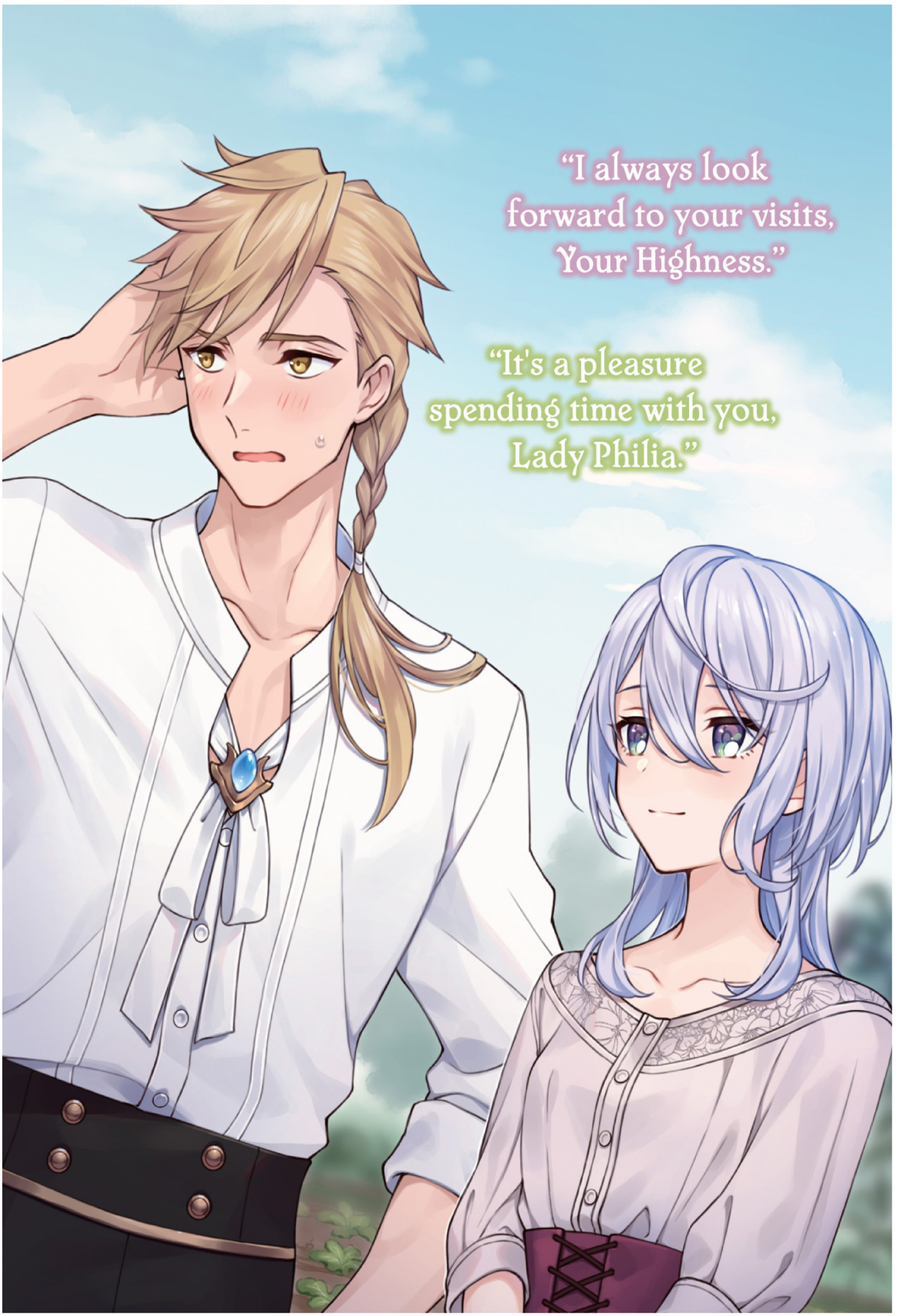
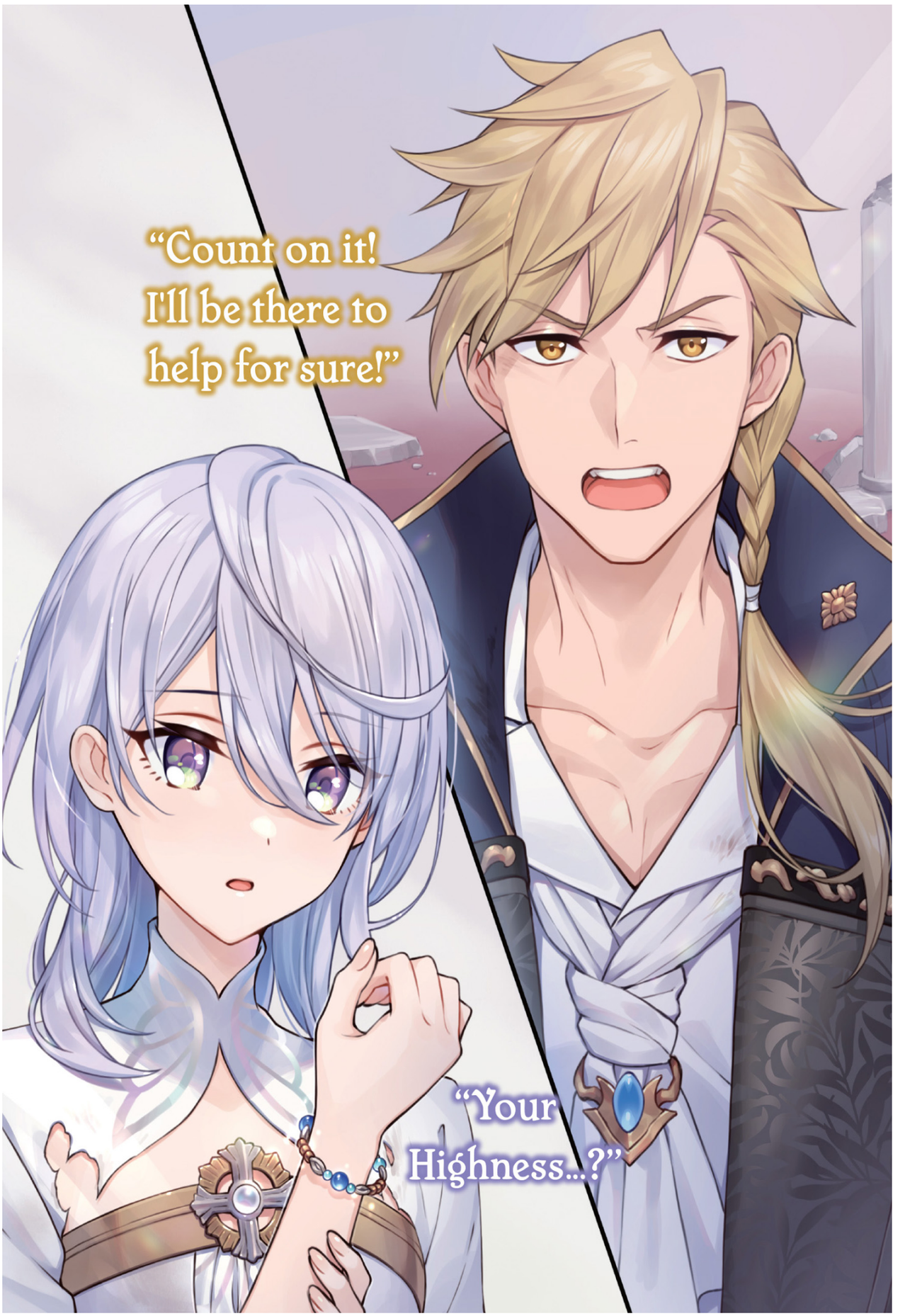

NOVEL
2
Written by
Fuyutsuki Koki
Illustrated by Masami
The
Too-Perfect Saint
Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and
Sold to Another Kingdom

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"I always look forward to your visits, Your Highness."
"It's a pleasure spending time with you, Lady Philia."


JULIUS GIRTONIA
The second-eldest prince of Girtonia, currently imprisoned in the dungeons.
MIA ADENAUER
Philia's younger sister and the saint of Girtonia. Is training to become as skilled as her older sister.
ERZA NOTICE
An exorcist from the kingdom of Dalbert who becomes Philia's bodyguard.
MAMMON
Erza's familiar, who can shapeshift at will.
OSVALT PARNACORTA
The second-eldest prince of Parnacorta. Has a friendly and empathetic personality.
PHILIA ADENAUER
The saint of Parnacorta, recently bestowed the title of archsaint for saving the world from a monster invasion.


"Count on it!
I'll be there to
help for sure!"
"Your
Highness...?"

The Too-Perfect Saint

Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and Sold to Another Kingdom

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY

Fuyutsuki Koki

ILLUSTRATED BY

Masami

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

The Too-Perfect Saint: Tossed Aside by My Fiance and Sold to Another Kingdom (Light Novel) Vol. 2
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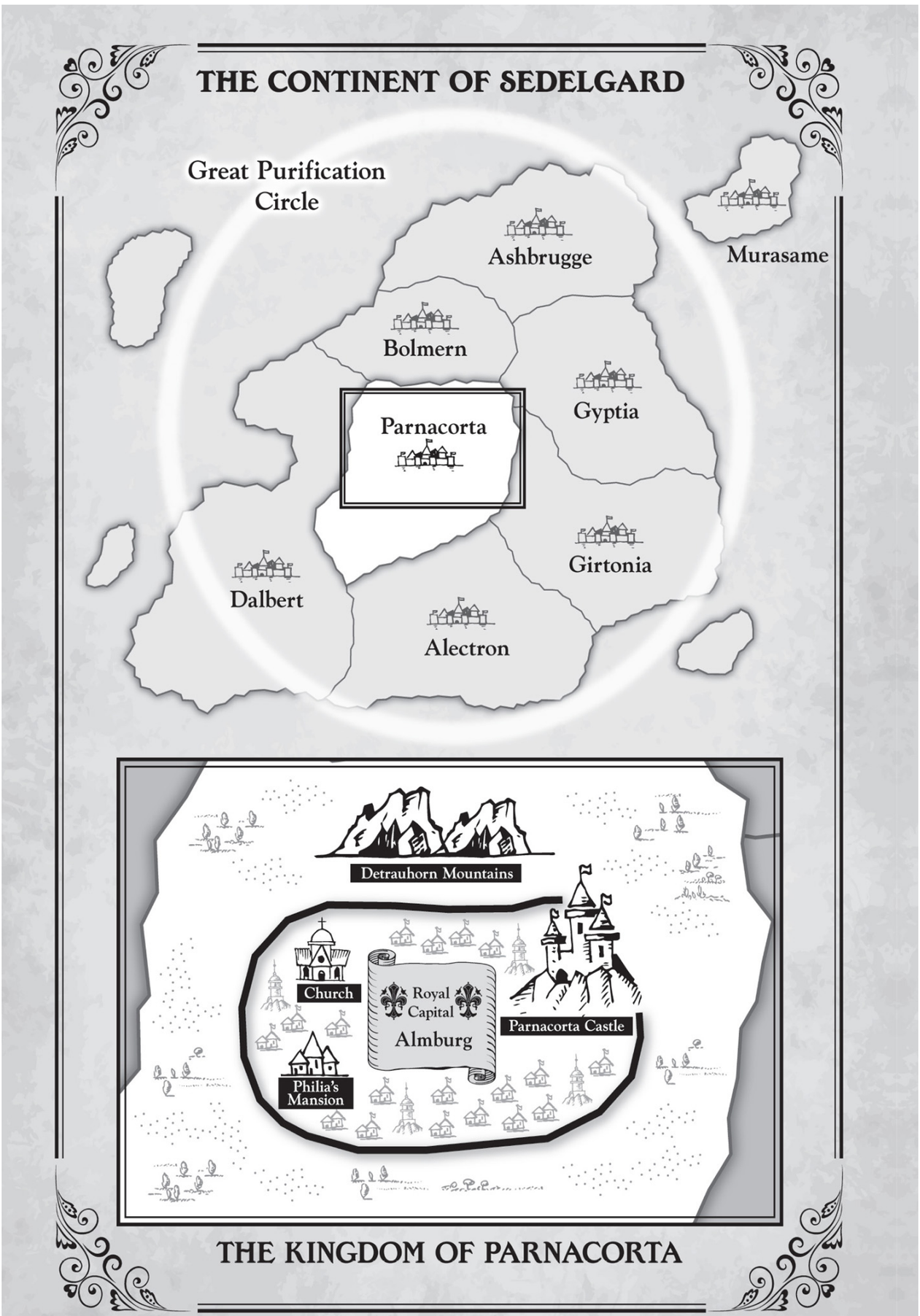
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Girtonia
Dalbert
Alectron
Detrauhorn Mountains
Church
Royal Capital
Almburg
Parnacorta Castle
Philia's Mansion
THE KINGDOM OF PARNACORTA

Prologue

“DULL.”

“Unfriendly.”

“Far too serious. She’s just so boring.”

Such were the things people said about me all my life.

I strove to do my best, convinced that no one would love me if I didn’t make myself useful to others. And yet, for all my efforts, the fate that befell me was being sold to another kingdom.

Back then, it was like I had forgotten how to express any trace of emotion. It was only after I was sold to Parnacorta that I learned to laugh again.

Fat droplets of rain poured down on Prince Osvalt’s farm, his pride and joy.

“Walking in the rain without an umbrella, Lady Philia? You’ll catch a cold like that,” His Highness reminded me.

After Prince Osvalt informed me that the country had suffered from poor harvests due to drought, I made it rain from time to time. I’d learned weather-control magic while training in the desert. My master, Saint Hildegard, had put me through a rigorous regimen, but she taught me all I needed to know as a saint.

“Thank you for your concern, but I’m covered in a Robe of Light, so there’s no need to worry about getting wet.”

Using accumulated mana—particles of magic found in nature—I cast a defensive spell to protect myself from wind and rain. Another thing I’d learned from my training. It was more convenient this way—not carrying an umbrella left me free to use both hands.

“Whoa, now that you mention it, you’re glowing! You look like a goddess or an angel.”

“Your Highness, you’re starting to sound like Grace. Please stop that.”

His Highness flashed a toothy grin and laughed. “My bad! I just can’t help but say what’s on my mind. Sorry.”

So his words weren’t flattery, but came from the heart? He really was quite the strange man. In the past, he’d also said that I was adorable, among other things.

“With the drought persisting, our water supply just won’t be enough. I’ll stop this shower in a minute, but I have to make it rain every now and then.”

“Really sorry for the trouble, Lady Philia. This year’s drought has been tough, but you’ve been a great help.” Prince Osvalt looked apologetic.

“It’s nothing,” I replied. “As a saint, it’s my job to do the utmost for the prosperity of Parnacorta.”

Ensuring the fields were fertile was one of my duties, after all. I had come to this kingdom to fulfill the duties of a saint, so I had a responsibility to use my powers to help Parnacorta flourish.

“Hey! The rain stopped in exactly one minute, just as you said—not a single second more or less. That’s so like you.”

“That should be enough for today, shouldn’t it?”

“Yeah. Ah, there’s a rainbow! See? Over there! Lady Philia, you made a rainbow!”

“A rainbow?”

With childlike excitement, His Highness pointed at the sky. I could see the rainbow from where I stood. It was just as he’d said. I’d had no idea a rainbow could be so beautiful.

Since coming to Parnacorta, I’d begun to notice the scenery more.

“Oh, right. You were declared an archsaint some time ago, remember? I got you something to celebrate the occasion.”

As I gazed at the rainbow, Prince Osvalt handed me a small box.

It was true. A month ago, the Cremoux pope had bestowed upon me the title of archsaint from his head church in the kingdom of Dalbert—which I found excessive.

Cremoux was the official religion of all the kingdoms on this continent, so the pope's authority surpassed even that of royalty. Receiving the title of archsaint was an exalted honor, so I could understand why His Highness was delighted. But his going out of his way to get me a present made me feel guilty.

"Um, Your Highness..."

"You're gonna say that you can't accept this, huh? Come on, take a chance."

He'd guessed exactly what I was about to say. Was I that predictable? How embarrassing.

"Your humility is a virtue. It's one of the things I admire about you. But this is...well, how should I put it? It's not that expensive. Just a little token of my true feelings. Please accept it."

I still felt unsure, and I didn't know what His Highness meant about his feelings, but clearly it would be terribly rude to decline.

It was the first time I'd received a present from someone other than my sister Mia. A warm feeling began to spread through me.

"In that case, I shall receive it with thanks."

"Great. Open it when you get home. Gotta warn you, I've never given anything to a woman before, so I'm not that confident about this whole thing..."

"Heh... I'm looking forward to it." Even now, I was still a bit surprised by how naturally laughter came to me these days.

Why did it become easier to express myself whenever I was around him? It was an utter mystery to me. When I asked His Highness about it, he replied that he thought it was a good sign. Ever since he'd said that, I'd started to look forward to the changes in myself. I told myself that I should be the best person I could each day, so I could become an even better person tomorrow.

"Guess I'll see you around, then."

I returned his farewell. "Yes, let's meet again soon. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

I headed home, marking the end of another trouble-free day of accomplishing my duties as a saint.

***

“Lady Philia, that brooch is so cute! Is that from His Highness?”

“Lena!” I stammered. “How did you know?”

When I arrived home, I opened the box from Prince Osvalt to find a silver brooch in the shape of a butterfly. I knew that butterflies were a symbol of peace and stability in Parnacorta. It was quite like His Highness to give me such a gift.

As the recipient, I could make that connection…but I found it strange that Lena could guess that the brooch was from Prince Osvalt.

Lena giggled. “Actually, the other day, His Highness asked what would make for a nice gift for you, and I said, ‘How about some kind of jewelry?’ I mean, normally, you don’t wear anything fancy.”

“Oh my! Lena, you’re the one who suggested that to His Highness?”

Well, that explained it.

The more I thought it over, the more I realized that it was only natural for His Highness to ask someone close to me for gift ideas. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Lena was closer to me than anyone else in the kingdom. His Highness couldn’t have sought out a better person.

He took her advice and picked this brooch for me…

“All I did was suggest what kind of thing to look for,” Lena clarified. “His Highness chose that brooch himself with you in mind, Lady Philia.”

Prince Osvalt was thinking about me? Lena’s words gave me a shock. Just picturing His Highness going out of his way to shop for me made me smile.

“Maybe he picked a silver butterfly because it’s the same color as your hair,” Lena mused.

“The same color as my hair?” I said. “Now that you mention it, that’s true.”

“It’s gorgeous! I wish I could get a present from a guy…”

I hadn’t noticed the similarity at all until Lena pointed it out. With such guesswork, she could make quite the detective.

Somehow, the thought of His Highness picking out a brooch that matched my hair made me glad.

“Still,” I said, “I feel a bit awful thinking of how His Highness took the time to think of what to get me, and then went through all that trouble to shop for it…”

On the one hand, I was happy. But on the other hand, the fact that Prince Osvalt had gone to such great lengths just to give me a present left me feeling guilty. I only did what was right as a saint, so wasn’t this token of gratitude a bit much?

“Lady Philia, you saved not only Parnacorta, but the entire continent… Oh, I know! How about you give His Highness something in return? I’m sure it’d make him so happy!” Lena smiled.

I see. I suppose that’s a good idea.

