, “Mash, Melulu! I’ll explain later! For now, prevent the white tiger from getting to us!”

“Got it!”

“We’ll do our best!”

The two promptly positioned themselves between Byakko and Adel’s group.

“Myu, we’re taking Elciel down!”

“Understood, Lady Adel!”

Now that Mash and Melulu were here, the scales had tipped. With Byakko suppressed, Adel and Myu could go on the offensive against Elciel. At the end of the day, Adel wouldn’t rest easy unless she finished Elciel with her own hands.

“Circle around to attack Elciel from the side! The instant her spell ends, I’ll charge in and cut her down!”

“Understood!” Myu dispelled her barrier and darted off.

“Elciel! I will never tire of ending your life! Prepare to fall by my hand again!”

*PSHHHH!*

“Ahhh!”

Suddenly, Theodora’s scream rang out. The hands that she had been pressing against the leak in Central Tower had been pushed back with such force that she had landed on her butt. Not only was the miasma escaping with increased intensity, it was even turning an ominous color.

The elderly Saint grinded her teeth in frustration. “It’s grown too powerful for me to suppress!”

“HA HA HA!” Elciel cackled at the top of her lungs.

“What’s so funny?!” Adel demanded.

Ignoring her, Elciel thrust a hand toward Central Tower. “It’s time! Come to me! Give me everything!”

Howls of hatred and malice filled the air as the violently escaping miasma was sucked into the palm of Elciel's hand.

Overwhelmed by the sight, Myu mumbled, "What... What is going on, Grandmother? Lady Adel?"

"That's what *I* want to know!" Adel retorted.

"I cannot say for certain, but I do know that miasma is what forms monsters," Theodora replied.

"Are you saying Elciel's a monster?!"

"Even if not in full, perhaps in part."

The idea of Elciel being part monster reminded Adel of something: this was exactly the state that Mash and his subordinates were in. Both Elciel and Mash's group had the Moving Coliseum of Navarra in common, the facility that conducted experiments to fuse man and monster. Was this what everything had been about? Did Elciel join hands with Archbishop Navarra and visit the facility to gain the ability to absorb miasma through transplantation?

The back of Elciel's clothes burst open, and jet-black wings larger than her own height spread to their full span. Her skin turned black from being dyed with miasma, and her eyes turned the color of blood. She emanated malevolence and far more power than she had before.

"Ahhh!"

"Princess?!" Adel's head snapped up at the sound of screaming high up, and barely managed to catch Euphinia as she fell down. The other initiates fell alongside Euphinia too, but Adel had every faith that Myu would take care of them.

Her eyes still wide in shock, Euphinia said, "Th-Thank you, Adel. Pega disappeared all of a sudden, so w-we..."

"Looks like her Sealing Sanctuary has grown more powerful," Theodora noted. "My Divine Beast has also disappeared."

Sure enough, the large humanoid Divine Beast with white fur that had been propping up the cracked tower was nowhere to be seen. Byakko had also

disappeared the moment Elciel transformed.

“What do we do, Grandmother?!” Myu wailed. “Is Central Tower going to fall?!”

Pain filled Theodora’s face. “There’s nothing we *can* do! Elciel...have you, an Eminent, sold your soul to the monsters?! Why?!”

“What is it that makes you human?” Elciel countered. “Your body? Your mind? Are you confident enough that your character is so upstanding that you deserve to be acknowledged as human?”

“Elciel, what are you—”

“All this philosophical talk doesn’t mean a thing!” Adel interrupted. “Human or monster, good or evil, I don’t care! All I know is that you are a traitor who means Princess harm. That alone makes you my enemy!”

“What a simpleton,” Elciel sneered. “Wanna try me?”

“You bet I will!” Adel closed in, weaving side to side as she wound up her attack. “Yaaah!”

*FWOOOSH!*

A massive pillar of blue fire surged forward from Adel’s thrust. She hadn’t been simply standing still while Elciel underwent her transformation and exchanged words with Theodora. Since the moment Elciel stopped moving, Adel had been gathering her ki.