In the past, I’d tried to bake and give out cookies as a sign of my gratitude, but that plan had failed spectacularly. I could just buy a ready-made item to avoid having to worry about something like that happening again. Come to think of it, I hadn’t properly thanked Mia for helping me out in Girtonia yet, so this was a good opportunity to get her something as well.

There was just one thing bothering me.

“Lena, what kind of present would be appropriate for His Highness?” I asked.

“Hmm. Why don’t you do as His Highness did, and ask someone close to him? Or, maybe you can just ask him directly.”

“Ask His Highness directly?”

“Yes! That’s a surefire way to find out what he likes.”

Could I do that? Directly ask Prince Osvalt what he'd want as a present?

True, that would be the fastest solution—insofar as it would give me the information that I needed. However...

"But if I asked him directly, he'd most likely say that he didn't need anything. That's the kind of person he is... No, wait, that's exactly what I'd say, too."

If I let His Highness know that I wanted to get him a thank-you present, surely he'd tell me not to bother. That would make difficult and awkward for me to give him anything at all.

"That's why you should feel around for what His Highness likes without letting him notice," Lena said. "Ask him to meet up with you to go shopping together, then observe which items catch his eye. And then, later, go back to buy him something he liked!"

Strolling around town with Prince Osvalt, we'd come across all sorts of potential gifts. That made sense. I could take note of whatever he liked and narrow the list down until I settled on the perfect choice. I knew I could always count on Lena to help me out.

"Well, then, I should contact His Highness right away. But wait... Lena, what if he declines? I'm sure he's busy."

"Lady Philia, there's no way he'll turn you down! I believe that with all my heart. Now stop worrying and invite him already."

Encouraged by Lena brushing my concerns aside, I decided to have faith in her reassuring words and ask His Highness to go shopping with me. If he accepted my invitation, I could use the opportunity to stock up on raw ingredients for new medicines and materials to keep on hand for emergencies. It didn't feel right to invite His Highness out under false pretenses, so I ought to really shop on this shopping trip.

Not long after I sent him the invitation, Prince Osvalt readily accepted. We agreed to go shopping together near the palace.

***

“It’s not every day you invite me out, Lady Philia.”

A few days after asking Lena for advice, I met up with Prince Osvalt in the town closest to Parnacorta Castle.

With a smile on his face, His Highness waved as he rushed over to me. It wasn’t just rare; I’d never done anything like this before. I was much more nervous than I’d expected.

But no, that wouldn’t do. I reminded myself to stay alert. After all, I had to observe what His Highness liked and keep a tally of his favorites.

“There’s a lot I want to buy, and I can’t carry all of it alone,” I explained. “I thought of asking Leonardo to help me out, but I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Pathetic as it may sound, I’d asked Lena to help me think of an explanation that wouldn’t come off as unnatural. I’d had my doubts about whether it was acceptable to ask Prince Osvalt to help me carry my shopping, what with His Highness being royalty. But Lena had insisted that His Highness would be glad to help. Was that true?

“Oh, really? I’m glad to hear that. So, where d’you wanna go first?”

“R-right. Why don’t we just stroll randomly around a bit?”

I was bowled over by Lena’s keen insight and detective skills. Being a maid required attention and care, I reminded myself, so of course the job honed one’s observational skills. But who could have guessed that, just as she predicted, Prince Osvalt would actually be happy to accompany me? Once again, her insights had proven her indispensable.

My suggestion to start with a stroll around town had also been Lena’s advice. She’d pointed out that the shops selling raw materials for medicines weren’t likely to have something suitable to give to His Highness.

“Wow, it’s strange to hear the word ‘randomly’ from you,” His Highness remarked. “I sure didn’t expect you to say something like that.”

“Oh? I suppose you’re right. That’s peculiar of me.”

I suddenly found myself in a tight spot. His Highness was right: I wasn't the type of person to show up without a plan. Yet here I was, acting spontaneously. No doubt Prince Osvalt had sensed that something was off.

What was I to do? It looked like my cover was about to be blown.

"Nah, not all. I think it's great that you're learning to cut loose. Anyway, let's go for it. We can wander around for a while. I have a feeling today's gonna be fun."

It was kind of Prince Osvalt to praise my sudden impulsiveness, but did that mean he'd thought me rigid and inflexible until now? Now that I thought about it, I wasn't the type to bother expending effort on unnecessary things. Some people certainly considered me a stick-in-the-mud for it.

We made our way to the neighborhood lined with the busiest shops.

"Welcome! Welcome! This spear is the one and only Peerless Flash, capable of piercing through any shield! It was forged by a skilled artisan from beyond our continent, from the faraway land of Murasame!"

"How about some of these vitamin-packed fruits? Just one a day keeps the doctor away! What a miracle, huh? Start today and get a healthy body without a doctor's help!"

"Presenting the painting maestro Capia's posthumous work, *The Demon's Smile*! Get a fine work of art for an exclusive price while you can! I'm telling you, in ten years it'll cost a hundred times as much! A rare and precious masterpiece like this is only going to increase in value over time!"

As we passed by a weapons shop, a fruit stand, and an art gallery, among others, shopkeepers enthusiastically peddled their wares to passersby. The bustling energy was infectious, making me feel alive.

"What was that about a Peerless Flash? You know, I heard there's a so-called 'town of blades' in Murasame where the top blacksmiths have their foundries. They're all masters of the craft,

and wage friendly competition with each other. Mind if we check this shop out?”

What a wonderful turn of events. Prince Osvalt had just shown an interest in spears.

Spears… That brought back memories of the time His Highness took me to Girtonia to help Mia. I’d witnessed his fighting skills firsthand and was awed by how skillfully he wielded his spear, which was longer than he was tall.

He’d learned to fight with a spear from Philip, one of his knights. Even someone like me, who didn’t know much about weaponry, could tell his training had been forged in fire.

I made a mental note that a spear would be a good present for His Highness.

“Aw, I’m sorry. You’ve got stuff to buy. We don’t have to waste time checking out that shop.”

“It’s no trouble at all. It’ll be fun to look around a shop you’re interested in.”

“Really? Well, as long as I’m not the only one having fun, I’m glad.”

I tried walking a few steps behind Prince Osvalt. With his broad back, and his golden hair illuminated by sunlight, he looked as radiant as the sun. I suddenly understood why I felt warm whenever I was around His Highness. He was like the sun to me.

After that, we browsed through medicinal herbs, old books, and other magical goods. I was essentially making His Highness keep me company while I did my own shopping, but even as I reminded myself not to lose sight of why we were there in the first place, I couldn’t help but feel like this time spent together was more precious than any gift.

“Huh. I had no idea there was such a fashionable shop out here, but you seem to know the place well,” Prince Osvalt said.

“I came here with Mia and Grace once before.”

After we'd walked for quite some time, His Highness and I decided to visit a newly opened tea shop for a break over cake and tea. This shop had already become popular among young people as a place to enjoy teas from Bolmern, Grace's homeland. Today, as usual, it was full of young ladies.

Mia, Grace, and I had found this place when they took me out on the town. Mia had suggested that I needed new clothes, and in the process of visiting one shop after another, we'd come across a street performer who was promoting the tea shop and been convinced to give it a try. We'd been served some fine tea—delicious enough to give even Lena's brews a run for their money.

I wanted Prince Osvalt to experience it too. Thank goodness he approved.

"You know," His Highness said, "when you first got here, I never thought someday I'd be having tea with you like this."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. When you were new to Parnacorta, you never rested, not even when people begged you to. Lena and Leonardo got so worried about you. I'm glad you can unwind and have a good time now."

I had to agree. When I first arrived in Parnacorta, I was so preoccupied with establishing myself as the kingdom's new saint that the thought of resting didn't so much as occur to me. Still, I was puzzled.

"Er, pardon me, but what makes you so glad, Your Highness? I'm just having tea."

I was aware that I'd changed, but I couldn't understand why His Highness said he was glad. I could understand if he was pleased by some accomplishment of mine as a saint, but…

"I told you when we first met, didn't I? I said I wanted you to fall in love with this kingdom."

"I remember that. I thought it was a strange thing to say. I was resolved to fulfill my duties as a saint, regardless of how I felt about this kingdom."

“I know. That’s why I’m happy. No matter what you did as a saint, I wanted you to know peace. That wish has come true, and that makes me glad.”

He was that concerned about my well-being?

I’d heard that Prince Osvalt had opposed the kingdom’s decision to buy me to the very end. Was that why? I didn’t want him to treat me kindly out of guilt.

“What’s wrong? You’re making a long face.”

“It’s nothing. What do you say to more cake? Mia praised the cakes here.”

“Really? Then let’s go for it. It’s nice to indulge in a sweet treat every so often.”

Pointing at the menu, I gave Prince Osvalt my recommendation, which he ordered.

Getting lost in thought and letting my worries show on my face was no good. After all, I still had to come up with a present for His Highness.

After enjoying tea and cake, we continued our stroll around town.

The spear was still the only item on my mental list of gift ideas. I had to try harder to find other things that His Highness liked. This was several times more challenging than my saintly duties, so I had to put in more effort.

“Ah, here’s where I bought the brooch for you. Nice shop, eh?”

Prince Osvalt pointed to a small boutique. In addition to brooches, it sold necklaces, bracelets, and other baubles. They reminded me of the necklaces I made when I expanded the Great Purification Circle. I’d learned the basic method of creating magic objects by transferring magic to everyday wearable items. Next time, it might be interesting to make not only necklaces, but bracelets and other accessories.

“Lady Philia, do you want that bracelet? If you like it, shall I get it for you?”

“N-no, it’s not like that. I was just thinking of making some jewelry pieces in my spare time.”

“Really? In that case, can I ask you to make me one? I’d love to wear something that you made.”

Oh no; this wasn’t good. I’d spent too much time staring at a bracelet, thinking of using it for inspiration, and Prince Osvalt had gotten the wrong idea. The whole point of this excursion was to find a present for His Highness, but now here he was, offering to get *me* a present. What an absurd twist!

Wait, what did he say after that? I could’ve sworn it was about wanting to wear something I made…

“Something wrong? You look lost in thought. Did I say something weird?”

“Er, no. Of course it’d be my pleasure to create something for you. I’ll make sure to deliver!”

“Hey, no need to put yourself out. There’s no rush.”

Should I *make* him a present? I hadn’t considered it, but it might be a good idea. I’d ask Lena about it upon returning to the mansion. Would it be a better choice than a spear?

“E-excuse me, Y-Your Holiness… Forgive me for asking, but are you planning to buy that bracelet?” A red-haired woman approached me from behind. I assumed she was interested in the bracelet herself.

“No, I’m not. I apologize for lingering here so long.” I moved out of the way to let the woman take the bracelet.

“Oh, no, I haven’t made up my mind myself! Well, if you insist…”

The red-haired woman looked delighted as she took the bracelet. She went over to the shopkeeper to pay for it, after which she received a small box similar to the one Prince Osvalt had given me. As soon as she was done with her purchase, she ran up to me.

“Y-Your Holiness, I’m so sorry. If it’s all right with you, could we perhaps shake hands? I-I respect you so much…” The woman’s cheeks turned the color of peaches.

“A handshake? Certainly, I don’t mind.” Recalling that Grace had requested the same thing when we met, I stretched a hand out toward the woman.

“Thank you so much! I’ll remember this for the rest of my life!”

The woman left the shop with her head bowed, unable to hide that she was smiling from ear to ear. She had an attendant waiting outside, so I wondered if she might be a noble.

If I’d been able to make her day, that was all that mattered. Still, to say that she’d remember our handshake for the rest of her life was surely an exaggeration.

“That was Baron Hechtman’s daughter,” said Prince Osvalt. “I’m pretty sure her name is Karen.”

“You seem quite knowledgeable.”

“Well, when we lost our previous saint, Elizabeth, we looked all over for potential replacements. That woman is a magic user,” explained His Highness, who had recognized the red-haired woman at once.

Saint Elizabeth’s untimely passing had left Parnacorta without a saint for a time.

“There weren’t many women who could use magic in our kingdom—just around a hundred,” His Highness continued. “And only half of those were of a suitable age for sainthood. Lady Karen there was on our short list.”

“I see. So that’s how you came to know her.”

“Yeah. But in the end, not a single candidate had enough power to become a saint,” His Highness said with a far-off look on his face.

Indeed, women possessing magic power strong enough for the church to recognize them as potential saints were a rarity. That was why the position was hereditary in most kingdoms.

“You have no idea how much you helped us by coming here.”

“If I’ve been of aid to Parnacorta, that’s all that matters.”

Prince Osvalt laughed. “Anyway, that’s how things were before you came along. Shall we get going?”

His Highness must have been in dire straits when I came to Parnacorta. No doubt that was why he’d always been so considerate to me. Even if it was only natural that he was treating me kindly because I was a saint, his kindness was comforting, all the same.

Chapter 1:
The Mysterious Vanishing Incidents

"WHERE SHOULD WE GO NEXT?" Prince Osvalt asked as we stepped out of the boutique. "I think we should go somewhere that has something you're shopping for..."

What to do? Personally, I was hoping to gather more information. Just then, I spotted something. *Didn't that belong to Lady Karen?*

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but there's something on the ground over there."

"Huh? Oh, it's a box from that shop. It's all wrapped up, so someone must've bought it and accidentally dropped it."

The box lay on the ground outside the storefront. I picked it up and determined that there was still something inside.

"It wasn't here when we entered the shop," I said. "Lady Karen must have dropped it."

"In that case, let's have it returned to the Hechtmans," Prince Osvalt suggested, handing the box over to one of his bodyguards.

I'd seen how the bracelet caught Karen's eye, so I was relieved we'd be able to give it back to her. It would've been a shame for her to lose it so quickly.

"My lady! Lady Karen! She's not here either! Where could she have gone?"

One of Karen's attendants hurried by, calling for her. Did she wander off and get lost?

Prince Osvalt was curious as well. "Hey! Do you work for the Hechtmans? What happened? I heard you calling for Lady Karen."

This was strange. Even if Karen had indeed wandered off, she'd left the shop only moments ago. She couldn't have gone far. Why would simply losing sight of her send her retainers into such a panic?

“Y-Your Highness! I’m John, the Hechtman family butler. You won’t believe this, but Lady Karen just vanished into thin air, right before my very eyes!”

What was he talking about? John didn’t seem to be speaking figuratively. He made it sound as if Karen had, all of a sudden, *literally* disappeared without a trace.

“John, was it? Calm down,” said His Highness. “A person can’t just disappear like that. You sure you weren’t seeing things?”

His Highness was thinking the same things I was. This had to be some kind of misunderstanding. The first priority was to calm John down and get a better idea of what had happened.

“Sorry, Your Highness,” said John. “I lost my composure, but even now that my head is clearing, I swear I’m not misremembering things. Lady Karen met Lady Philia in that shop and was delighted to shake hands with her. She stepped outside, took that box out of her bag, then vanished in front of me.”

John continued to insist that he’d seen his mistress disappear, and didn’t seem to be confused or lying. Irrespective of what had really happened, the fact remained that Karen was, indeed, nowhere in sight. Could she really have vanished? If not, what alternate explanation could there be?

“Lady Philia,” Prince Osvalt asked, “is it possible for someone to just disappear? Is there a magic spell that can do that?”

“As far as I know, there’s no such magic, but we shouldn’t rule out the possibility based on my limited knowledge. Spells I’m unaware of could easily exist.”

“Hmm. If even you have never heard of such a thing, either something really serious is afoot, or John has the wrong idea and Lady Karen simply hid herself away on a whim.”

According to John, Karen had vanished in the middle of a conversation with him. It didn’t make sense for her to suddenly decide to frighten or inconvenience him by hiding. Besides, she hadn’t struck me as the impulsive type. Perhaps she really had vanished. And if that were the case, there must be a reason.

“Your Highness,” I said, “I think we should launch a search for Lady Karen. Widen it to the entire imperial capital—no, all of Parnacorta. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Prince Osvalt nodded. “Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I’ll ask my brother to help, too. Let’s start right away. This could be urgent.”

A woman had vanished mysteriously into thin air. In an instant, Prince Osvalt and I had forgotten all about shopping.

The search began that very day, ranging across not only the imperial capital, but the entire kingdom of Parnacorta. Unfortunately, we couldn’t find a trace of Lady Karen. Instead, a frightening truth made itself clear.

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“You’re saying that Karen’s not the only sudden disappearance?”

We had been searching for Karen for a week. Prince Osvalt visited my mansion to relay some shocking news to me. The search had turned up other cases of people vanishing into thin air.

“Yeah, at least two others aside from Karen: Tina Marcell and Maria Aldorf. And there’s something they have in common.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember that list I told you about last week? The potential replacements for Saint Elizabeth? Both women were on that list, just like Karen. In short, they’re all magic users. It might just be coincidence, though.”

Two more women with magic powers had disappeared without explanation? That couldn’t be mere coincidence. Very few people could use magic, and if you narrowed that pool to only women, you’d get half of an already small population. Three women with magic powers vanishing within a short time suggested a clear pattern.

But as for why they might have been targeted, I had no idea at all.

As Prince Osvalt and I discussed the matter, I heard the commander of the Knights of Parnacorta at the door.

“Your Highness! Philip Delon, reporting!”

Why would Philip visit me? His Highness must have summoned him.

“Your Highness! It seems mysterious disappearances have been reported in other kingdoms!”

“Is that so?”

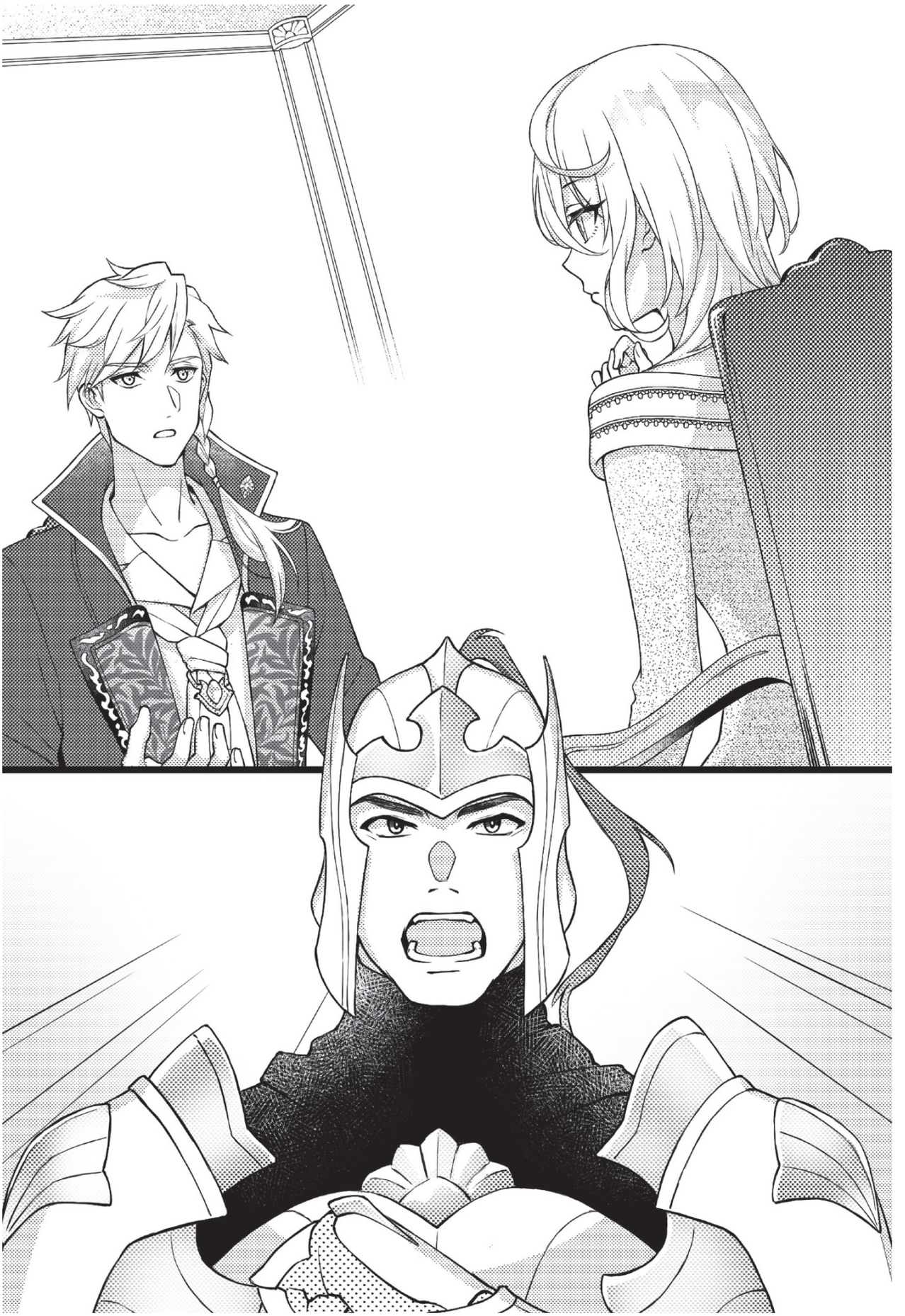
“As His Highness guessed, the victims are all women with magic powers. Thus far, no kingdom has been able to learn how or why they disappeared.”

The alarming string of disappearances had come to be known as “the mysterious vanishings.” All that was known about this inexplicable phenomenon was that women with magical power were disappearing. No one seemed to have any idea as to the reason.

“In light of these incidents, I’ve had a number of men, including Philip, deployed to guard your mansion,” Prince Osvalt told me, explaining that he’d been swift to dispatch some of the Knights of Parnacorta to serve as my bodyguards.

I already had Lena, Leonardo, and Himari to protect me, so posting knights around my mansion struck me as excessive. “Is there any particular reason to assign me more bodyguards?” I asked.

Straightening his posture, Philip spoke of how much magic power I possessed. “Lady Philia, you’re the most powerful magic user in Parnacorta—no, the entire continent. This order comes not only from me, but from His Highness, Crown Prince Reichardt!”



He had a point. As a female magic user, I could be the next victim of the mysterious vanishings.

“Sorry you’ll have to put up with Philip making a racket. But seeing as you’re the one holding the Great Purification Circle together, the fate of not just Parnacorta, but the entire continent, is in your hands. Guarding you is the least we can do, and it may not be enough.”

If I were to suddenly vanish, the Great Purification Circle that I’d cast would dissipate as well. His Highness was right: My presence was necessary to protect Parnacorta and all neighboring kingdoms.

“I understand. Philip, please take care not to push yourself too hard.”

“Unfortunately, that is a request I cannot honor. We, the Knights of Parnacorta—as well as your personal staff—would lay down our lives to protect you, Lady Philia.”

Rather than protest further, I chose to accept their kindness. With peace and order on the line, the kingdom could spare no effort when it came to defensive measures. Still, I felt uneasy not knowing the reason behind these incidents.

Women with magical powers mysteriously vanishing... I had to determine who was behind this and why as soon as possible, because Mia and Grace could very well be next.

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“Three in Parnacorta, five in Bolmern, and two in Girtonia! At present, there are close to twenty confirmed cases across the continent!”

Two days after Philip began guarding me, he passed along the latest information gathered from the palace’s investigation into the vanishings.

“The vanished women all fall roughly between the ages of fifteen to twenty-five. The international investigation team thinks

the age range may be significant, as well as the fact that the victims have all been women."

Lena and Leonardo, their arms folded, pondered Philip's report. "Hmm," said Leonardo. "Perhaps the culprit has a 'thing' for young ladies."

"Ew, Mr. Leonardo! How could you think such a disgusting thing?"

I had no idea what Leonardo was suggesting, but the wavelength of a person's magic power was affected by age and gender. I could estimate how old someone was, and whether they were male and female, just by sensing their magical aura. It was clear to me that the culprit was after people with a certain type of magic.

But why seek out magic? If we could find a motive, we could get a step closer to solving this mystery.

"Allow me to raise two more concerns!" said Philip.

"And those are…?" Were there yet more issues connected to the vanishings?

"It seems your Great Purification Circle freed up a good deal of time for the saints of each kingdom. To prepare for a similar crisis in the future, the other saints have proposed using this time to exchange information and opinions, as well as improve their abilities. In other words, they're planning to hold an international conference called the Saints' Summit!"

Mia and Grace had indeed commented that they had more free time thanks to my purification circle. As a result, they were making progress in their training. Being a saint was demanding, so in the past, it had been common for saints to use what free time they had to rest and recover. It might be a good idea to use this newfound opportunity to transcend national borders and develop our holy powers.

"And this summit thingy will be held in Parnacorta, right?" said Lena, leaping to the conclusion we would be hosting it.

"Why hold it here?" I asked. "Would it not make sense for a large kingdom like Dalbert to be the site?"

“But in that case, Lady Philia,” Leonardo pointed out, “you wouldn’t be able to attend.”

“That’s right,” Lena chimed in. “Of course everyone at a saint summit will want to meet you!”

“Me? Are you sure?”

“You’re the archsaint who saved the continent! Of course anyone in the same line of work would want to meet you.”

Lena and Leonardo both agreed that, given my inability to leave the imperial capital, the summit would have to be held in Parnacorta.

But for that many saints to come together…

“So you’re saying that a great many women with magic will be gathering in the imperial capital of Parnacorta…”

“That’s right!” Philip nodded eagerly.

Though saints varied in age, most of those currently active were around their twenties—in other words, the age range of the victims of the vanishing incidents. This meant we should seriously consider the wisdom of hosting this summit, lest any more people come to harm.

“Philip, what was that other concern of yours?” He’d mentioned having two concerns, and I suspected the other one was connected to the incidents as well.

“Well, I’m not sure if this is related to the disappearances, but…His Highness, Prince Julius of Girtonia, has disappeared from the dungeon where he was imprisoned!”

“Disappeared? He wasn’t executed?”

“No! He just vanished without a trace! It’s quite similar to the other incidents, but we have no idea if it’s related.”

All those vanished women, and now Prince Julius. What did it mean?

At that time, I had no idea that these issues would blow up into a crisis involving all our neighbors.

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“Lady Philia, what are you up to?” said Lena. “Oh, what a cute bracelet! Is that the thank-you gift for His Highness?”

I touched the bracelet I’d made. How had Lena gotten the idea that it was for Prince Osvalt?

“Oh, no. I’ve been preoccupied with more pressing matters, so the present for His Highness will have to wait. I’m just practicing in the hopes of giving him a handmade gift someday. I also tried making earrings and rings.”

Recently, I’d developed an interest in making jewelry. I bought a spellbook on the subject and learned how to use magic to enhance metals and gemstones, which turned out to be more enjoyable than I’d expected. I ended up making a number of enchanted accessories.

“Lady Philia, you’ve finally developed a sense of style.” Lena sniffled. “Even if it’s for His Highness, who would’ve thought you’d get into fashion design?”

“Er, Lena, I don’t understand why that’s worth crying over…”

“But, my lady, you never showed any interest in clothes, jewelry, or makeup before!” Lena was practically in tears.

True, I used to be indifferent to anything fashion-related. I wasn’t picky about the clothes I wore. As long as I had a few robes for work and sleepwear that was easy to move in, I considered my wardrobe adequate.

During a previous visit, Mia and Grace took—no, practically dragged—me to clothing shops in the imperial capital, and then made me buy cosmetics. They pushed me to do a lot of things that were outside my comfort zone. Mia patiently explained such concepts as the colors that were “in” that year, and how to pull off this or that recent trend. I was surprised by how hard it was for me to follow what she was saying. That was also the day we visited the tea shop where I later took His Highness.

Perhaps it was because Lena had seen that side of me that she was now excited to see me designing jewelry. Even so, I couldn't understand why she was moved to tears.

"I'm quite proud to have made this bracelet. Here, Lena, would you like it?"

I handed Lena a bracelet with a glowing purple gemstone, which she eyed with a puzzled look.

"Huh? Are you sure that's okay? It's so pretty."

"Yes, of course. I made this bracelet with you in mind."

"Lady Philia…"

With that, Lena gave me a big, tight hug. I was surprised but gratified to know that a present from me could make her that happy.

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"Lady Philia! Got some vegetables for you, fresh from my farm. Give them to Leonardo, will you?"

The evening after I gave the bracelet to Lena, Prince Osvalt stopped by with a bushel of freshly harvested vegetables.

"Everything okay with Philip and the other knights? I was worried that they might be bothering you."

I chuckled. "Sir Philip and the rest of the knights are all perfect gentlemen. The other day, we rescued a kitten from a tree."

"Rescuing a kitten? Hey, now, I don't want to hear they're slacking off on protecting you."

"Not at all. We all went out to the garden together, and I was in no danger at all. In fact, it's safer here than anywhere else in the kingdom."

"I see. That's good to hear."

Ever since our shopping trip, Prince Osvalt and I had started exchanging small talk whenever we met.

“Oh, right! Has my brother told you that an exorcist from Dalbert is coming over?”

“An exorcist? No, I hadn’t heard about that. I didn’t know that profession still existed in Dalbert.”

I was aware that some people specialized in exterminating evil spirits, but I’d never met one before. The existence of such spirits was disputed to begin with—I was skeptical they were real, myself. But for an exorcist to come here at a time like this…

“Are you suggesting that these incidents are the work of evil spirits?”

It wasn’t unheard of for people to blame inexplicable phenomena on spirits, but such claims were lacking in credibility. And yet I couldn’t think of any other reason for an exorcist to visit Parnacorta.

“You’re half right. I heard that this exorcist belongs to some kind of secret organization within the Cremoux church. They specialize in exorcising not evil spirits, but demons—denizens of the Demon Realm. The Cremoux Pope believes the disappearances are demonic in nature. And since you’re the one and only archsaint, the exorcist has personal orders from the Pope to protect you.”

Demons? Certainly, many ancient texts spoke of demons, but it was hard to believe that such beings were living with us here on the surface world. But if the Pope had gone so far as to dispatch an exorcist…there might be truth to it. I resolved to do more research.

That night, I went through as many texts about demons as I could get my hands on.

According to these manuscripts, demons, unlike monsters, could speak human languages and wield powerful magic. They lived far longer than humans and possessed powerful life force. Some demons were less intelligent than humans and incapable of speech, but others were highly intelligent and possessed great knowledge. Though I wasn’t sure if all these stories were true, I

also found mention of a powerful, godlike being called a “demon king.”

If such beings were indeed behind the vanishings, that could explain how they were able to abduct people without being noticed. Based on what I’d just read, it wouldn’t be surprising for demons to have abilities beyond human comprehension. But if that were the case, I was forced to consider the possibility that the Great Purification Circle wouldn’t be as effective against demons as it was against monsters.

The purification circle covering the continent almost completely neutralized invading monsters. The vanishings occurred within its range of protection, which was undeniable proof that the circle was ineffective against whoever or whatever was responsible. If demons were behind the vanishings, they would have to be treated as a completely different type of threat from monsters.

According to one archaic manuscript, demons inhabited the Demon Realm, a pitch-black dimension without a single ray of sunlight, swarming with monsters to an extent incomprehensible to our world. During the age of ancient civilizations, the Demon Realm encroached on the human world. Countless demons and monsters emerged aboveground and set about relentlessly attacking humans.

Few texts had survived from that age. Historians speculated that ancient people, unable to bear such torment any longer, used some kind of ancient ritual to cut the Demon Realm off from the surface world. Now, the Demon Realm only drew close to our world during cyclical periods of increased demonic activity, when monsters broke through in large numbers to wreak havoc. To ancient people, our modern age would no doubt look peaceful.

But we were in the midst of one of those demonic cycles. What’s more, demons were denizens of the Demon Realm. Did these events form a chain of causality?

“Lady Philia, are you awake?”

“Oh, is that you, Himari? It’s not like you to visit my room.”

As I was reading texts on demons and noting down important points, Himari rushed into my room without even knocking. This had to be some kind of emergency.

“Something is amiss. The knights were standing guard outside when they suddenly fell to the ground. It is most curious.”

Philip and the others had fallen to some foe? But the Knights of Parnacorta were considered the very best of the best. Philip, in particular, was the world’s greatest spearman. He was famed across the continent for his mastery, and even known in lands beyond. Surely he couldn’t be defeated so easily?

I could infer only one thing.

“Himari, please stay by my side. I’ll call for Lena and Leonardo.”

“My apologies, Lady Philia, but I believe we should flee this place.”

“That may be exactly what the attackers want us to think. It could be a trap. We’ll stand our ground and meet them here.”

“...I must have misread your expression. I thought that you had such a driven look on your face because you were determined to fight.”

I had no idea what my face looked like, but I couldn’t ignore the fact that people had been harmed while trying to protect me. *Philip and the other Knights of Parnacorta, I hope you’re all right...*

Himari and I left my room and met up with Lena and Leonardo. Together, we stood ready by the entrance. As I warned the others that the enemy might try to enter through the windows, I kept myself on alert.

Lena yelped. “Lady Philia, I hear footsteps outside...”

“Stay quiet. No matter what happens, don’t lose your composure,” I said softly. Calculating the enemy’s pace from their footsteps, I anticipated their arrival.

“Huh. Who knew Little Miss Philia was such a cutie? The magic power of an archsaint is sure to be a most delicious feast!”

An unnaturally pale man with clean-cut features slipped through the door. He was so perfectly assembled that he looked like a facsimile of a human rather than the real thing. He should have been handsome, but the artificiality was unsettling.

Illuminated by lamplight, he smiled as his gaze ran over me, sizing me up.

Who was he? There was no point in wondering. He was most likely the one who subdued the knights of Parnacorta. To approach him would be foolish and dangerous.

As I was considering this, Himari and Leonardo leapt forward.

“I won’t let you lay a hand on Lady Philia!”

“You’ve overstayed your welcome!”

Oh, no. It wasn’t a good idea to attack when we had no idea how this stranger had managed to defeat Philip and the other knights.

“Why don’t you two go to sleep for a bit? I only want that beauty over there.”

Pointing his finger at Himari and Leonardo, the intruder drew a hexagram in the air. It emitted a pale blue light. Awash in that eerie light, Himari and Leonardo collapsed, powerless, in an instant. *Wh-what did he just do?*

“Himari… Leonardo… Just like that…”

“Don’t fret. I just put them down for a nap.”

“How dare you?”

As soon as I heard how easily Philip and his men had fallen, I’d come up with a rough guess as to what type of foe we were dealing with. This intruder was capable of magic, and he must have cast some kind of paralysis or sleep spell.

“Well, aren’t you calm for someone with no one left to protect you? I’d expect nothing less of the great archsaint. Most people would be hysterical with panic.”

“What are you after? Are you behind the disappearances?”

“Hmm…what do you think? Show me a good time, and maybe I’ll tell you. But first, let’s put that little lady over there to sleep as well.” This time, the intruder pointed at Lena and began to cast another hexagram.

“Are you sure you can?”

If my response didn’t alert him to the fact something was wrong, his own body soon did. He struggled to raise his arm.

“Ugh… Why can’t I move?”

“All thanks to my Chain of Holy Light. I may not be as fast as my sister Mia, but my spellcasting speed is nothing to sneeze at. I waited to gauge your abilities, though it was careless of me to let Himari and Leonardo fall under your spell.”

“But when did you…?”

I went to work restraining the intruder, binding him with chains of light strong enough to hold a dragon. I chided myself for being too cautious and allowing him to make the first move. It was a relief that he hadn’t used any spells that could maim or kill, but I had to admit that my initial assessment was off.

The intruder sniggered. “Strong women really are exciting. Now I get why he wants them so badly.”

“What exactly are you?” I asked, still on my guard. His magical energy was strangely distorted, and I highly doubted he was human.

“I’m a demon,” came the reply. “Surely you must have guessed… Gah!”

With that, his head went flying through the air.

A golden-haired young woman wielding a falchion stood before me. The curved, sicklelike blade of her weapon shone a brilliant red.

For the very first time in my life, I was looking at an exorcist.

Returning the falchion to its sheath, the woman strode toward me.

In a showy fashion, she’d decapitated the demon so cleanly that not a drop of blood had spilled. Even before she confirmed

that the man was a demon, it was clear to me that he was no human.

“Pleasure to meet you, Archsaint. I’m Erza Notice, exorcist. In the name of Archbishop Zenos of the head church of Cremoux, I’ve come to serve as your personal bodyguard.”

The exorcist, who introduced herself as Erza, said that she’d come all the way from the head church of Cremoux. Her red-bladed falchion was forged from ore with a high level of magical penetration. What’s more, I could sense immense magic power emanating from her—possibly even more than what Mia and Grace, the greatest saints I knew, possessed. From the way she carried herself, I got the impression that an exorcist received more specialized combat training than a saint.

“I’m Philia Adenauer,” I said. “Erza, thank you very much for taking the trouble to come all the way here.”

“Parnacorta is pretty far from Dalbert, but it’s no big deal. Archsaint, was this the first time you’ve encountered a demon?” Erza’s face remained impassive.

“Indeed it was. I’ve never seen such an entity before. As I’m sure you can tell, I’m shocked that he’s still alive.”

“What?”

“Lady Philia,” cried Lena, “his head’s fallen off! There’s no way he’s still alive!”

Lena might have been fooled, but I could still sense the demon’s powerful magical aura and hear what sounded like a heartbeat. Surely he was still alive.

“Oh, you’re even quicker on the uptake than I expected. You can get up now, Mammon.”

“Fine, fine, no more fooling around. I couldn’t believe how ruthlessly you lopped my head off, y’know!”

When I pointed out that the demon was still alive, Mammon, as the demon was apparently called, stood up, holding his head in his hands. At this point, it would be impossible to confuse him for a human.

“The head can talk on its own?!” Lena was shocked to see Mammon’s disembodied head opening its mouth to speak.

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you. I’ll put myself back together in no time.”

Mammon reattached his head to his neck. In the blink of an eye, he looked as he had before. How strange that he could lose his head, then reattach it in an instant—all without shedding a drop of blood!

“As expected of an archsaint—you didn’t even bat an eyelash at that performance,” said Erza. “You’ve got nerves of steel.”

“I assure you, I’m quite taken aback. It’s just that I have trouble showing my emotions.”

If a demon could survive decapitation, its life force must have been even stronger than the ancient texts suggested. Even more surprising was the fact that it could reattach its head with seemingly no effort at all.

Lena glanced suspiciously between Mammon and Erza. “What’s going on here? Isn’t it an exorcist’s job to exterminate demons? But this demon seems…fond of you.”