The most powerful attack that Adel was capable of, the same one that had pulverized Elciel in profane land, landed squarely on the current Elciel. Once again, it swallowed her up in a torrent of raging blue fire. And yet, when she reappeared, not even her hair was singed.

“What?!” Adel couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Weak. Granted, a bit better than those who can’t lift a finger. But still, weak.” Elciel waved a hand.

The gesture appeared casual, but it generated an incredible shockwave. Adel’s brain registered Elciel’s form shrinking rapidly before realizing she had been sent flying. Her world changed every time she blinked, and the next

instant, her body hit the stone pavement hard. Her momentum made her body bounce up again, until eventually her back smashed against Central Tower. She grunted as all the air was driven out of her lungs from the impact.

"Adel!" Everyone shouted Adel's name in alarm. Mash and Melulu rushed to help her up.

"Are you okay?!" Mash asked worriedly.

"I'm fine! But now we know: Elciel is on a whole other level than before!"

It was plain to all that the miasma that Elciel had absorbed from Central Tower had given her a very significant boost in power.

Mash frowned. "To make matters worse, we have fewer numbers now because of her. We're in trouble."

"What're we gonna do?!" Melulu wailed. "We can't fight without a Sanctuary!"

Elciel interrupted. "There's no need for you to fight. You are of so little consequence. Now that I've absorbed the power from Central Tower, I've no interest in further destruction. The one last thing I need...is that girl's life."

Elciel pointed—not at Adel, but Euphinia.

"I have no business with anyone else. Don't make this more difficult than it has to be. Leave the girl, and the rest of you can go."

"A thousand curses on you for even suggesting the idea!" Adel spat, moving to stand between her and Euphinia. "You will never have Princess!"

Letting Elciel take Euphinia would be allowing history to repeat itself. It would leave Adel with a vendetta that, even if she fulfilled it and was touted a hero, would fill her with regret and self-reproach instead of joy. She would much rather die than allow events to play out the same way again. As long as she still drew breath, she refused to let Princess Euphinia come to harm, no matter what happened.

"Cerberus, you still can't come out?!" Adel demanded, hoping that Byakko's disappearance meant Kelpie was gone too.

"*I'm sorry, Adel, there's nothing I can do about it. But allow me to say this: if*

*you truly wish to kill Elciel, letting her go today and coming for her again some other time isn't a bad idea. I see room for you to grow. Train up, then—*"

"Don't you start! Don't even joke about it!"

Doing so would be meaningless. Adel wanted to kill Elciel because the Eminent was after Euphinia's life. Giving Euphinia up now to kill Elciel later would be putting the cart before the horse.

Euphinia softly clutched Adel's back. "Adel..."

"Not a word, Princess," Adel growled, knowing what the princess wanted to say. She would plead for everyone to let her go so that they could be saved. After all, this kindness and strength of character was what had made Adel swear loyalty to Euphinia in the first place.

"To sacrifice me and escape...is not what I want."

"What?!"

Adel was caught off guard, both by the fact that Euphinia had seen through what she was thinking and by the denial.

"What was it that you wanted to say, then?"

When Adel turned back to look at her liege, she saw a serious face and an unusual glow in her eyes. Her vibe also seemed different from usual.

"Nothing good comes from being hasty, Adel. You aren't totally out of options yet."

"What do you mean? My greatest attack proved ineffective, and I can't summon my Divine Beast. What else can I do?"

"So much more. Your Divine Beast is fine inside you. In fact, there's no need to summon it. You'll have an easier time being one with it this way."

"Um, Princess? I'm deeply sorry, but I don't quite understand what you mean..."

"The old you couldn't do this, but now you can. Try enveloping the Divine Beast inside you with your life force." Euphinia gently took Adel's hand and placed it on her chest.

Generally, a Saint forming a contract with a Divine Beast was described as her assimilating the Divine Beast into her shadow. How it actually felt for the Saint, however, was her inviting a distinct existence deep into her chest. And now, Adel was being urged to place her hand as close to that existence as possible. As one's "life force" was their ki, Euphinia seemed to be alluding to a ki technique.

Adel was bewildered. When Euphinia said "the old you," she must have been referring to Adel before the time jump, when she was the man in black armor known as the Swordmaster. And "now you can" was referring to Adel as a woman equipped with the abilities of a Saint. How did the Euphinia of this timeline know Adel's past despite only having met her current self?

"Princess, how did you..."

Before Adel finished her question, she suddenly noticed a figure floating next to Euphinia: a young boy wearing a hood. It was the very person who had sent Adel back in time, saying, "I'll do what I can to help you fulfill that wish of yours." Apparently, he had been talking about turning Adel into a woman. And now, he was here to teach her how to use these new powers.

When the figure faded away, Euphinia's glowing gold eyes reverted to her usual beautiful sky blue. "Huh? Wh-What was I...?"

Not having seen the boy, Mash was still at his wits' end. "Adel! What should we do?!"

Ignoring him, Adel threw all caution to the wind. "I suppose I just have to give it a go! There's no telling what might happen, though!"

She understood what the boy had said. After all, she had been using Ki Amplification to boost the abilities of spelltools like Salamander's Tail since even before the time jump. In all likelihood, she could do the same with the Divine Beast within her. The idea had never occurred to her before, but it made complete sense.

"Um, what are you talking about?" Euphinia blinked in confusion, clearly not remembering what she had said moments ago.

"Just trust me!" Adel urged Euphinia to stand back, then pressed her hands to her chest as hard as she could. Her fingers sunk into the supple mounds as she

sent every last drop of her remaining ki into herself. “Take it all, Cerberus!”

“*I-Is this... AWOOOOO!*”

Flames burst out from Adel’s body, forming a roaring pillar that seemed to pierce the very sky.

“What is happening?!”

“Adel! Are you okay?!”

“Lady Adel!”

Mash, Melulu, and Myu all cried out with surprise and concern, but Euphinia declared with confidence, “Adel is fine! As is Pudding!”

“The power of her Divine Beast is growing by the second!” Theodora exclaimed. “It’s practically exploding!”

When Adel stepped out of the flames, everyone gasped with surprise at her change. Fluffy ears that bore strong resemblance to Cerberus’s topped her head, and a long, bushy tail waved behind her back. She was also wearing leather armor, the same color as Cerberus’s fur. And finally, a long scarf seemingly made of fire was wrapped around her neck, covering even her mouth.

Adel was the most surprised out of everyone. “What is this?!” she cried, examining her unfamiliar self. She had turned into a completely different being, just as Elciel had from absorbing all the miasma.

“What did you do?! Did you...fuse with your Divine Beast?! Who *are* you?!” Elciel demanded. Wasting no time, she launched another shockwave at Adel.

“Yah!”

*Boom!*

Adel merely swung her arm, and the same attack that had sent her flying like a ragdoll earlier now dissipated harmlessly.



Elciel instinctively stepped back in surprise.

"*WA HA HA HA! If you knew how to do this, why didn't you do it from the start, Adel?! I love this! It feels so powerful, and so right!*"

"Sorry, I only just now learned how to do it!"

This technique, which Adel decided to name "Ki Possession," was possible only for women, as it required having a contracted Divine Beast. In the past timeline, Adel would never have thought of it in a million years.

Adel approached Elciel with slow, deliberate steps. "Who am I, Elciel? I am Princess Euphinia's knight escort. Nothing more and nothing less!"

"You fool! You possess such power, yet you choose to debase yourself by being a wench's lapdog?!"

Elciel repeatedly threw shockwaves at Adel, but she waved them all away like swatting away flies.

"And what's wrong with that? I suppose I now appear like the dog that I *am*. However, my only master will always be Princess Euphinia!"