I had to agree…which meant I didn’t understand why Erza had cut off his head.

“Oh, this guy’s a familiar who’s served my family for generations. As part of the Notice family’s contract with Mammon, he must obey my every word.”

“In exchange, when she dies, her soul is mine to feast on. That’s also in the contract. I follow like a vulture, awaiting my meal.” Mammon snickered.

In short, she was controlling the demon. I recalled the old saying, “It takes one to know one.” Perhaps it made sense to enlist a demon to hunt demons.

“Was this ambush your way of showing us how dangerous demons can be?”

“Sorry about that. It was this idiot’s idea. Once again, he acted without waiting for my orders.”

“I knew they’d get it faster if they experienced a demonic attack for themselves!” Mammon protested.

“You’ve got a point. Beheading you saved me an explanation.”

“You hear that, Little Miss Philia? All I did was cause a little mischief, and she chopped off my head! That’s my mistress for ya. Personally, I abhor needless violence.”

Erza and Mammon seemed to enjoy trading barbs. Looking at Mammon now, I thought that other than his deathly pale complexion and lack of human vitality, he seemed more or less like an ordinary man. Apparently, not all demons were sworn enemies of humanity.

But enough of that. This was no time for idle chatter. We needed to start asking some very important questions.

Using a recovery spell, I awakened everyone Mammon had put to sleep, and asked Lena to make us some tea. After we had all settled down, we began to talk.

“Lady Erza the exorcist and her familiar Mammon…” Philip sighed. “I never thought I’d be deceived by a demon! This is the failure of my life.”

“It’s not your fault, Philip. You didn’t stand a chance against such magic.”

“No, that was pathetic of me,” Philip insisted. “I took on the responsibility of guarding Lady Philia, and I humiliated myself.”

Mammon’s successful attack was a heavy blow to Philip and Himari in particular, as they took pride in their defensive skills. No one could blame them for falling prey to an unknown enemy with immense magical power, but I supposed they had their pride, and awkward attempts to console them might have the opposite effect.

It was then that Lena cheerily suggested, “Why don’t we start learning about demons so we can better protect Lady Philia next time?”

“How nice, Lena. I like your positivity. Let’s go on a date in a few years.” Mammon slid an arm around Lena’s shoulders.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Gah!”

Erza sent the demon’s head flying once more.

“Aiee!”

“And there goes his head again…”

“I’m begging ya, can you quit chopping off my head like it’s a stage routine? I don’t wanna scare off my future date,” Mammon grumbled. He picked up his head, turned it around, and placed it back on his shoulders. As before, he didn’t bleed at all, nor did he seem to be in any pain. Demons truly were fundamentally different from humans.

“His head’s back on!”

Entirely dismissing Mammon after beheading him once more, Erza forged ahead. “Ignore the idiot. Let’s discuss the mysterious vanishings—and what they have to do with the archsaint.”

“You think they’re connected to me?”

The vanishing incidents had something to do with me? It began to dawn on me that Erza probably hadn’t come just to be my bodyguard.

“The mastermind behind the incidents is Asmodeus, one of the most powerful figures in the Demon Realm. His goal is to resurrect Archsaint Fianna, the very first saint. He intends to achieve this by collecting a massive amount of magic power from young women—and you, Philia Adenauer, will be the physical vessel for the reborn Fianna.”

“They want Fianna to possess me? What about my soul? What does all of this mean?”

Erza’s explanation that the disappearances were motivated by the desire to harvest young women’s magic powers and use my body to revive the previous archsaint only left me more confused. Rationally speaking, it was impossible to resurrect someone who

died hundreds of years ago. It sounded too preposterous for me to follow the logic, or lack thereof, behind the plan.

"Archsaint, are you familiar with reincarnation?" Erza asked.

"Of course. As the Cremoux faith teaches, our souls are constantly in flux. When we die, our bodies decay, but not our souls. Instead, they transfer to a new life, and this cycle repeats for eternity."

Reincarnation was a fundamental tenet of Cremoux, the churches that saints belonged to. We believed that the body was nothing more than a vessel for the soul. When we died, our souls remained undamaged, simply passing on to the next vessel. Memories might vanish, but the soul remained forever.

"So where do you think Fianna's soul is now? She may be long dead, but she must have been reincarnated many times over, so her soul should still exist today."

"That's true, but I don't know of any way to locate a reincarnated soul."

According to legend, Fianna, the first saint, possessed magic powers beyond human comprehension. But even someone like her was subject to the laws of reincarnation.

I was about to say this out loud when Erza replied, "It's not impossible. Asmodeus knows where Fianna's soul is, and so do we. Let me tell you, Archsaint: Fianna's soul dwells within you."

"What?!"

I was the reincarnation of Archsaint Fianna? How could she know such a thing?

Mammon chimed in. "The Great Purification Circle—y'know, that ritual you used? I remember it well. It's the exact spell Fianna invoked about four hundred years ago, right down to the wavelength of the magical energy you emitted. Maybe mortals don't know this, not even saints like you, but each person's magic is a mirror that reflects their soul."

He didn't even hesitate to admit to seeing Fianna invoke the ritual for a Great Purification Circle four hundred years ago. I had

never heard that magical energies were unique to one's soul. There were no written records about this.

"Whoa, you must be awfully old," Lena commented.

"Lena, darling, you are so candid. I love that about you. By the way, Master Asmodeus has been around even longer. If you think a pacifist like me is something, wait until you get a load of *his* power."

"Are you saying you understand the laws of reincarnation because you've lived long enough to witness it?"

"That's right. Romantic, isn't it?"

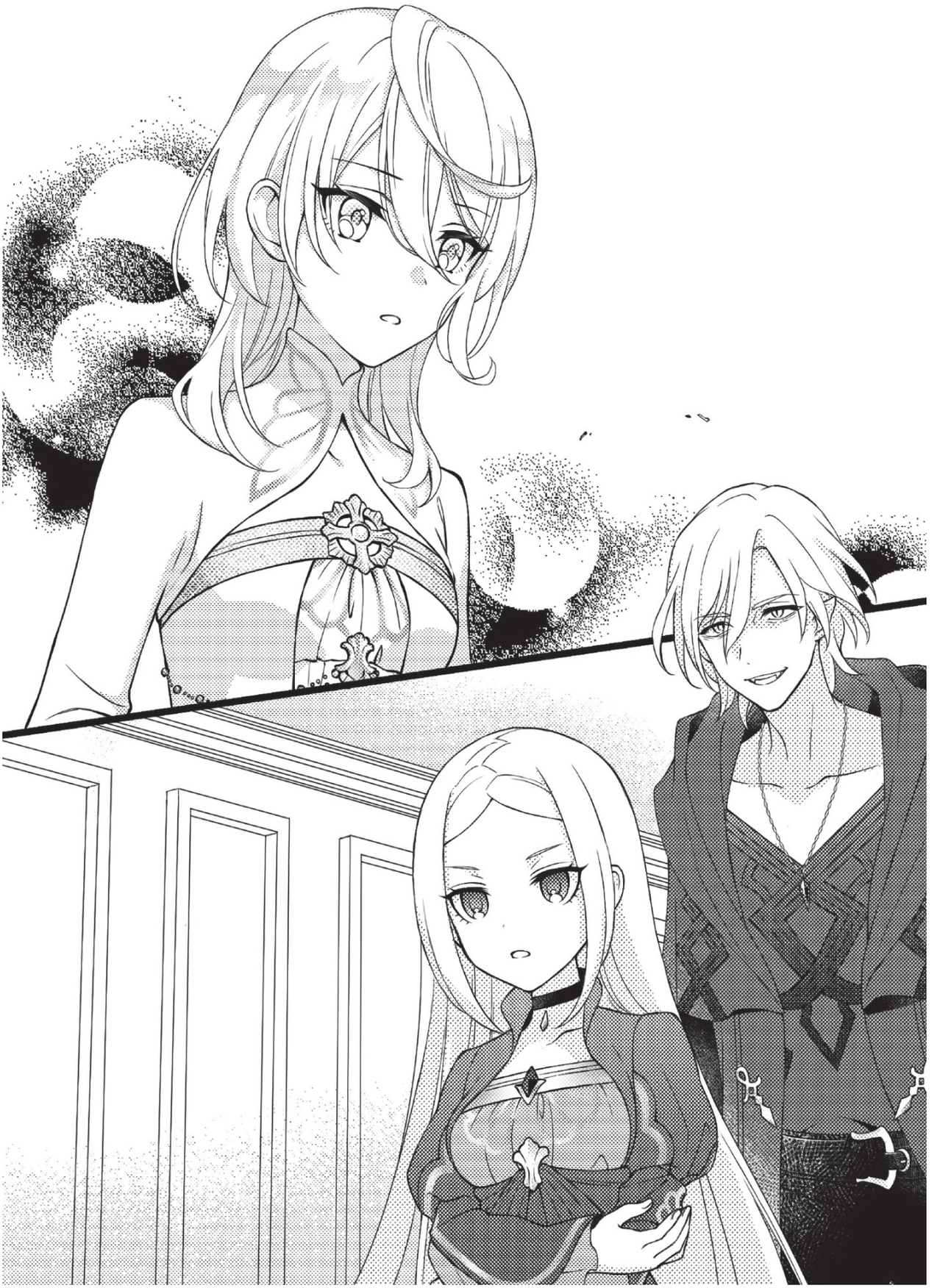
The texts I had read all agreed that demons lived very long lives, but there was something moving about hearing Mammon himself say that he'd known Archsaint Fianna. If possible, I wanted to ask him all sorts of questions about history. But that had nothing to do with the matter at hand, so I held back.

"Faced with the rise of the Demon Realm, you invoked a large-scale ritual," Mammon continued. "That was how Asmodeus, despite being in the Demon Realm, learned that Fianna's reincarnation was on this continent."

"My Great Purification Circle alerted him?"

"And so, he came up with a plan. By obtaining Fianna's soul and a massive amount of magic power, he believes he can resurrect his long-lost love."

My purification circle covered the entire continent. I could easily believe that the magic waves had reached even the Demon Realm. That was how Asmodeus learned of my existence and thought of a way to use my body for Fianna's resurrection. What an epic tale.



Still, there was one more question on my mind.

“Are you saying that Asmodeus was in love with Archsaint Fianna?” Leonardo asked. “Are demons capable of romantic feelings for humans?” I’d been about to ask the same question. What, exactly, was the relationship between Asmodeus and Fianna?

Erza began speaking of the last time the Demon Realm encroached on our world.

“In ancient times,” she said, “when the Demon Realm approached the surface world, three of the highest-ranking demons managed to invade your world: Beelzebub, Azael, and Asmodeus. Exorcists faced off against some of the Demon Realm’s most powerful figures. Soon enough, the war became a stalemate, dragging on with no end in sight. The monster population of the time was many times greater than what it is now, and countless lives were lost. But just when humanity seemed to be on the brink of extinction, a miracle took place.”

I knew humanity had had to fight tooth and nail to survive back then.

Erza continued. “Enter Fianna, a young woman with divine power. She overcame the highest-ranking demons, turning the tide of the war in an instant. She defeated Asmodeus before he could even lay a hand on her.”

“Damn, that was a terrifying time!” said Mammon. “I was glad I chose to side with humanity. Even to a demon like me, that woman was a beast.”

While Erza relied on secondhand knowledge, Mammon was clearly describing events he had seen with his own eyes. Fianna must have been incredibly powerful to intimidate someone who could survive decapitation. Compared to her, I was nothing.

“While Beelzebub and Azael retreated to the Demon Realm, Asmodeus, despite being defeated, still tried to approach Fianna. His demonic instincts were overwhelmed by her immense power. Somehow, he began to admire her.”

“How was that possible?” Himari asked.

“I say it’s a fetish. Getting beaten up by a hot woman must really turn him on.”

Mammon’s reply momentarily stunned everyone into silence.

“Quit joking around,” said Erza, swinging her falchion once more.

“Uh-oh! That was close!”

Mammon managed to dodge Erza’s weapon by grabbing his head in both hands and lifting it himself. Apparently, he could detach and reattach it at will. I could hardly believe what I was seeing.

But disturbing as it was, I found myself closely observing Mammon as he reaffixed his head to his shoulders. The mechanism behind the process made me think of an automatic recovery spell. Magic must hold Mammon’s body together. If his magic supply was ever cut off, he might not be able to recover so easily.

In one piece again, Mammon smiled as if nothing had happened.

“Many demons are fallen angels who were driven out of heaven a long, long time ago,” said Erza. “Asmodeus is one of them. Fianna, on the other hand, was a mortal who very nearly possessed the divinity of a goddess from heaven. She must have aroused Asmodeus’s primal instincts. He’s said to be the most lustful of all the demons.”

“Unfortunately for Master Asmodeus,” Mammon added, “he was unable to win Fianna for himself. And as terrifyingly powerful as Fianna may have been, she was, ultimately, only human. She died before she even reached her fifties. Now Asmodeus wants to create a copy of Fianna that will do his bidding.”

And that was the tale of the archsaint of legend, as told by an exorcist and a demon.

Asmodeus’s selfish obsession struck me as extremely twisted. We had to stop him before any more women fell prey to his plans.

“We think Asmodeus has entered this world by possessing a human with an evil, lust-tainted heart,” said Erza. “Specifically, we believe he’s possessed Prince Julius of Girtonia, who recently vanished from prison.”

“What?”

Prince Julius was the last name I expected to come up in this conversation. Though we were no longer engaged, could it be that we were still linked by fate?

***

Mia

“GOOD MORNING, MOTHER,” I said with a yawn. “You’re here earlier than usual.”

I’d had fun visiting my sister Philia, but ever since my return to Girtonia, my days had consisted of rigorous training under my aunt—and now foster mother and mentor—Saint Hildegard.

Thanks to Philia, I barely had any work to do as a saint, other than helping Prince Fernand with rebuilding Girtonia. That meant I had all the time in the world for training.

As I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, my foster mother scolded me. “Mia, you’re certainly talented, but you’re not giving it your all. At this rate, you’ll never catch up with Philia.”

Her special training was no joke. I couldn’t believe Philia had nonchalantly withstood the same regimen as a child. But then I thought back to the first time we worked together after I became a saint. I’d considered my sister a prodigy who was impossibly far ahead of me, and watching her in action only made the gulf between us seem wider still. Now, however, I realized I’d had it all wrong. Unbeknownst to me, my sister had been putting extraordinary effort into improving herself.

Now it was my turn to do the same.

“I know, Mother. I agreed to undergo this training to surpass my sister, after all. I’m ready to go all in and keep my fighting spirit up! In fact, you can go even harder on me if you like!”

That’s right, I told myself. If I kept my fighting spirit up, no challenge was impossible. I had to work hard so I could help Philia in the future.

“That’s good to hear. Honestly, there are times I’ve gone easy on you because you’re my foster daughter.”

“You’ve been going easy on me?”

“Though you have different parents, you must have watched your sister’s training as you grew. Now that you’re aware you’ve been missing out on the full regimen, it’s time to dispense with mercy. Your *real* training starts today.”

Ha ha ha… So even Saint Hildegard could crack a joke sometimes. Her special training was so intense that I found myself battling tears and regret on a daily basis. And apparently that still wasn’t the real thing?

She had to be kidding, right? She considered that “going easy on me”? How dense of me to not have noticed her consideration. My limbs began trembling in earnest.

“Well, eat your breakfast, then get ready at once.”

“All right. You know, Mother, you’re a way better cook than Philia.”

“Please don’t bring up that girl’s only weakness.”

“The way you said that… You’ve tried her cooking too, huh?”

I imagined my foster mother carving into one of Philia’s pitch-black dishes. My sister was so hopeless at cooking that it shocked me. The only time I ever saw her look embarrassed was when she brought her own lunch and I asked to swap meals with her.

After finishing breakfast in a rush, we ventured into the mountains to begin training.

The plan was to start with some warm-ups, like standing beneath a waterfall and running around blindfolded. But when we

reached the mountains, a soldier called out to us before we could begin.

I recognized the soldier as part of the faction that supported the crown prince against Julius's usurpation. It had been a while since we last met. What business did he have with us this time?

"Lady Mia and Lady Hildegard! Terrible news! Julius... That traitorous criminal Julius... He's disappeared from prison!"

"What?"

Did he mean Julius had escaped? Could this be the work of his loyalists? He was sentenced to death, but the execution had been put off while the kingdom focused on rebuilding.

All the same, it was strange of him to say that Julius had "disappeared," rather than "escaped."

"A-anyway, Prince Fernand has summoned you. It's urgent! Please come to the palace immediately."

Exchanging silent nods, Mother and I headed for the palace.

I had a bad feeling about this—but I was going to handle it myself instead of asking for Philia's help. I was the saint of Girtonia, after all.

"Mia! Lady Hildegard!" Prince Fernand greeted us. "Thank you for coming. I apologize for summoning you on such short notice."

Though his complexion looked much healthier, His Highness still had dark circles under his eyes. He'd clearly been up late, night after night, working on the reconstruction efforts. The palace was short-staffed, since the corrupt officials who used their positions to enrich themselves had all been thrown in prison along with Julius.

"I heard about Julius's disappearance," said Mother. "Word on the streets is that he vanished into thin air. Is this connected to the other vanishing incidents?"

What vanishing incidents? Mother's blunt query left me tilting my head in confusion.

“So you already have an idea of what’s going on. I expected nothing less from you, Lady Hildegard. My brother disappeared without a trace from a heavily guarded prison. It’s strikingly similar to the recent cases of people mysteriously vanishing in neighboring kingdoms.”

Prince Fernand explained that, across the continent, young women with magical powers had begun to disappear. Recently, the Kingdom of Parnacorta had assigned Philia more bodyguards for fear that she would be targeted too.

“Not that we should always do as Parnacorta does,” said Prince Fernand, “but from today, I’m assigning both of you more bodyguards. I’ll dispatch some of Pierre’s men.”

With that out of the way, His Highness returned to the original topic. “But Julius is neither a young woman nor someone with magical abilities. We’ve been trying to establish a link between his disappearance and the other incidents, but the only person we can think of who’s well-versed in such phenomena is Philia. Her expertise would certainly be of help.”

I advised otherwise. “Forgive me, Your Highness…but in light of the way this kingdom has treated my sister, I’m not keen on that idea. My sister is now the saint of Parnacorta, and we already owe her a huge debt. From now on, I don’t think we should rely on her or cause her any more trouble.”

Considering what happened between my sister and Julius, we couldn’t possibly burden her with searching for him. Girtonia’s problems should be resolved in Girtonia.

“I suppose you’re right. In some ways, we’ve become too reliant on the archsaint. Very well. We’ll assemble an investigation team to look into these incidents ourselves.”

His Highness readily retracted his suggestion. After all, we were already protected by a purification circle cast by my sister, who was now the saint of another kingdom. I felt confident in my assertion that it was unthinkable to ask for anything more.

“Mia,” said Mother, “I’m glad you don’t want to lean too much on Philia, but surely your older sister would want you to feel that you can count on her.”

“She *is* my sister…”

I remembered how, when I was in danger, Philia chose me over her duties as a saint. Nothing had ever made me happier. More than anything, I was proud of her.

That’s right. I wanted to catch up to Philia in terms of my abilities as a saint, but that didn’t mean I should stop treating her as my big sister.

“You’re right, Mother. Your Highness, if the investigation into Julius’s disappearance ever hits a wall, please let me know. I’ll mention it offhand when I write to Philia. But let’s try to handle it ourselves. My foster mother and I will do whatever we can.”

“Should the need arise, Mia, I’ll be counting on you. And Lady Hildegard, thank you for your consideration.”

Our agreement turned out to be in vain. Philia arrived at the truth long before we did, before we even knew what was going on.

At that time, I had no idea that I would end up fighting the creatures known as demons…

“If that’s all, Your Highness, we shall take our leave…”

But Prince Fernand wasn’t finished.

“Hold on. There’s one more thing I wanted to discuss: the Saints’ Summit.”

“Saints’ Summit?”

“Yes, it’s an international conference proposed by Saint Emily Mattilas of Bolmern. She thought it would be a good idea to create an opportunity for saints from each kingdom to gather and discuss issues.”

The Great Purification Circle had freed up a lot of time for saints across the continent. Indeed, we could now invest in our training and still have time to spare. At the summit, we could share ideas to improve ourselves and prepare for the next crisis.

But this Saint Emily…wasn’t she the older sister of that cheeky Grace? I’d heard she had some kind of fierce, if one-sided,

rivalry with Philia. Was it a good idea to have someone like that leading the summit?

"I've heard of Saint Emily," said Mother. "She's said to be the most outstanding saint in the history of the distinguished Mattilas family, and she's skilled and hardworking, too. Among the currently active saints, she's probably the closest to Philia in ability. If such a capable saint is organizing this summit, it may be worthwhile to join."

I wasn't surprised that Mother had heard of Emily. Though she retired from active duty for some time, she had a long career as a saint, and she knew a lot about the other kingdoms.

Even so, I had no idea that Emily was that highly regarded. If she was considered second only to Philia, she was a more skilled saint than me. Come to think of it, Grace was familiar with archaic languages, despite her young age. Of course, her big sister was even more impressive.

But given the current situation, was it a good idea to have so many saints gathered in one place?

"You're concerned about the vanishing incidents, aren't you, Mia? It's written all over your face."

"Sorry, Your Highness, but this assembly will be at Parnacorta, won't it? In that case…"

"You're worried that something might happen to Philia, aren't you?"

Mother and His Highness saw through me so easily. Maybe I'd gotten so used to living in peacetime that I could no longer maintain a brave face when I sensed trouble. That was a shame, considering how good I'd gotten at hiding my emotions while I was engaged to Julius.

"Your concerns are understandable," said His Highness. "You're right: The presumption is that Parnacorta will host the summit. But if it helps, Parnacorta has already dispatched some of its knights to serve as Archsaint Philia's bodyguards. And King Eigelstein is making a special exception to allow each saint's personal guards into the kingdom."

That was a relief. I figured Philia would be fine with Himari and her bodyguard-servants to protect her, but knowing that the Knights of Parnacorta were there, too, gave me an extra layer of reassurance. Besides, my sister had honed her powers to perfection, so she probably didn't need bodyguards in the first place.

"At any rate," said Mother, "I'm sure the first item on the summit's agenda will be the vanishing incidents."

"You think we can solve the mystery?"

"The victims are all young women with magic powers. I'm probably outside the culprit's target age range, but most saints fit the bill. I imagine everyone at the summit will want to share self-defense plans."

Mother was right. Philia, Grace, and I were all around the same age as the women who had vanished. Exchanging information with other saints could help us protect ourselves and bring us a step closer to figuring out what was going on. But in the meantime, we'd be abandoning our kingdoms. What if something happened while we were away?

"Naturally, Mia and Lady Hildegard, I would like both of you to attend the Saints' Summit. You might be able to pick up useful information."

"Understood, Your Highness," Mother said.

"But, Your Highness..." I began.

"Regrettable as it is, Girtonia is still completely dependent on its saints. Mia, this kingdom can only grow if you do. For the sake of our nation, I need you to learn what you can from the other saints. Given what you and your sister have been through, you might not have much faith in us, but I promise we can muddle through without you for a few days."

He was ordering me to attend the summit for Girtonia's sake—and saying that my growth would benefit Girtonia. He had a point. Philia would move hell and high water to protect the kingdom she served. Representing Girtonia at the summit was precisely what it meant to follow in my sister's footsteps.

And travelling to Parnacorta would mean getting to see Philia again. That was definitely something to look forward to.

“I’m telling you now,” Mother warned me, “this won’t be a vacation.”

“No way! Mother, you could tell from the look on my face that I was thinking something silly?”

“No, I could tell from the fluctuations in your magical aura.”

“You can read that in my magic?”

“...I was joking, obviously. Really, now; if you can fall for a trick like that, your skills still have a long way to go.”

Whoa, she had me there! But anyone, Philia included, would fall for Mother’s deadpan delivery. No, on second thought...Philia would probably stare at her, just as straight-faced, and say something like, “No, that’s impossible.” She was just that clever.

“You got me,” I admitted. “But aren’t you excited to see Philia as well?”

“I won’t deny it. I’m curious to see how she’s grown.”

Soon after that meeting, Parnacorta was confirmed as the host kingdom for the Saints’ Summit. And so, we set off for the land that had become my sister’s home.

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Grace

“OH HO HO HO! Demons and the like are no match for me, Emily Mattilas!” My sister Emily puffed up with pride as she chortled.

Magically gifted young women had been vanishing from across the continent—and this was how Emily reacted to the unbelievable revelation that the culprit was a demon. Was there really nothing that scared her?

“Don’t mind Emily, that’s just how she is. Once you get used to it, you can ignore her theatrics.”

“The four of us working together struggled to capture that demon,” grumbled my sister Jane, the third eldest, “and you have the nerve to take all the credit? Isn’t that shameful behavior for a saint?”

An exorcist named Klaus Eiselbein had been dispatched from the head church of Cremoux in Dalbert to guard us, the four saints of the Mattilas family. Klaus, a young man with silver hair and blue eyes, told us that another exorcist was guarding Lady Philia in Parnacorta.

Exorcists, we learned, had battled demons since ancient times. Apparently, they belonged to a secret organization that operated all over the world under orders from the church.

Klaus controlled a demon familiar named Satanachia, who took the strange form of a black wolf that walked on two legs. To show us what we were dealing with, Klaus and Satanachia gave us a demonstration of demonic power. Faced with Satanachia’s powerful magic and prodigious vitality, we were forced to fight for our lives. The ordeal was nerve-wracking—much more so than fighting monsters had ever been—but, thanks to a binding spell cast by Emily, we were finally able to restrain him.

But even though it was Emily’s spell that finally subdued Satanachia, she couldn’t have done it if my two other sisters and I hadn’t used diversion after diversion to create an opening. No wonder Jane couldn’t help speaking up.

After the battle, Klaus added that demons could even survive decapitation. He didn’t give us a demonstration, though, as he thought it wouldn’t be proper to show to ladies.

“Do you now understand how horrifying demons are?” he continued. “The mastermind behind the vanishings, Asmodeus, is the highest-ranking demon alive. He’s infinitely more powerful than a mid-ranking demon like Satanachia.”

According to Klaus, Asmodeus, who was behind the mysterious vanishing incidents, was after my mentor Lady Philia, who had since been conferred the title of archsaint. But he was

also abducting other young women with magical power, which was why Klaus was sent to protect us, the four saints of the Mattilas family.

“I don’t like the sound of this Asmodeus,” Emily said.

“Indeed. He’s the one who’s been disrupting the peace. We can’t let him get away with this.”

“How dare he treat me, Emily Mattilas, of all people, as second fiddle to Philia Adenauer?! Does he have no respect for a lady?”

Emily’s petty outburst left Klaus speechless. If it weren’t for her obvious envy of Lady Philia, I’d be able to respect her as both my sister and as a saint, haughtiness and all.

My second-eldest sister, Amanda, scolded her lightly. “Stop it, Emily. Klaus looks like he’s already starting to regret coming here.”

The attempt failed. “I’m not saying anything amiss, Amanda.”

Ever since she heard that Lady Philia had become archsaint, Emily had been ramping up her own training efforts. I could even foresee her losing interest in our efforts to stop the vanishings, now that she knew we’d be fighting to protect Lady Philia.

“Emily,” my sister Jane teased, “I bet you’re thinking that if Philia gets captured by that demon, you’ll become the number one saint.”

“Don’t you dare underestimate me, Jane! I will triumph over Archsaint Philia with my own abilities—yes, by becoming archsaint myself! I would never let myself be captured by some demon. That’s—”

“Indeed! That’s the pride of those born into the esteemed Mattilas family!” Father’s voice boomed through the drawing room as he strode in.

“Father!” I was surprised to see him up this late.

“Well said, Emily. Lady Philia is an impressive saint, so it won’t be easy to surpass her. Are these so-called vanishing incidents the work of some lawless scoundrels working behind the scenes to target the archsaint? If so, I’m counting on you to crack this case and protect her!”

“Not quite, Count Mattilas,” Klaus countered. “I’m here because your daughters are likely to be targeted as well.”

Emily ignored him. “Leave it to me, Father! I shall stake the Mattilas family name on my ability to resolve this issue with splendor, elegance, and grace!”

“Miss Emily, please listen to me. You see, I…” Klaus tried to get a word in, but

Father and Emily’s usual bad habits were starting to rear their ugly heads. Poor Klaus looked like he was about to cry. Beside him, Satanachia’s ears twitched as he gave his master a concerned look. So even demons got worried, after all.

I had a bad feeling that we’d be seeing trouble at the Saints’ Summit. After all, it was an international gathering of women with high magical powers.

My chest tightened with worry at the thought of something terrible befalling Lady Philia. She saved the entire continent. If she was in danger, shouldn’t it be our turn to save her?

“It’s settled!” Father declared. “I, too, shall travel to Parnacorta for the Saints’ Summit! After everything Lady Philia has done for Grace, it’s only right to pop in and say hello.”

“I also intend to say hello,” Emily sniffed, “but for a different reason.”

“I beg you, please don’t act rashly at the Saints’ Summit,” Klaus interjected. “I could be censured by the church.”

“Wa ha ha ha!”

“Oh ho ho ho!”

“If only I could switch places with Erza,” Klaus muttered. “Serving Philia must be so much more pleasant.”

His Majesty, the king of Bolmern, objected to all four of the kingdom’s saints leaving for Parnacorta, so it was decided that Amanda and Jane would stay behind. Klaus promised that Dalbert would send someone else to guard them.

And so Emily, the exorcist Klaus, his familiar Satanachia, my father Count Mattilas, and I all set out for Parnacorta.

Lady Philia, I'm so glad that we'll meet again so soon!

And Lady Mia, I'll never, ever lose to you.

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Philia

WHILE AT WORK ON HIS FARM, Prince Osvalt talked about Erza's addition to my bodyguard team and her residence at my mansion. "Lady Philia, how are things going with Lady Erza? I heard she brought a demon with her. If that makes you uncomfortable, I can arrange for them to stay elsewhere."

I assured His Highness that Erza had Mammon well under control. "Erza is acting under the pope's direct orders. If I ask her to do something that's out of line, I'm sure she feels free to refuse. Personally, I'm quite all right. Philip and his men are still guarding me, too, after all." I paused to note down the efficacy of the new fertilizer.

With the Saints' Summit only a week away, saints from all over the continent, along with their bodyguards, would soon be arriving in Parnacorta. Given the risk that Asmodeus might stir up trouble at the summit, His Highness must have thought extra caution was necessary, because he was showing more concern for my safety than ever.

"Philip, huh? He's been down in the dumps lately. I heard that demon thoroughly walloped him, then you took the creature down all on your own. Must've been humiliating for him, as a bodyguard."

I couldn't deny it. Ever since that night, Philip had been rather dejected. I was never very good at finding the right words to say, so as much as I wanted to cheer him up, I wasn't sure how to approach him.

“Lemme guess—you don’t know what to say to a knight who’s lost his pride, huh? Situations like that are tricky for you.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I find it a real problem. I’ve come to know so many people since I came here. I want to be someone they can lean on when they’re in trouble, and I want to make it a habit to thank them.”

High Highness laughed. “I was just teasing you! I didn’t think you’d take it so seriously. You’ve gotten a lot better at speaking your mind, y’know. Don’t force it. Just take your time, and I bet you’ll figure out how to express yourself honestly.”

He was teasing me? What part of that was a joke? He had been entirely correct: Expressing myself was a challenge. How could I translate feelings into words?

“Thank you, Your Highness. I’m glad that you care so much about me. I always look forward to your visits.”

His Highness looked so shocked that he dropped the vegetables he was holding. “Whoa! What did you say?”

“I tried to express my true feelings. Was that no good?”

Once again, I’d failed. Direct communication truly was no easy feat.

“N-no, not at all. It’s just that hearing those words from you made me so happy. I enjoy seeing you, too. Just doing farm work with you like this is a lot of fun. And I still think about that shopping trip.”

“Are those your true feelings, Your Highness?”

Prince Osvalt flushed red. With an awkward look on his face, he scratched his head. “Well, yeah. But now I’m kinda embarrassed. Why don’t we take a lunch break? Let’s haul these vegetables to Leonardo and ask him to make something.”

I agreed eagerly. Leonardo’s cooking was always a delight.

***

After handing over the vegetables to Leonardo, I headed to the garden, intending to work on a new spell. I found Erza and Mammon there, bent over and examining something while Lena watched.

“Meow, meow, meow!”

“He’s just as cute as I said, isn’t he, Miss Erza?” said Lena. “Here, Alexander, have some goat milk!”

Evidently, Lena had decided to introduce them to the kitten we rescued from a tree. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to find his mother, so we decided to take him in.

Lena, who had taken a particular liking to the kitten, had named him Alexander. She doted on him greatly. Alexander’s beautiful white fur gave him an air of refinement, so the knights were fond of him as well.

“Yes, he’s absolutely adorable,” Erza agreed. “He’s as white and fluffy as a cloud.”

“Yes!” said Lena. “You get it!”

“Will you look at that? It’s rare for Big Sis Erza to be so open with her feelings.” As Erza commented on Alexander’s cuteness, Mammon teased her for her sincerity.

“Tch!”

Prince Osvalt had said that sincerity was a good thing, but Erza seemed irritated by Mammon’s teasing.

“Hold on there!” Mammon stammered as Erza drew her falchion. He raised both hands and shook his head. “I-I’m against violence! Besides, wouldn’t it scare this tiny kitten out of its wits if my head landed next to it?”

I had to agree that if Mammon’s head were to go flying, Alexander was sure to be startled.

“True,” Erza grunted. “Fine, I’ll let it go.”

“I knew it! Big Sis, you’re all heart!”

“Anyway, I heard this little one wandered away from his mother. Poor thing.”

“That’s… Yeah, that’s a pity.”

Mammon’s head was spared; Erza looked distracted by a sudden memory. True, Alexander had been separated from his mother, but why did she bring that up all of a sudden? I couldn’t help but wonder…

“You. Turn into a cat.”

“What?”

“This poor little kitten doesn’t have a mother. Don’t you feel sorry for him? As long as we’re here, you should take the form of a cat to comfort him. That’s an order.”

Erza had explained that Mammon’s near-human form was simply a shape he chose to assume. In that case, he ought to be capable of turning into a cat as well.

I was curious to see him transform. After all, shapeshifting was beyond the ability of any human.

“Aw, c’mon, Big Sis. I don’t owe it to this kitty to play at being his mom.”

“It’s not about what you owe,” Erza said. She turned to me. “Archsaint, do you think it’d be good for this kitten to have a parent?”

“Me? Well, I’d like to see Mammon transform into a cat.”

Mammon laughed. “Little Miss Philia has jumped on the bandwagon. Guess I have no choice. Can’t disappoint a pretty girl, can I? Okay, transformation time. Here goes nothing!”

A glowing purple light surrounded Mammon as his body began to twist and turn. His physique gradually changed and fur sprouted all over him until he was no longer recognizable. The transformation was complete.

I was astounded. Mammon had become a beautiful white cat who was almost identical to Alexander—except he was much, much bigger. He looked well over two meters tall.

Could an animal that size even be considered a cat? He was more like…

“That’s too big! You’re practically a tiger!”

“I can change my shape,” Mammon protested, sounding peeved, “but I can’t change my size.”

That made sense. But, as Erza pointed out, he looked like a white tiger or snow leopard at that size. Mammon continued to insist that he was a cat, though.

“But, but… He’s so cute like this!” Lena squealed. She seemed to wholeheartedly approve of Mammon’s cat form.

“Lena!” Mammon purred. “I always knew you were on my side! I’m so glad we’re friends.”

I, too, found Mammon adorable as a cat. A small cat was well and good, but a big one had a certain charm to it as well.

“I guess you’re a little cuter now,” Erza admitted. “Now stay in that form the whole time we’re here.”

“Th-the whole time? How cruel can you be? I can’t flirt with the ladies like this!”

“That makes it even better. You can stick to other cats.”

“You’re too much, Big Sis!”

And so it was decided that Mammon would spend his days with us in cat form. Soon enough, we realized the obvious: If word got out that a gigantic white tiger was running wild at our place, people might kick up a fuss. As the saying went—curiosity killed the cat.

Meanwhile, Lena enjoyed riding on Mammon’s back. “Lady Philia! Do you want a ride too? You should try it! He’s so fluffy!”

It certainly *looked* like fun, but riding on my bodyguard seemed a bit…forward.

As the Saints’ Summit drew near, Erza and Mammon managed to settle into daily life at the mansion just fine.

Chapter 2:
The Saints' Summit Begins

"PHILIA! It's been a while! Well, not really, but...how are you?"

"From the looks of it, you've continued to train daily, Philia."

Mia and my aunt and mentor Hildegard had come all the way from Girtonia. We were enjoying lunch together, with the accompaniment of tea brewed by Lena. Mia had contacted me beforehand to let me know that she and Aunt Hildegard would be coming to Parnacorta for the Saints' Summit, which would begin tomorrow, so I'd suggested that the two of them stay at my place.

Since adopting Mia, Aunt Hildegard had been putting her through intensive training. Mia had written to me complaining about the rigors she endured each day.

Noticing Mia and Master Hildegard's presence, Erza and Mammon made their way to me.

"Archsaint, who are they?" Erza asked.

Mammon whistled. "We've got another beauty here. And she's bursting with magic. How tempting..."

"Um, Philia?" Mia stammered. "When did you get a pet tiger? And did it talk just now?"

"I sense a huge flow of magic power," said Aunt Hildegard. "Who—or what—are they?"

I couldn't blame them for being surprised by Mammon in his gigantic talking cat form. Everyone in the mansion had gotten used to him, but it was understandable for newcomers to react that way.

How should I go about this? I wasn't good at introducing people with different backgrounds to one another.

"Er, um, Erza, meet my younger sister Mia and my aunt Hildegard. They're both saints, and they're here for the summit."

"Oh, she must be your sister from Girtonia."

“Mia, Master, this is Erza. She’s an exorcist. And this is her familiar, Mammon. For certain reasons, he’s currently in cat form, but they’re both here at the command of the pope to guard me.”

It took some effort on my part, but I managed to introduce everyone.

Mia and Aunt Hildegard stared intently at Erza and Mammon, clearly wary. It was a reasonable response, especially with Mammon in that form.

“An exorcist? So that cat creature is…a demon?”