Adel grinned with pride. Her dream was, in so many words, to serve and protect Euphinia as her loyal servant so that she could live a happy life. This was what she had come back in time for.

"*You're making it sound like I'm a lapdog too, Adel!*" Cerberus protested.

"Hah! Just accept it, partner. You and I are now one, so it's all the same!"

Adel charged straight at Elciel, not even bothering to zigzag or feint. Cracked pavement flew like buckshot from where she had kicked off of, and the flames that surrounded her scorched the rocks in her wake.

"Don't get full of yourself!" Elciel howled, crossing her arms in a guard.

However, the blow that she was expecting never came. Instead, Adel grabbed her arms. It was a simple motion, but it didn't matter since her opponent couldn't react in time.

"You've gotten so slow!" Adel laughed cheekily, then unleashed a kick that sent Elciel's body shooting high into the air.

“DAAAMN YOUUU!”

However, Elciel wasn’t such a pushover that she could allow herself to simply fall back down. Her wings burst open and flapped powerfully a few times, allowing her to regain her posture.

“The abuse you hurl at me only brings me joy, Elciel! Let me hear more of it!”

“Shut up and DIEEE!” Elciel’s hands flew as she prepared what was likely the biggest attack in her arsenal.

“I’ll return those words right back at you!” Adel thrust her right palm toward her occupied opponent.

Thanks to fusing with Cerberus, Adel could now manipulate fire as if it was a part of herself. It burst from her hand and gathered into a fireball. However, the flames were neither a natural red, nor the blue of the amplified Salamander’s Tail. No, it was a shining, scorching blackness that roiled with vehemence and fury.

“*Is that the black fire that my clan’s legends speak of?! HA HA HA! This day has finally come! Contracting with you was the best decision I’ve ever made!*”

“Leave the celebrating for after we kill Elciel!”

“*So we will. You can do it, right?*”

“Just sit back and watch!”

Elciel unleashed her attack first. A thick beam of highly compressed miasma shot from her blackened hands. It was clear from a glance that a mere graze was enough to erase someone from existence.

However, that also meant it was harmless as long as Adel didn’t let it touch herself. The fist-sized ball of black flames gathering in front of Adel’s hand exploded in size, quickly surpassing the height of a normal person. When it stopped growing, it was a massive fireball several times larger.

“GOOO!”

The black beam and black fireball clashed in midair, creating a shockwave that slammed into everything all around. Myu and Lute cried, “Grandmother!” as they propped Theodora up. Similarly, Euphinia fell over with a small yelp.

Adel whirled back in alarm. “Are you hurt, Princess?!”

“She’s fine, Adel!” Mash replied in Euphinia’s stead.

“We’ll protect her, so go nuts!” Melulu added.

The two of them helped Euphinia back up and stood in front of her to shield her from any further shockwaves.

“What incredibly powerful attacks!” Theodora exclaimed as she stared up at the sky. “Central Tower wouldn’t stand a chance against a direct hit from either of them!”

Slowly but surely, the fireball started being pushed back by the beam, indicating that Elciel’s attack was more powerful.

“Ha ha ha!” she cackled triumphantly. “You’re all bark and no bite!”

“If you think so, you must be blind!” Adel smirked, then brought her left hand forward, creating another black fireball of the same size.

Elciel had barely managed to overpower Adel’s attack with both hands, but Adel had been using only one hand. And now, Adel was bringing the other hand to bear.

“What?!”

“Now, begone with you, and never appear before Princess again!”

*FWROOOOSH!*

The second fireball rushed forward. It became one with the first, and the attack rushed at Elciel with renewed momentum.

“Nooooo!”

The flames swallowed the Eminent’s entire body, scorching the very air it passed before eventually dissipating high up in the sky.

“And that’s the third time. I admit, I’m starting to get a little sick of seeing your face,” Adel murmured.