“Oh, my! The lady got it in one guess. She’s a smart one.”

Indeed, I was proud of Aunt Hildegard for recognizing Mammon as a demon right away.

“Mother, can such a lovely creature really be a demon?” Mia asked, eyeing Master Hildegard skeptically.

Yes, my aunt was right—but in his current form, Mammon didn’t fit most people’s idea of a demon. It was only natural for Mia to have her doubts.

“Lady Philia, the rooms are ready!” Lena called. She guided Mia and Aunt Hildegard to their respective rooms.

Though the Saints’ Summit would only be held for a short time, I was excited to have the chance to catch up with my sister and my mentor.

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After leaving her luggage in her room, Mia said that she wanted to show me the results of her training, so we headed out to the courtyard.

“I’ve been studying ancient magic,” she told me, “but whenever I try to expand a magic circle, I just can’t stabilize my power, no matter how hard I try.”

“I had a feeling you’d have trouble with that, so I took some notes for you. Sorry the diagrams aren’t precise. I should’ve

plotted them more carefully."

"Am I really that predictable?" Mia asked sheepishly.

In Girtonia, Mia had continued to study ancient magic on her own, and her ability to absorb mana had drastically improved. But I knew that the more magic power there was to use, the greater the risk of instability, so I gave her some notes I'd been working on for the summit.

Mia glanced up at Erza and Mammon, who were standing on the roof of the mansion. "Hey, are you sure we can trust that shady exorcist and demon? Don't you find them fishy? The headhunting is pretty creepy."

Did they really come off as suspicious? To me, they just seemed quirky.

"I don't think you have to worry about them," I said. "The pope of Cremoux sent Erza here after formally contacting the Parnacorta royal family about the matter."

"Hmm. Even so, that idiot prince has become a vessel for a demon—Asmodeus, was it? Of all the people to possess!"

"The Girtonia royal family is said to trace its bloodline back to the great mage who revitalized the kingdom in ancient times. That blood has flowed through Girtonia's rulers in an unbroken line of succession for generations. Combine that with the malice within Julius, which has only grown stronger since his imprisonment, and you have the perfect person for a demon to possess. He was the logical choice."

It could only be fate for Julius, formerly a prince of Girtonia, to be possessed by a demon in pursuit of the soul of the Archsaint Fianna, which supposedly dwelled in me. He was the man who sold me to Parnacorta—the very same man who almost drove my homeland to devastation. Mia had managed to settle her score with him. Perhaps it was now my turn.

Erza had told me that Asmodeus was a demon far more powerful than Mammon, and that, ultimately, fighting him was an exorcist's job. But as a saint, I could not overlook the fact that he had thrown our kingdom into turmoil.

“There you go again with that bad habit of yours.”

“Bad habit?”

“You’re trying to deal with everything alone, aren’t you? I know you are. Just from the look on your face, I can tell what you’re thinking.”

Mia could tell at a glance that I was thinking of battling a demon. She had a point. I had to learn to rely on others instead of shouldering every burden by myself. In the past, I’d considered it only natural to work alone. I didn’t feel lonely, living that way. But things were different now.

Now, I was surrounded by people I could rely on.

“You’re right, Mia. To expand the Great Purification Circle, I had to ask for help from Grace and the other saints. Now I know I’m not alone.”

“Yeah! Don’t forget I’m a saint, too, and I have to make up for Girtonia letting that idiot prince escape. I’ll fight, too—shoulder to shoulder with you this time.” As Mia spoke, she stabilized her purification circle and expanded it.

Standing shoulder to shoulder, eh? That brings back memories of the day you—a fresh-faced saint—and I worked together for the first time.

That day, you were watching me, too…

“Oh ho ho ho! What have we here? What a puny barrier! Philia Adenauer, you may have cast the Great Purification Circle, but I see you’ve gotten rusty. It seems things are even worse than I’ve heard.”

Laughing loudly, a woman I didn’t recognize entered the grounds of my mansion.

Behind her stood a carriage from Bolmern. And those brown curls resembled Grace’s…

“Emily! What are you thinking, carrying on like you do at home?” Grace stepped out of the carriage. “You’re embarrassing yourself in front of Lady Philia and Lady Mia.”

“Grace!”

“Oh, she’s Grace’s older sister. It all makes sense now.”

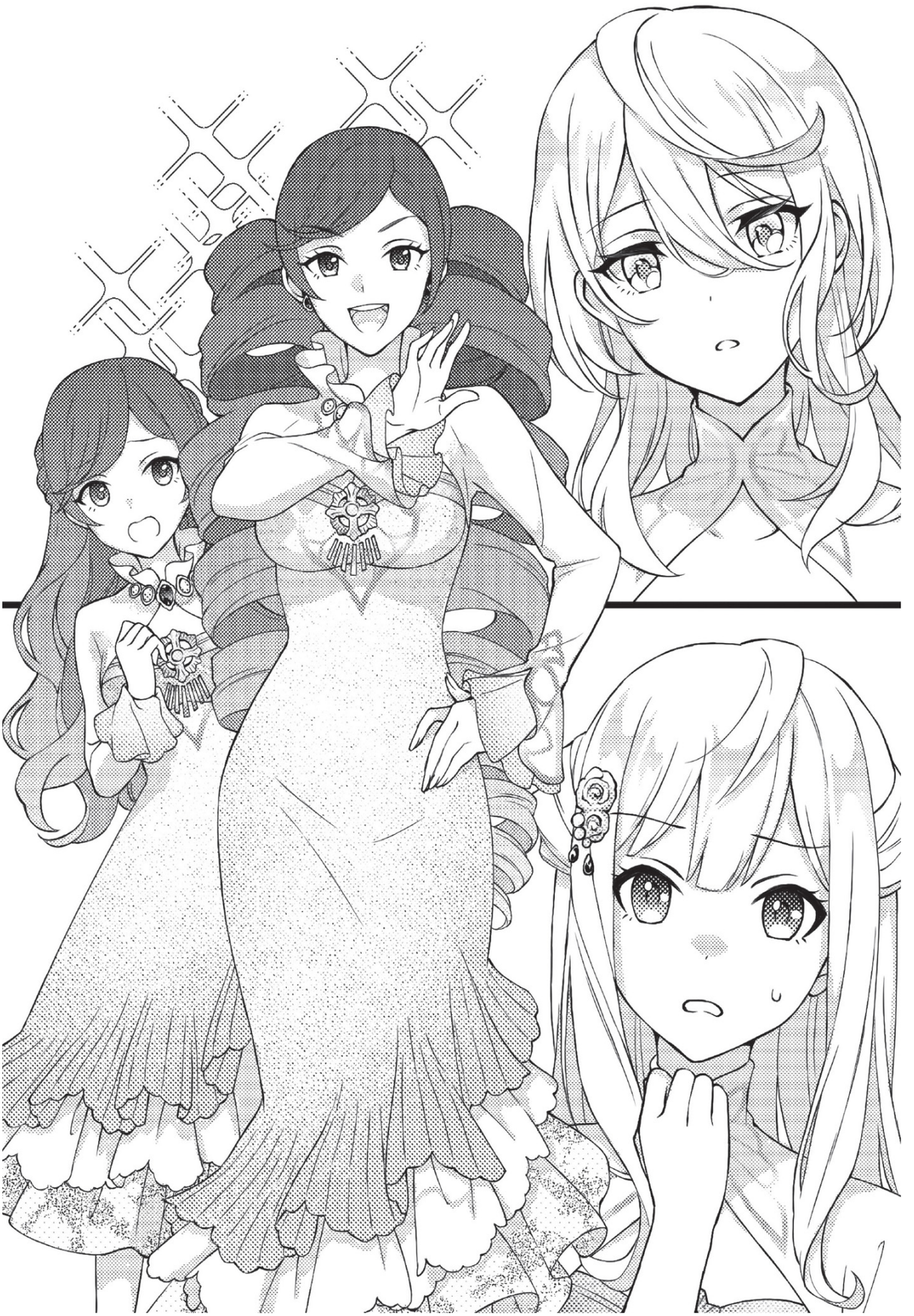
This woman could only be Emily Mattilas, the eldest of the four Mattilas sisters. She’d helped expand the Great Purification Circle. According to Grace, Emily was the most outstanding, talented, and capable of the sisters.

“Grace, do you see this pathetic barrier? It seems that the Philia Adenauer you respect so much has lost her touch.”

“Emily, this is Mia, Lady Philia’s younger sister. Lady Philia is far more skilled—no one can come close to matching her. Don’t imagine for a second that she’s in the same league as Mia.”

“Oh, my. So this silent, listless woman must be the archsaint, then. I was expecting someone haughtier.”

“Don’t worry,” said Grace. “I doubt there’s a single person on this continent haughtier than you.”



Somehow, Emily seemed to have mistaken me for Mia. Did I really seem “silent and listless”? I liked to talk, and I thought I showed some fighting spirit, but perhaps that wasn’t the impression I gave off.

“Grace,” said Mia, “I’m not so weak that you can get away with insulting me like that. What you’re seeing is just practice to stabilize my magic. It’s not the real thing at all.”

“Sorry, Mia, that was rude of me. Since you’re Lady Philia’s other apprentice, I assumed you’d be putting in more effort. I just happened to say what’s on my mind.”

“I guess it’s time to settle this once and for all with a decisive battle. Bring it on!”

For some reason, Mia made Grace’s competitive instincts come alive—and she wasn’t capable of being the bigger person once Grace provoked her. A bit of rivalry was fine, but I wished they’d stop fighting.

“Now, now, girls. It’s not proper to carry on like that in someone else’s mansion. Oh, Lady Archsaint! I’m Oscar Mattilas. I can’t thank you enough for looking after Grace. What an honor to meet the greatest saint of all time.”

The well-built man who’d just arrived held his hand out for a handshake. Could he really be the famed Count Mattilas, the greatest mage in all Bolmern? The head of the Mattilas family was renowned, and from what I’d heard he had the actual skills to match his reputation. He was said to wield magic power comparable to that of a saint. I’d wanted to meet him for quite some time, so I was ecstatic to have him show up at my door.

Shaking Count Mattilas’s hand, I returned his greeting. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Professor Mattilas. I’m Philia Adenauer. I’ve read all of your books on magical theory. It’s an honored to speak with you.”

“Ah, you’ve read my books? I’m happy to hear that.”

Should I try asking him to sign my copies of his books? On second thought, it might be improper.

“Lady Philia, you knew my father’s work all this time? Why didn’t you say anything until now?” Grace asked.

“Professor Mattilas is so famous that it’s only natural for me to know of him. I didn’t think it was necessary to go out of my way to mention it. Besides, I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable by saying I was a fan of your father’s.”

“Philia,” Mia commented, “your idea of modesty is baffling.”

With members of the Mattilas family coming over to say hello, the mansion was livelier than usual. I’d come to appreciate the added energy as a source of joy in my life, of late. At the same time, I understood more clearly than ever how I needed to protect this kingdom. I had faith that I could become stronger every day.

“You and your sisters also have an exorcist guarding you?”

“Yes, a fellow named Klaus came to our place. He’s not here right now, though; he went off to greet his senior exorcist.”

I knew that the head church of Cremoux would take the safety of the Mattilas family seriously. The four sisters had supplied magic to expand the Great Purification Circle, so if anything were to happen to them, the circle would be affected.

“He wandered off?” said Mia. “He sounds awfully free-spirited for a bodyguard.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Grace. “And he seemed so studious, too.”

“Klaus has been keeping watch. I think it’s fine.” Mia implied that Klaus was irresponsible, but I refuted that. As long as he kept a close eye on things, he could do as he wanted to a certain extent without causing any problems.

“Huh?”

“Oh ho ho ho! You two clearly need more training. Look over there.” Emily pointed toward the distance. “Klaus has been chatting with a woman while watching us from higher ground.”

Mia and Grace squinted, trying to focus their gaze on a hilltop that was about five kilometers away.

“Higher ground… You mean that hill up ahead?”

“I can barely see two people. I can’t tell if one of them is Klaus, though.”

Apparently, neither of them could make things out very well.

“It’s not about seeing with your eyes,” I said, “but sensing their magic. It’s one way of perceiving mana.”

“I thought any saint could sense something like that. Oh ho ho!” Emily laughed.

“Your sister has quite the colorful personality,” Mia commented.

“This is one of those rare times I agree with you,” said Grace. “My sister has the most colorful personality in all of Bolmern.”

The mana-perceiving technique wasn’t that difficult, so I was confident that Mia and Grace would be able to learn it in no time.

“He keeps bowing his head while talking to Erza about something. He seems to be asking her about the target she’s guarding… Oh, I think he means me.”

“What? Philia, you can even tell what they’re talking about? Incredible!”

I could read Klaus’s lips well enough to confirm that he was asking Erza about me. He and Erza seemed to have an established top-down hierarchy, with Erza as his senior.

“Emily, can you understand what they’re saying, too?” Grace asked.

“O-of course…is what I wish I could say. Philia Adenauer, don’t think you’ve got an edge on me just because of this.”

“Knock it off, Emily,” said Grace. “You’re making things awkward for Lady Philia. You’d make a better impression by not putting on airs.”

Emily glowered in my direction. Despite their bickering, the two sisters seemed to get along very well. From an outsider’s perspective, did Mia and I seem that close?

“Well then, Lady Philia, we must get going. I wish you all the best in your endeavors.”

The Mattilas family set forth in their carriage, headed for the lodging that the Parnacorta royal family had arranged for them. Klaus chased after the carriage while Erza kicked him all the way.

Was the Saints’ Summit finally about to begin? I hoped against hope that it would succeed without incident.

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It was the eve of the Saints’ Summit. For some reason that had nothing to do with the event, I couldn’t sleep. In spite of myself, my heart was thumping, and I couldn’t calm down. A vaguely unsettling feeling kept me awake.

“At last I’ve found you…” A familiar voice softly and stealthily rang out by my bedside.

That voice… Could it be…?

“What’s wrong, Philia Adenauer, my dear ex-fiancée? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“J…Julius?!”

“Don’t forget my title! That’s ‘Prince Julius’ to you! ‘Your Majesty’ would also be acceptable. After all, I’m going to rule the entire continent!”

Coming to my senses, I became aware of a translucent entity in my room. The specter bore a striking resemblance to Julius. Was it a ghost? No… I remembered that Julius was believed to be possessed by a demon called Asmodeus. This entity was likely a projection controlled by demonic magic from afar.

“I had the wrong idea back then. No other human in this world has a soul as beautiful as yours. Marry me and become mine. This time, I’ll love you with everything I have.”

Words that, for the most part, I could never imagine Julius saying were coming out of his mouth, leaving me speechless. Should I take this as a demon’s attempt to seduce me?

All I could say for sure was that I sensed tremendous magic power emanating from this entity, far beyond anything I'd encountered before. While I couldn't sense anything resembling malice or hostility from it, it was worth keeping my guard up.

"Am I speaking to the demon Asmodeus?"

"Ah, so you can sense my power. You truly are the reincarnation of Archsaint Fianna. Your magic is nothing compared to hers, but you don't seem to be a total fool."

"I heard that you were after my soul."

"Indeed! I have come to take you, body and soul! I'll make your beauty mine for all eternity!"

The entity before me confirmed that he was Asmodeus and declared that he'd come to take my soul. Erza had been right, after all, about a powerful demon targeting me.

"I hoped to see you tremble in fear, but I can get my fill of that some other time. Now, come to me!" The translucent entity extended an arm.

Suddenly, the window shattered as Erza burst into my room. Forming a cross with two fingers, she fired a huge vortex of light at the entity.

"Exorcism Technique: Purification Cannon!"

"What—?!"

Unable to utter another word, the translucent shape vanished.

Had I just witnessed one of the so-called exorcism techniques—spells and rituals used to battle demons? From the looks of it, this system of spellcraft was different from the magic that saints used. It struck me as more similar to ancient magic that involved using and releasing mana from one's surroundings.

The Great Purification Circle was one such mana-using spell, able to expand outward and neutralize the power of any monster it encountered within its range. Purification was designed to counteract the dark magic that shrouded monsters. But the exorcism technique Erza had just used also involved releasing intense purifying power, amplified by mana. The logic behind it

was quite similar to that of the Great Purification Circle. Perhaps both techniques had their roots in the same ancient magic, but branched off and developed independently.

Mammon had said that the Great Purification Circle had almost no effect on demons. But if my hypothesis was correct, perhaps that simply meant that the circle's purification power couldn't get *through* to demons. Demons physically embodied dark magic, which might block the Great Purification Circle's powers.

At least, that was a possibility that had occurred to me after repeatedly observing Mammon's regeneration and the effects of Erza's exorcism techniques.

"...Good evening, Archsaint. Sorry for wrecking your wall with all that glass," Erza apologized, staring at the spot where the translucent entity resembling Julius—and radiating power tinged with malice—had stood.

"It's fine. There are other rooms I can move to. Besides, the damage is fixable." I was still shocked to have seen for myself that Julius truly was possessed by the demon Asmodeus.

"You're as calm as ever," said Erza. "Most other people would be at least a little frightened after an experience like this."

"Oh, I was taken by surprise. It just doesn't show on my face."

As we spoke, Erza took a talisman from her pocket and affixed it to the floor. I could tell the object was infused with considerable magic, but what did she intend to do with it?

"Reveal yourself!"

As Erza uttered those words, the talisman glowed as bright as the sun. A snarling figure materialized.

"Grrrr! Gr-grrr!"

"Wh-what's this...?!"

"Can you see it? This is a low-ranking demon—and one of the culprits behind the vanishings that everyone's talking about."

In the glow of the talisman stood a pitch-black humanoid creature about the size of a puppy. It let out a strange, inhuman

cry that made me want to cover my ears. Its uncanny aura told me this was no ordinary monster.

This was the being that had been abducting women from across the continent? If Erza hadn't told me, I would have had no idea.

"What are low-ranking demons like? It doesn't look sentient enough to have plotted the abductions."

"A creature like Asmodeus, who is the equivalent of demonic nobility, can split their shadow into tiny shards and transform each shard into a minion. Those are what we call low-ranking demons. Since they're fragments of a demon's shadow, they're invisible to most humans."

Erza explained to me what low-ranking demons were. It was terrifying to learn that demons like Asmodeus could create invisible underlings. She continued, "While this thing can't injure or kill people directly, it can take advantage of its invisibility to sneak up on people and transport them to Asmodeus's lair at the junction of the human world and Demon Realm."

"That explains it. The victims can't fight back against an invisible captor. So that's how Asmodeus operates."

"Exactly. That's the main reason I came here. Get it now?"

Asmodeus was after magic-using women and myself in particular. The church of Cremoux had sent exorcists to protect the Mattilas sisters and myself, knowing the powers he had at his disposal.

"We're simply defenseless in the face of demons, aren't we? We can't put up much of a fight against an opponent we can't see."

"Right. That's why we're not asking you to do anything. Just let us protect you."

"I see. That might be the easier and wiser option, but..."

"Gr-grrrr! Gr-grrr!"

"What?!" shouted Erza. "You've got to be kidding me!"

I cast Chain of Holy Light in the direction of the sound. Perhaps if I could figure out where these demons were lurking, I

could purify them the same way I did monsters.

Because purification circles were a type of magic specifically suited for monsters, they were said to be useless against demons. But I was able to exterminate this low-ranking demon by restraining it with Chain of Holy Light. It seemed that the light-based magic used by saints had some effect on demons, after all.