“*Ha ha ha! Nothing can stand against my clan’s black hellfire! Well done, Adel! It was my first time using this fire, and it felt sublime!*”

Cerberus was extremely pleased with himself. Adel's ears twitched and her tail wagged furiously, independent of her will.

"I won't ask you to not celebrate, but don't overdo it. At the end of the day, what brings us joy isn't killing our enemies but protecting our liege."

"*Heh. Anyone ever told you you're a spoilsport?*"

"That said, thank you. Thanks to you, I am now stronger in every way than I was in the past."

Adel stared at her clenched fist. She had been seeing her transformation into a woman in the wrong light this whole time. Before, she had thought that despite having become weaker as a solo fighter, she was meant to surpass her past self with the support of allies and her Divine Beast. As it turned out, that was wrong.

With Ki Possession added to her arsenal, she had become a more powerful fighter as well. Having already surpassed her past self in every way, she was to protect Euphinia with everything she was now capable of. This was what the young boy intended, and he had probably decided to show up and teach her because he'd lost patience with her failing to come up with Ki Possession on her own.

Now that Adel had the full picture, she no longer questioned why she had been turned into a woman. The answer was plainer than day. She had become superior in every way, and so all she had to do was accept it and live on. This was what it truly meant to give her all to protect Princess Euphinia. Finally, she was fully at peace—not in her new skin, but her *own* skin.

"Adel! You were amazing! Thank you for protecting us all!"

Adel turned around with a bright smile. "It was nothing, Princess. I'm just glad you're safe."

◆◇◆

"And now, we begin the ceremony to induct the knight escorts for my daughter, Princess Euphinia," the king announced solemnly, looking over the packed audience hall.

“Melulu Sedis.”

“Here, Your Majesty!”

“Mash August.”

“Here, Your Majesty!”

The two approached Euphinia’s seat and kneeled before her.

After a second of silence, the king also called out, “Adel Astal!”

With dazzling eyes, Adel shouted, “Here, Your Majesty!” The dog ears on her head twitched as her bushy tail wagged furiously.

Several days had passed since the fight with Elciel, but Adel’s ears and tail still remained. According to Theodora, they would eventually disappear on their own, so Adel could only wait patiently. However, Theodora did add that she was merely making an educated guess, as she had never encountered this phenomenon before. Adel herself didn’t mind, because Euphinia thought it cute and loved the change.

“*Can you not wag my tail whenever you like?*” Cerberus said in a peeved tone. “*You’re making it seem like I give a damn about social status among humans.*”

*I’m sorry! But this is important to me!* Adel replied, doing so in her mind as she couldn’t speak out loud in her current situation.

Adel had come back in time to become Euphinia’s knight escort, wishing that this time, she would ensure that the princess would live a long and happy life free of worries. The first step to fulfilling that wish was to be inducted, and it was finally happening. Naturally, she was over the moon.

There had been a bit of a kerfuffle along the way when Claire, the person in charge of the Saints stationed in Wendill, protested. According to her, Saints obtaining secular positions would be against the teachings of the Holy Tower Church. As a result, Adel became forbidden from being employed by Wendill. She was told that if she wanted to stay, she couldn’t do it as someone in Wendill’s direct employ; she had to be deployed by the Church, like the other Saints here.

However, thanks to Eminent Theodora’s support, Adel got official permission

to become Euphinia's knight escort. Not even Claire could complain when the person who had given the green light was both an Eminent and her own mentor. And so, this day had finally come. Adel couldn't be happier that she had saved Theodora during the initiation ceremony. Now, her official standing in the Church was "Sanctioned Saint," the same as Euphinia.

Every so often, there were Saints born as royals or nobles who had to succeed their families due to the absence of other candidates. The Church's teachings included a strong emphasis on separating the religious and the secular, but forcing these Saints to abandon their families would itself be an interference with the secular world, and in a very significant way too. Furthermore, doing so would create a deep chasm between the Church and the world's rulers. Neither side wished for this, and so a policy for making exceptions was created. This was the position of a Sanctioned Saint.

Sanctioned Saints were granted special permission to hold secular power. Such women gained prestige in being Saints, while the Church used them to maintain connections with those in power in the secular world. Normally, this was an honor that was usually granted only to those of exceptional status like Euphinia. The fact that Adel received it too, despite being someone of completely unknown origins, was an incredibly special case.

Supposedly, it was largely thanks to her contribution. Because Elciel had absorbed all the miasma in Central Tower before dying by Adel's hand, Central Tower was now in a much better state than before. Not only did Theodora thank Adel for saving her own life, the higher-ups of the Church all thanked her profusely for saving the whole world. Some even suggested appointing Adel as an Eminent to take Elciel's place. Adel had no interest, of course. She insisted that she only wanted to be Euphinia's knight escort, and the request was granted.

Now, Euphinia and Adel were both officially under Theodora's direct command. According to standard protocol for Sanctioned Saints, Theodora still held the authority to summon them on the Church's behalf if the need arose.

Things would not have turned out this way if the initiation ceremony had proceeded without mishap. In a way, Adel was thankful to Elciel for wreaking havoc when she did.

At the end of the day, Adel saw herself as Euphinia's knight escort, and that was it.

Princess Euphinia looked down at the three kneeling before her and smiled gently. "Thank you for promising to protect me, everyone. I will be in your care."

"We pledge our lives!" all three shouted in unison. Adel's tail wagged so hard it was tickling the backs of the two at her side.

"Stop tickling me!" Melulu complained.

Mash chuckled. "Ha ha ha, it just goes to show how happy she is."

"Now, it's time for a feast!" the king declared, rising to his feet. "My daughter has officially become a Saint, and she has three trustworthy knight escorts at her side! What a wonderful day it is! Let us drink in celebration!"

Halfway through the banquet, Adel stepped out onto a terrace to get some fresh air. It was the same balcony that he had visited before coming back in time. This time, however, it wasn't half destroyed. Instead, he found Euphinia standing all by herself, looking up at the stars.

Seeing the anguish and apprehension in her eyes, Adel quickly rushed over. "Princess, what is the matter?! Also, it's dangerous to be out here on your own!"

"Oh, it's you, Adel... I'm sorry. I asked to be alone."

"Were you worried you would bring the mood down?"

Euphinia was the kind of person to be concerned about such things. She always made an effort to stay calm and treat everyone around her with kindness, even if doing so meant pushing down her own worries and doubts. Adel knew this well. When Euphinia had saved Adel from the Moving Coliseum of Navarra, she had projected dignity and authority, but her hand had been trembling. This part of her was the same even now, when she was merely ten years old.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry!"

"There's no need to apologize, Princess. However, if there is something on

your mind, would you mind telling me? As your escort, seeing you look so sad but not being able to know why makes me feel powerless."

"Was I making such a terrible face?"

"No, of course not! You are absolutely the beautiful and intelligent angel that you always are!"

"Ha ha, I don't know if I'd go so far as to call myself an angel, but thank you." The princess made a wry expression, but at least she now looked a little brighter than before. "Well, if you really want to know...I'm feeling a little doubtful. Am I really fit to be a Saint?"

"I'm sorry, what? Uh, no one alive is more fit to be a Saint than you are."

Euphinia had contracted with Pegasus, who was a high-ranking Divine Beast despite its behavior. She could also deploy almighty Sanctuaries of unbelievable scale. She was heads and shoulders above all the other Saints in terms of ability.

"You saw it, didn't you? Central Tower crumbled under my fingers when I touched it. Doesn't that mean it was something in *me* that made that happen? If so, then I shouldn't be allowed to be a Saint. I can't let go of that thought."

"I see. But Eminent Theodora said you weren't the cause, didn't she?"

"Eminent Elciel made it sound like I was, though. Did she know something we don't? I don't know what it could be, but that's why it's been bothering me."

The unease in Euphinia's face grew.

"I deeply apologize, Princess!"

"What for?"