“I guessed this from watching you,” I told Erza, “but it seems that the trick to spotting demons is to gather the condensed magic power in your eyes.”

“You figured that out after seeing me do it only once? Even if you understand the logic behind it, it’s not an easy skill to master, you know.”

“There’s a similar technique in ancient magic, although it was used for detecting traps. If I teach it to Mia, Master Hildegard, Grace, and her sisters, they should be able to use it in no time.” Anyone familiar with ancient magic would find it easy enough to master this technique. I made plans to tell everyone about it in the morning.

“Guess your title and your reputation aren’t just for show, after all. No wonder Asmodeus wants you as a vessel.” Erza sliced two demons in half with her red falchion.

That weapon of hers seemed to be quite effective against demons. The exception was Mammon, who emerged unscathed from its attacks again and again.

“Asmodeus himself must be somewhere else,” I remarked.

“Good observation. What you saw was just a projection of the possessed Julius. Asmodeus’s real body is far away. He probably sent that projection to assess you, then used his minions to try to snatch you away.”

So my suspicions were correct: That translucent Julius wasn’t the real thing. I’d never seen a ghost before, but I could confidently say that I couldn’t sense any life in him.

“I’ll stay awake to keep watch, so you can go back to bed. You’re in charge of tomorrow’s Saints’ Summit, aren’t you?”

“All right, then. Please give me around five minutes. I need to focus my mana to ensure I’ll be refreshed and ready to go after a proper rest…”

For some reason, Erza stared at me in astonishment. “Huh. Now I understand why Lena and Leonardo were unfazed by us. You’re in a class by yourself, Archsaint.”

Had I said something strange? Between this and Prince Osvalt’s comments about how much I’d changed, I couldn’t help but worry about how others perceived me.

In any case, the Saints’ Summit was the next day. If I didn’t want to cause anyone trouble, I had to focus.

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A new day began, finally marking the start of the Saints’ Summit—an unprecedented international conference attended by saints from all over the continent—in the kingdom of Parnacorta.

Out of all the saints attending, I asked Erza about one person in particular.

A descendant of Archsaint Fianna Aesfill, she worked as a saint in her homeland of Dalbert, headquarters of the church of Cremoux. After Erza told me I was the reincarnation of Fianna, I became curious as to what Fianna’s descendant was like.

“Erza, is Saint Alice Aesfill of Dalbert guarded by an exorcist, too?”

“Alice? No, she’s an exorcist as well as a saint, so she can use exorcism techniques. She’s not as versatile as you, though. She doesn’t know purification magic.”

“Does that mean she can fight demons?”

“That’s right. Of course, she also has Dalbert’s top bodyguards protecting her.”

Alice didn’t have an exorcist protecting her because she could fight demons on her own. Since the head church in Dalbert

employed exorcists, was it possible that the Aesfills had used exorcism techniques for generations?

As I chatted with Erza in the garden, Mia and Aunt Hildegard showed up.

“Philia!” Mia greeted me with a yawn. “You’re up early as usual”

“Mia!” Aunt Hildegard scolded. “You’ve been slacking off since you came here!”

“Nice to see you in high spirits so early in the morning, Mother.”

Ever since Aunt Hildegard adopted her, Mia had been undergoing rigorous training, but the two seemed to be getting along well. That was a relief to see.

“Hey, when you really think about it, isn’t this amazing? I never thought I’d be able to meet saints from other kingdoms.”

“Even without putting much thought into it, it truly is remarkable. But as a saint of Girtonia, remember to behave in a way that won’t bring shame to our kingdom.”

“Yes, yes. Come on, Philia, let’s go!” As Hildegard admonished Mia, she took my hand and led me down the road to Parnacorta Castle. The castle’s conference room would be the venue for the summit.

I remembered the last time I had been in that conference room, warning Prince Osvalt and his advisors that the Demon Realm was approaching.

“Ah! Lady Philia, Lady Mia, and Lady Hildegard, you’re already here. For security, we not only have the Knights of Parnacorta on hand, but we’ve managed to coordinate with top-notch guards from each kingdom. Rest assured, everything’s going along swimmingly.”

“Your Highness,” I said, “thank you for working so hard. You must have been up since dawn. I’ll drop by to say hello again later.”

When we reached the palace, we saw Prince Osvalt personally overseeing the security effort. Normally, that was Sir Philip’s job. But since he was guarding me, and forces from other

kingdoms were also deployed here, His Highness had been placed directly in charge of security efforts. There were diplomatic reasons for the choice as well. This was his first job since he'd been essentially put under house arrest, so he was eagerly committed to it.

"Your Highness," said Mia, "it's been a while. How are things going with my sister?"

Prince Osvalt glanced at me with a conflicted expression, as if he were scrambling to come up with an answer. "Oh no, Lady Mia, I've told you before, Lady Philia and I are…"

"…Your Highness?"

Once again, Mia caused trouble for His Highness by asking a weird question.

"Um, that reminds me. Lady Philia, there's something I want to discuss with you after the Saints' Summit. How about we have dinner together?"

"Er, yes. It'd be my pleasure to join you."

Why did I answer him so quickly? Thinking it over, I realized that if it were just the two of us at dinner, I'd have to carefully consider a number of things, such as what to wear. I vaguely remembered Mia and Lena telling me that.

Normally, I made it a point to think things over carefully before settling on a course of action. In this case, however, there was one thing I was sure of: His Highness's invitation made me happy. Declining was not an option. Somehow, situations like this were becoming more frequent lately.

"Oh!" Mia exclaimed.

"Don't you 'oh' them," said Aunt Hildegard. "Enough of your meddling. We should keep moving."

Giving Prince Osvalt a slight bow, Aunt Hildegard dragged Mia on into the palace. Why was she in a rush to leave?

"Your younger sister's a sweetheart," said His Highness. "I get why you'd risk your life to protect her."

"Yes, she really is too good for me."

“I bet she turned out so good because she had you for a big sister.”

I was glad that Prince Osvalt was so ready to compliment Mia. That sweet little sister of mine was my pride and joy, after all.

“By the way, Philip brought over some of the demon-repelling weapons you designed the other day. We’re doing what we can to produce as many copies as possible.”

“Thank you. I used Erza’s falchion as reference to create something I think could be mass-produced cheaply, though I’m not sure whether they’ll be effective.”

“I know. Unlike monsters, we don’t know much about demons, after all. But Lady Erza gave your weapons her seal of approval, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. She said they were well-made, and that she’d take the blueprints back to the exorcists’ headquarters.”

I was pleased that the weapons I designed earned some praise from Erza, though I hadn’t expected her to test their effectiveness by blowing off Mammon’s head.

But after what had happened last night…

“Your Highness, will you please take these?”

“What are these? Eyeglasses? My eyesight’s pretty decent, y’know.”

“Last night, Erza told me that ordinary people can’t see low-ranking demons, so I tried my hand at creating glasses that make them visible.”

“Tried your hand, huh? You just made these?”

“The mechanism behind them is fairly simple.”

The logical first step against an invisible enemy was to make them visible. Thank goodness my jewelry-making hobby had prepared me to develop these glasses. I thought I ought to make sure Prince Osvalt could see demons, since he was in charge of security. And so, as a precaution, I handed the glasses to him.

“Well then, Your Highness, I look forward to dinner.”

“Yeah, same here. Good luck with the summit.”

After seeing Prince Osvalt off, I stepped into the palace’s conference room. All the while, I hoped from the bottom of my heart that nothing would ruin a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this summit.

***

“Lady Philia has arrived!”

“Whoa!”

As soon as I entered the conference room, I was startled by the sound of unanimous applause. Saints from all the kingdoms on the continent—Girtonia, Bolmern, Dalbert, Alectron, Gyptia, and Ashbrugge—welcomed me warmly. They were all accompanied by guards from their respective kingdoms. The energy in the room was so overwhelming that I was momentarily lost for words.

Until very recently, I hadn’t imagined a gathering like this could be possible. It was inconceivable for saints from every kingdom to all be available at the same time. Knowing that the Great Purification Circle had made the Saints’ Summit possible made me feel like expanding it to cover the entire continent really was worth the effort.

But since the beings behind the vanishings were unaffected by the purification circle, we had to be on the lookout for danger. With that in mind, I tried to introduce myself, but…

“Lady Philia! It’s an honor to meet you! I’m from Gyptia—”

“I’ve heard so much about your endeavors. In Ashbrugge…”

“So today’s big star is finally here. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m from the Kingdom of Alectron—”

Erm, well…saints from all over the continent were gathered here, and they were as excited as I was.

Although I knew the saints by name, I’d never met them in person before. Kingdoms with multiple saints, like Bolmern, were

few and far between. It was rare that a saint could leave her kingdom. I'd never expected to be so warmly received by my fellow saints, even if we were all comrades, doing our best to carry out our duties in the name of the same God.

Brushing aside my vague sense of anxiety, I decided to direct my energies into making something meaningful out of these lovely encounters.

"Philia, you sure are popular."

"Come on, Mia. It's not funny."

Before I knew it, I'd been declared chairperson of the summit. I took out the documents I'd prepared. Mia, who sat next to me, gave a carefree laugh as she watched me try to deal with everyone.

Did I really look so funny? Part of me wanted to reexamine my recent actions, but I decided to focus on fulfilling my role as chairperson.

"Now, for the first topic on the agenda, I thought we should discuss the vanishing incidents. Is that all right with everyone?"

The vanishings were the obvious choice for opening the summit. They were the talk of the entire continent, as well as the issue that we all had to be the most vigilant about. I'd decided that our first priority should be to exchange information, discuss ideas for countermeasures, and develop self-defense methods.

Since there were no objections, I wasted no time sharing the truth behind the vanishings.

"Regarding the mass disappearances of women with magical powers, an investigation by the head church of Cremoux has concluded with certainty that they are the work of demons."

At the mention of demons, many heads tilted in confusion. That was understandable. I could confidently say that I'd read extensively on magic and ancient history, yet the existence of demons was new to me. I recounted what Erza had told me, informing the audience that the vanishings were connected to the approach of the Demon Realm, and that an incredibly powerful

demon named Asmodeus was amassing magic to revive Archsaint Fianna.

As I began to talk about exorcists, a woman with short blue hair hesitantly raised her hand.

“I-I’m the saint of Dalbert, Alice Aesfill. I also serve as an exorcist for our head church.”

She spoke softly and timidly. So this was Alice, the descendant of Archsaint Fianna Aesfill.

“Asmodeus’s ultimate target is Miss Philia,” Alice continued. “Until he captures her, he’s likely to keep his other captives alive. If we want any hope of rescuing these women, we must come together with our combined abilities to protect Miss Philia to the death.”

So long as Asmodeus failed to capture me, the women he captured to draw power from would be unharmed. I could see the logic behind that. It just meant I had to brace myself and maintain constant vigilance.

But it also meant everyone else had to shoulder the burden of protecting me.

Mia and Grace both stood up at once and launched into proud speeches.

“No problem! I’ll protect my sister. Mother, you won’t mind if I stay behind in Parnacorta, will you?”

“I won’t let Mia outshine me! I, Grace Mattilas, will put the prestigious Mattilas family name on the line to protect Lady Philia!”

Their determination was exceptional, but wouldn’t it cause trouble if they were away from their homeland for so long?

“Hey, Philia,” called Mia. “Wouldn’t you feel safer with me around? Don’t worry! I made it through Mother’s cruel training, so I have no weaknesses remaining!”

“Now, Mia, don’t give people the wrong idea of me. Philia never said a word against my training.” Aunt Hildegard glared at Mia.

I wasn't sure whether "cruel" was the right word, but Aunt Hildegard had certainly toughened me against any level of pain and tribulation. I'd been hurt when Julius broke off our engagement and sold me to Parnacorta, but the fortitude I'd built during my intensive training had made me able to adapt to my circumstances right away.

"I am Lady Philia's number one apprentice, and it's natural for an apprentice to protect her master," Grace declared.

"Wait just a moment," I interrupted. "Mia and Grace, please think of your own kingdoms first. As saints, protecting your kingdom should be your top priority. I'll be fine." It wouldn't be a good idea for Mia and Grace to stay behind in Parnacorta. I couldn't let them neglect their own kingdoms in favor of protecting me.

"Hold that thought! Philia Adenauer, that's the wrong mindset!"

"Er...Emily?"

Why would Emily object to my reminder that a saint should prioritize her own kingdom? Had I said something off again?

"Mia and Grace *are* putting their kingdoms first! We took our kingdoms' interests into consideration, and concluded that protecting you keeps our homelands safe!"

I didn't know what to say to that.

Opening the red fan she carried in one quick snap, Emily explained, "The one sowing terror across this continent is targeting you, after all. To fight him, shouldn't we surround you and prepare to attack en masse? You're in capable hands, so relax and let us protect you!"

So protecting me was directly linked to ensuring peace across the continent? I didn't want to be a burden. Was I relying too much on others again? But they were right—I wasn't alone. I had many people supporting me.

I still had trouble accepting help from others, but after listening to Emily's words, I started to think that I ought to trust in my fellow saints.

Since the question of our next course of action had come up, the discussion shifted from the vanishings themselves to countermeasures against demons. I had Alice lead the conversation, asking her to teach us skills such as capturing low-ranking demons. We then exchanged information on barrier magic and healing spells, and I gave a lecture on the basics of ancient magic and how to cast a Great Purification Circle.

Casting a Great Purification Circle required an enormous amount of magic, but through my research, I'd managed to come up with a more efficient way to convert mana, which I'd already taught Mia and Grace.

As a result, I was now able to maintain the Great Purification Circle across the entire continent on my own. This freed me from the inconvenience of having to wear a magic necklace at all times.

Mia said that even with this optimized process, it was still difficult to cast and expand a Great Purification Circle. Still, I believed that with time and effort, any saint on the continent could master it.

Having reached a lull in the conversation, we decided to take a lunch break. Just as I thought I'd have a chance to catch my breath, Alice approached me.

"Miss Philia, pl-please allow me to introduce myself once again. I-I'm Alice Aesfill, saint of the kingdom of Dalbert."

I'd heard from Erza that Alice was quite capable as an exorcist, so I'd pressed for her thoughts during the morning discussion. But she seemed just as shy as I was. In hindsight, I felt like I'd made a mistake by putting her on the spot.

"I'm Philia Adenauer. I apologize for earlier. Since you're both a saint and an exorcist, I really wanted to hear what you had to say, but I'm afraid I made things awkward for you."

"No, I-I'm the one who should apologize. I fumbled my words lots of times... Um, er, what I said was too confusing, wasn't it? I-I'm awfully bad at this. I can't speak properly when I'm nervous. Even my childhood friend Erza was glaring at me."

“Not at all. Your comments were concise and easy to understand. You were very helpful. You said you and Erza are childhood friends? I owe her quite a debt.”

Although Alice spoke with a lack of confidence, her explanation of how to take countermeasures against demons had been perfectly clear, even to those who were learning about demons for the first time. I was impressed. Of course, the sole saint of the great kingdom of Dalbert was bound to be exceptional.

Erza had never mentioned being friends with Alice. But then again, she was hardly the type to talk about her personal life, so it wasn’t that surprising.

“H-has Erza done anything rude? Like suddenly cutting off Mammon’s head…”

“Yes, but don’t worry. I’ve gotten used to it.”

“N-no, that’s not acceptable. That Erza! I told her so many times to show some manners.”

Tears stood out in Alice’s eyes. She and Erza must really be close. I wished I had a bond like that with someone. Back in Girtonia, I’d had no one I could call a close friend, but now…

“Somehow, talking to you doesn’t feel like talking to a stranger,” said Alice. “Your presence is so warm. I can see why people believe you’re the reincarnation of my ancestor, Fianna Aesfill.”

“Really? Even now, I still don’t understand why anyone would think such a thing.”

“I meant what I said. Just minutes ago, I was so nervous, but now, as you can see, I’m not quivering one bit. Please keep an eye on Erza for me.” With a quick bow, Alice left the conference room with her guards from Dalbert, who had been waiting for us.

In addition to taking measures to defend themselves, all the other saints seemed to have personal guards at their sides. With saints and their bodyguards moving in lockstep, surely everyone would be ready to take action if Asmodeus appeared.

Deciding to get some fresh air in the imperial courtyard, I left the conference room.

In the courtyard, I encountered a familiar figure.

“Philip, are you doing some kind of special training?”

“Lady Philia! Are you on break? The spear you invented is incredibly easy to use! No matter how many demons attack, I, Philip, will protect you—please leave it to me!” Swinging a red spear around the courtyard, Philip replied in his usual energetic voice.

Apparently, demon-repelling weapons were already being forged from the prototypes I’d handed over to Prince Osvalt the other day, and Philip had received his.

Inspired by Erza’s falchion, the spear had a head made of processed, magic-absorbing metal. However, what set it apart from Erza’s weapon was its ability to absorb magic.

Since neither Philip nor Prince Osvalt had magical abilities, they couldn’t fortify their weapons by infusing them with magic. But this spear could absorb a demon’s magic and suppress its ability to regenerate. In short, Philip could put his extraordinary strength to good use against demons.

“You’ve been so discouraged since our first encounter with Erza and Mammon,” I said. “I designed these weapons to convey my gratitude to you.”

“Lady Philia, you did all this for us?” Philip wailed and burst into tears. “I’m so touched! I can’t stop crying!”

I recalled that when we first met, Sir Philip cried upon hearing me talk about Mia. He was such a tenderhearted person.

“Sir Philip, you’re so noisy!” Lena exclaimed.

“You should not trouble Lady Philia with such displays,” Himari added. “In my homeland, a real warrior sheds tears only at the death of a parent.”

“Calm down, Philip,” said Leonardo. “I rushed over here thinking something had happened.”

Lena, Himari, and Leonardo had stealthily watched over me, inside and outside the conference room, while the discussions were ongoing. Upon hearing Philip cry, they ran out of hiding.

Philip gulped. “Lady Philia, please forgive me for making such a fool of myself!”

“Don’t apologize. I didn’t expect you to be so appreciative of your weapon. You made me happy.”

No doubt smarting from the scolding he’d gotten from my personal guards, Philip still had a rueful look on his face, but I was genuinely happy. Seeing joy on others’ faces made my efforts worth it.

“Oh, Lady Philia made you one of those demon-repelling weapons, huh?” said Lena. “I got a dagger!”

“I shall slay all of Lady Philia’s enemies with this kunai.”

“These red shoes are rather stylish,” said Leonardo. “With these on, I feel young again.”

They all seemed to like the finished versions of their weapons as much as Philip liked his.

As I thought back to all the times they’d protected me without interfering with my work, I once again felt grateful for their help.

The break was almost over, and I wanted to get back ahead of time. Telling Philip and my bodyguards that I’d be counting on them, I parted ways with them and made my way to the conference room.

I walked with a spring in my step. Even after serious discussions about urgent matters such as the vanishings, I was able to relax after a few moments with my friends.

“Oh, Miss Philia!” Prince Reichardt, the crown prince of Parnacorta, called out to me in the hallway. “Perfect timing. I’ve finished compiling the budget for anti-demon countermeasures, so I thought I might visit the conference room and greet the saints.”

“Thank you for your hard work, Your Highness.”