"Back then, I should have touched Central Tower before you. If I did, then it would have crumbled under my touch instead! I saw the same thing you did, so the possibility was high!"

"But then you... But that's not..."

"What if I did, though? If you saw Central Tower crumble when I touched it, what would you have done? Would you have refused to accept me as your knight escort?"

“Of course not! There’s no telling if you really were the cause. I would tell you to not let it bother you, and we would investigate the incident together! If there really was a problem, I would do everything in my power to help you resolve it!”

Adel gently took Euphinia’s hand and smiled. “That is exactly what I am doing, Princess.”

“What do you... Ah! I said I would tell you to not let it bother you, and here I am acting this way. You used my own words against me, ha ha.”

“If anything happens, I will protect you. So please, don’t fight your worries by yourself.”

“I will keep that in mind. Thank you, Adel.”

The hand that Adel held was not trembling like it had been in their first encounter.

Suddenly, Melulu and Mash joined them on the balcony.

“Correction: it’s ‘*we* will protect you.’ Don’t forget that we’re here too!”

“We’re all with you, thanks to Adel.”

Apparently the two had been waiting for the right time to join the conversation.

Adel chuckled. “So you are. My bad.”

She felt certain that this time, she would do a much better job than before.



# Afterword

First of all, thank you so much for picking up this book. This has been *Sword Saint Adel's Second Chance A Peerless Swordmaster Begins Anew as a Saint to Save the Princess*. I hope you enjoyed it.

I am writing this concurrently with *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. It's been a while since I've done two series at the same time. It's challenging, but the constant pressure of having to put food on the table now that I am a full-time author is serving as a good motivator for me to increase my workload. I mean, I make it sound bad, but I'm still getting more sleep than I did when writing while holding a full-time job. So, I know I can handle this!

At the time, I was only getting three or four hours of sleep a day. Now that I look back, I realize I had been pushing myself pretty hard. However, at my first company, back before I started writing, I had hundreds of hours of overtime every month and pulled all-nighters two or three days each week. That company had perfected the art of exploiting its employees. And so, when I was moonlighting, I was already thinking that I had it better. I was earning money doing what I loved, after all.

In short, I've lived my life constantly thinking that I'm now better off than I was in the past. I guess working in that first company messed with my brain and twisted my view of the world. Don't worry, that company isn't around anymore (the president got arrested and the company went under).

So, I told my editor that I wanted to increase my workload now that I'm writing full-time. He, being his supportive self, suggested that I start a new series. Just like *Reborn to Master the Blade*, *Sword Saint Adel's Second Chance* has a genderbent main character, but just saying, I don't only write genderbent characters!

*Sword Saint Adel's Second Chance* is a work that didn't go the web novel path; instead, I planned it out with my editor before writing it. The way I do things is, I have a list of titles, each with an outline of a few hundred words. I always keep

it on hand, adding to it whenever ideas come to me and striking ones that are getting old. Ideas that I think would work as web novels also come from this list. Of course, the titles on that list far outweigh the number of titles that I've actually released. Recently, everything I've been adding has been related to robots, and that's becoming a bit of a problem. That said, I do want to write a robot series one day!

So, the two of us went over that list—there were five or six options, if I remember right. If none of the ideas in the list seemed good, then I would have had to start entirely afresh. This time, however, the nascent form of *Sword Saint Adel's Second Chance* was in there, and we decided to develop it into a proper plot. Originally, Adel was going to *be* Euphinia after the time warp, and she would be like, "Where is Princess Euphinia, then?! I have to find her!" But then I got the suggestion to turn Adel into a woman and have her stay with Euphinia to protect her, and so here we are.

Man, my editor seriously was a massive help with this work.

To wrap, I want to sincerely thank my editor, N-sama; the illustrator, Poppo-sama; as well as everyone else who gave their all making this book happen. That double spread with the stained glass window is so beautiful! I love it to bits. That is true art!

Well, that's that. I hope to see you again!