Apparently, he’d been planning to hand me the necessary documents and meet the saints for himself, while he was at it. Prince Reichardt had worked harder than anyone to ensure that the Saints’ Summit would be a success. He’d taken the initiative on numerous fronts, from managing personnel assignments to arranging accommodations for the visiting saints and their bodyguards.

A few days ago, Prince Osvalt told me that if Parnacorta’s previous saint, Elizabeth, were alive today, she would’ve been eager to take part in the summit. Perhaps Prince Reichardt felt he was honoring his late fiancée’s wishes. Elizabeth was still very much alive in his heart.

“How goes the summit? Have you learned much?”

“Of course. Each kingdom has its own specialization, so the information we glean from this summit will aid us for years to come.”

“That’s good to hear. If it’s beneficial to you, it’s beneficial to Parnacorta. We’re all happy to know that this summit has been fruitful for you.”

Prince Reichardt truly held me in high regard as a saint, to believe that my needs and Parnacorta’s were one and the same. Privately, I felt that was an exaggeration, but I was honored that he expected so much of me.

Some time ago, His Highness had proposed to me. But many things had happened since then, and we’d never found the right time to talk about it. I knew I ought to respond to his proposal as soon as possible, but…

“That reminds me—I heard that Your Highness was the one who chose the date for the Saints’ Summit. It’s not a particularly auspicious day on the calendar. Did you choose it for some other reason?”

His Highness chuckled. “As perspicacious as ever, Miss Philia. Most people wouldn’t have wondered about a detail like that. You’re right—for a gathering as special as this one, I should’ve

chosen one of the most auspicious dates on the calendar. I failed to consider that."

Was I wrong? I must have been overthinking things when I imagined there being a significance to today's date. His Highness seemed like the kind of person who'd check the calendar to see if a given date had any special meaning. Now I felt a bit embarrassed for reading too much into things.

"Forgive me for asking such a strange question," I said. "I've always been the type to notice small details…so much so that people call me nitpicky. I've been trying to do better…"

"No, you guessed correctly. I chose the date of the Saints' Summit based on my personal feelings."

"Your Highness's personal feelings?"

Frankly, I was taken aback. That didn't sound remotely like the Prince Reichardt I knew. He assessed everything rationally, and his desire to maintain peace and order across the kingdom aligned with my beliefs as a saint. I found it easy to relate to him.

"Today was to be the day I married Elizabeth at the cathedral where the saints are scheduled to gather when the summit ends."

"I-is that so? I'm terribly sorry for my insensitive probing. That was unbecoming of me."

I couldn't believe I'd made such an error in judgment. But then, how could I possibly have known today, of all days, was supposed to be the wedding day of Prince Reichardt and the late Saint Elizabeth?

"Don't worry about it. I know it's unlike me. I just thought that if I scheduled some other event for this day, it would help me forget about its original significance. And then, perhaps, I could start to move on." Prince Reichardt confessed this with a melancholy look on his face.

"Your Highness, you can't change your feelings. No other event would make you forget the grief of losing Elizabeth…and that's because she lives on in your heart."

"You're right. Liz…Elizabeth…is still here in my heart. How strange. I tried so hard to forget about the day I lost her, only to

find my feelings haven't faded one bit. Somehow, that's a relief to me."

Prince Reichardt smiled quietly, placing a hand on his chest. Perhaps he was afraid to forget those memories, no matter how painful and sad they were. Though I considered it important to come to terms with the past and overcome tragedy, I realized it was just as important to treasure the past.

"Lady Philia, about my proposal…"

"Y-yes," I stammered. "I remember. I apologize for taking so long to respond."

"Not at all. We have an emergency on our hands right now, so I don't mean to rush you. I hope you'll take the time to think it over when things settle down."

I was relieved His Highness didn't want to force me to make a decision. Indeed, considering that we faced a danger as serious as the rise of the Demon Realm, now was not the time for marriage.

"What concerns me is that you, too, may have someone else in your heart, Lady Philia."

"Someone…in my heart?"

Prince Osvalt?

As soon as Prince Reichardt said that, for some reason, Prince Osvalt came to mind.

What was this? How embarrassing…

"…Er, well, how should I put it? Someone who's made his way into my heart… Well…"

"So you *do* have someone else in your heart and mind. I see. I suppose I should brace myself for rejection."

"Your Highness?"

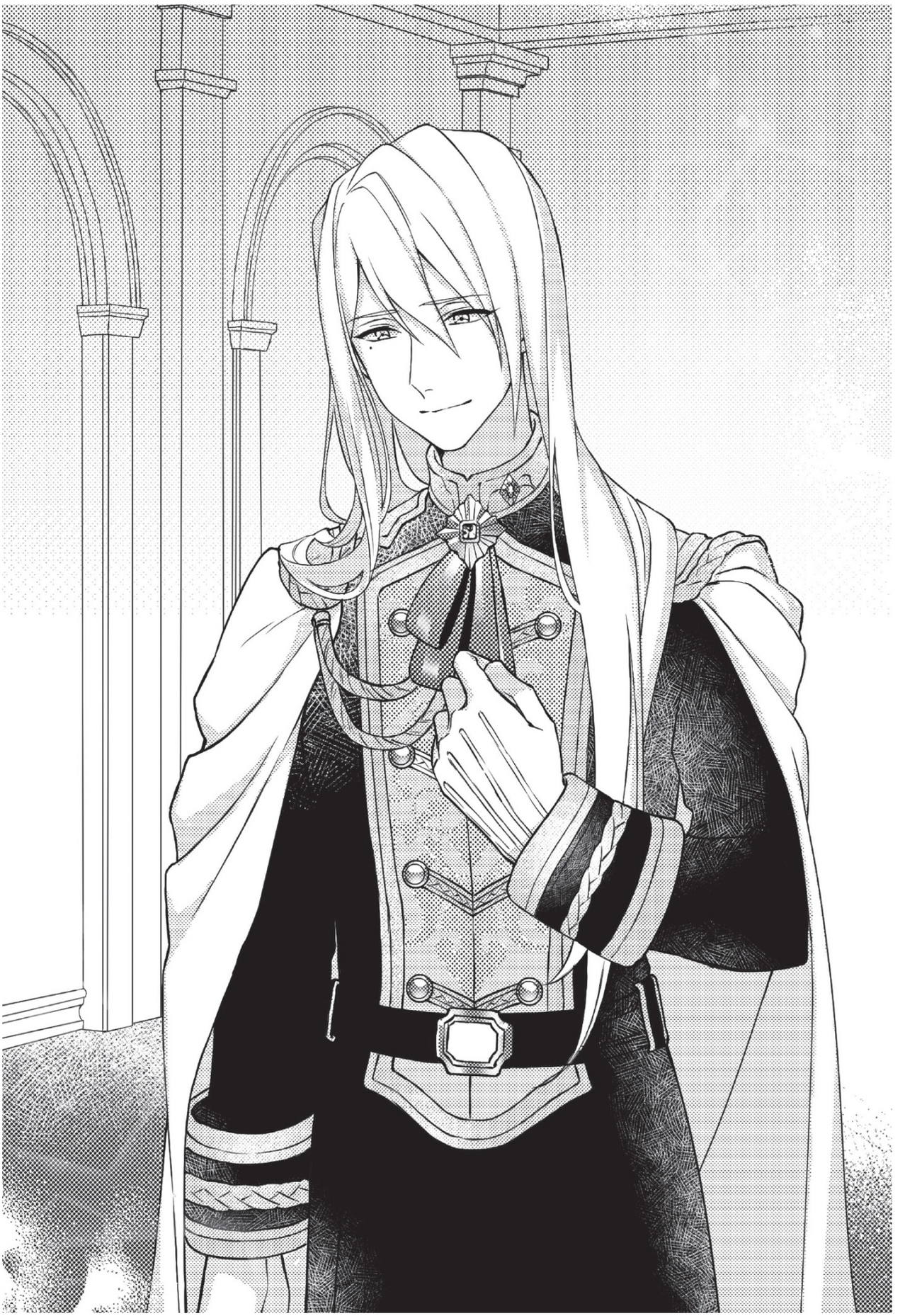
"Well, Miss Philia, I'll leave the choice to you. Please take good care of my brother."

Prince Reichardt scanned my face for my reaction, all the while giving me a significant look that seemed to convey some

deeper meaning. Then he smiled. He opened the door to the conference room and ushered me in.

Take care of his brother? What had I done to make him say such a thing?

After all the saints returned from their break, and Prince Reichardt finished greeting them. We moved to the next items on the agenda—sharing information on casting barriers and optimizing our healing magic.



After that, the topic shifted to training methods. Many hands went up.

“What kind of training did you have, Miss Philia?”

“That’s something I, too, would like to know.”

“Thanks to Lady Philia’s intensive training, I’ve become much more powerful than before.”

“Hmm…that topic doesn’t really interest me. But if you really want to talk about it, I’ll listen.”

Training methods? Both Mia and I had been taught by Aunt Hildegard, so anyone who was curious ought to ask her. She’d been quiet thus far, out of consideration for the younger saints, but she was exemplary both as a saint and a leader. Personally, I’d love for everyone to hear her theories.

“I honed my skills under the guidance of my mentor, Saint Hildegard. And so, Master, I’d like it if you would tell everyone about your training methods.”

“Me? Philia, you don’t have to give me any credit. Just describe your training in your own words.”

“Oh, no, I still lack experience as an instructor. Please do the honors, Master.”

My master sighed. “Well, I guess that leaves me no choice…”

With that, she launched into a lecture.

She described the numerous forms of training I’d gone through: spending a month on a snowy mountain in winter, hanging on the verge of death to expand my limits, being buried alive in the desert to learn to feel the power of the earth, sleeping on a mountain of needles as trace magic ran constantly through my body, and so on. Though I had to admit they’d been a bit harsh, remembering all those experiences made me feel a rush of nostalgia.

Coming out of my reverie, I looked around in surprise. Everyone had been animatedly exchanging opinions thus far. Why had they suddenly fallen silent?

“Just as I thought… Everyone’s wincing because Mother’s training is just too much. That part about you sleeping on a mountain of needles was a joke, right?” Mia laughed nervously. “Please tell me she was just kidding. Otherwise…”

Her voice lowered to a whisper, she informed me that everyone was cringing because of the list of training methods my master had just listed off. Come to think of it, when I’d told Prince Osvalt about my training, he’d said that just hearing about it made him want to give up immediately… All the same, I felt like it was a highly efficient regimen for building up one’s saintly abilities.

“Oh ho ho ho ho! I see now that Adenauer-style training relies heavily on brute force. Allow me, Emily Mattilas, to teach you the refined and elegant secret training methods of the Mattilas family!” Emily broke the silence that fell upon the conference room by introducing the Mattilas family’s unique training methods.

“Emily, you’re being rude again,” said Grace.

Emily ignored her. “First is training to increase one’s magical power. With the aid of rare herbs that grow near Lake Elton…”

The Mattilases were among the most prominent magical families on the continent. All four Mattilas daughters had achieved sainthood; in fact, Grace became a saint at a younger age than Mia or I. From my interactions with her, I could tell she’d been subject to an efficient regimen.

And the results of that training were put to good use at the conference. Emily’s lecture was quite educational.

The summit continued with a lecture from Alice on the basics of exorcism. “N-now, let me teach you some introductory techniques. D-demons are basically…” She gave us tips to defend ourselves if we encountered a demon.

“One problem is that demons can possess and control humans. Possessed humans…”

“Intruder! There’s a stranger in the palace!”

Midway through Alice’s lecture, a Parnacortan soldier ran into the conference room.

An intruder? What exactly was going on?

Just as suddenly, the soldier collapsed on the floor with a thud.

“Thanks for showing me the way, but now your job is done. I have business with the lovely Philia Adenauer. Philia! My soulmate! We meet again!”

“Julius?!”

Julius appeared from behind the fallen soldier. He wore what appeared to be prisoner’s garb, but it was unmistakably him. The night before, his apparition had been semi-transparent, but now he stood before me plain as day. Was he here in the flesh?

Mia and Aunt Hildegard looked particularly shocked. That was understandable, given how hard they’d worked to depose Julius.

“Oh, what do we have here? It’s the vixen who betrayed me and got me thrown behind bars. Well, whatever. As long as I can get my hands on Philia…”

Julius accused Mia of being a traitor. And last night, he’d alluded to breaking off our engagement. Apparently, possessing Julius gave Asmodeus access to his memories.

“I see you’re as disgusting as ever,” said Mia, “even after your body’s been hijacked by that Asmodeus guy. Well, bring it on! I’ll lock you up again! Holy Chain!”

As Julius cast a look in Mia’s direction, she was already casting a spell with unbelievable speed, conjuring chains of light.

Julius turned back to me. “Philia. I couldn’t get a good look at you in the dark last night, but I see now that your silver hair is as lovely as ever. And your soul, too, is beautiful beyond compare. A human of your quality ought to be mine.”

Mia gasped. “My magic didn’t work?”

Julius strolled toward me, nonchalantly deflecting Mia’s chains of light. I could sense a terrifyingly intense concentration of magic within him. Mia’s powers were nothing to him.

I faced him. “Asmodeus, what are you trying to get at by pretending to be Julius?”

“There’s no rhyme or reason to it, really. I guess I’ve just gotten used to this form. I fell in love at first sight with your beautiful silver hair and the presence of Fianna’s soul within you. For our love to grow, you’d prefer me in human form, not my true form, right? You nearly married this man, after all.”

I had no idea what he was going on about. But the Julius—no, Asmodeus—who stood before me spoke in a gentle and affectionate tone, albeit one tinged with condescension. I didn’t pick up any murderous or malicious intent from him. Could he genuinely be in love with Fianna?

“Miss Philia, please step back!” said Alice. “Exorcism techniques are the key to handling demons! I’ll drive him off!”

“Hmph… So there’s an exorcist here. The most annoying pest around. Sorry, Philia. It must be hard for you to hear my sweet nothings over all this noise.”

Purple light radiated from Asmodeus’s eyes. In quick succession, he conjured doors so small that they could fit in his hands, from which numerous black blobs emerged.

Were those fragments of Asmodeus’s shadow? I gathered magical power in my eyes and watched the blobs take on humanoid shapes and fly into the air.

“So I’m going to get rid of everyone else in this room besides you.”

With eerie calmness and sinister insanity, Asmodeus released the low-ranking demons he’d created. Waves of overwhelmingly powerful and unsettling energy emanated from him. When he said that he’d get rid of everyone, he meant it literally.

Hordes of low-ranking demons swarmed the saints, trying to spirit them away somewhere.

“Silver Judgment!”

Mia unleashed a rain of silver cross-shaped knives, one of her signature purification techniques.

Magic came in many varieties. Saints were particularly skilled in light-based magic, which is highly effective against monsters. In

addition to elemental magic based on earth, water, fire, and wind, there was also dark magic, but I'd seldom had any use for that.

Mia's Silver Judgment was unparalleled in efficacy. With it, she took down one low-ranking demon after another.

Earlier in the day, I'd shared my method for spotting low-ranking demons, and it was already being put to good use. Mia gathered magical power in her eyes and focused to spot and capture the demons.

"Exorcism Technique: Demon-Devouring Crow!"

Alice deployed an exorcism technique similar to Erza's. She pulled a talisman from her pocket, from which a crow bathed in silver light flew. It proceeded to tear at the demons. I'd read of similar spells in books of ancient magic, but this was the first time I'd seen one in practice. Perhaps, as I'd theorized, exorcism techniques had the same fundamentals as ancient magic, but developed differently from the kind of magic saints were familiar with.

"Damn it!" Asmodeus spat. "I just want the two of us to spend a little quiet time together. You exorcists and saints are such a pain! Such puny weaklings, and yet you're always in the way!"

Once again, purple light radiated from Asmodeus's eyes. This time, a door so large that it almost reached the ceiling appeared behind him. Five demons with the faces of black foxes emerged. They were clad in black robes, and though they walked on two legs, they were clearly not human.

Perhaps those were mid-ranking demons, roughly on the same level as Satanachia. According to Erza, such demons were animal-like in appearance, and they possessed far higher levels of intelligence and power than low-ranking demons. Many could speak, just like Mammon.

"Lord Asmodeus, don't hesitate to give us your orders."

"Seize all the women with magical powers. Do what you want with the rest. Kill them, for all I care. Ah, but don't lay a hand on the woman named Philia—she's precious to me."

“As you wish!” The mid-ranking demons voiced their assent in unison. They glanced blankly in my direction. Then, with a force powerful enough to crack the marble floor, they leapt forward and began their assault.

“What are these things?!”

“Please step back, Lady Saint!”

“What kind of power is this?! You beasts!”

The demons’ display of overwhelming agility and inhuman strength sent the entire room into a panic. So long as Asmodeus was around, he could most likely keep producing reinforcements.

“I see,” I said thoughtfully. “The fastest way to turn this situation around is to drive you, the root of all this trouble, away.”

“Then come to my realm. You’re beautiful as you are, but I’ve got the perfect vessel for your soul.” Asmodeus held out a hand to me.

I had no idea where his realm was, but leaving the capital of Parnacorta would break the Great Purification Circle, so I couldn’t let him spirit me away. If the Great Purification Circle were to disintegrate, swarms of monsters would spawn once more, throwing the continent into chaos.

“You’re smart enough to get it, aren’t you? Philia, your magical power may be impressive for a human, but it’s nowhere close to mine. I’d hate for you to get hurt. But don’t worry; I want to take you home to my realm in perfect condition.”

I said nothing in response.

“Of course, if you try to resist—”

As Asmodeus said, it was impossible for my magic to hurt him in any way. This had been clear from the moment he brushed Mia’s attacks aside.

Asmodeus still held out his hand, a tender look on his face. I had no choice…

“Snap out of it! Hurry up and get out of here!”

“What?! Damn it, an exorcist?”

A familiar red falchion sliced through Asmodeus's outstretched arm. As I expected, he didn't bleed at all. Apparently, now that Julius was possessed by a demon, his body was becoming more like a demon's.

The figure swinging the blade was, of course, none other than Erza. She truly was one of my most reliable bodyguards.

"Hey, stop! I'm not with these shady guys! Big Sis, I think people are getting the wrong idea about me in this form!"

"You damned demon! Who are you fooling, taking the form of a strange, talking tigerlike beast?"

"You're obviously in league with those things!"

"I won't let you harm Lady Philia and the rest of the saints!"

Adding to the chaos, Mammon ran into the conference room, pursued by soldiers. Seeing a gigantic white cat, the soldiers must have assumed he was one of the invading demons.

"Mammon, my fellow demon! I see you've been reduced to an exorcist's pet." Asmodeus seemed familiar with Mammon. Was he well-known in the Demon Realm?

"Oh, Lord Asmodeus, is that you? Your looks have really improved."

"You've always been a fool."

"Sorry, but I really don't care how I come off to others...well, except for the ladies, of course."

Grinning, Mammon continued cracking jokes as he returned to human form. Even faced with Asmodeus's massive power, he didn't act afraid at all.

"Big Sis, now's your chance! With Lord Asmodeus possessing such a scrawny weakling, he's not in top form at all. If we're gonna defeat him, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"Yes, you may be right. But first..."

Erza swung her falchion around with unbelievable speed, exterminating low-ranking demons in quick succession. In no time, their death throes reverberated across the room. They

disappeared one by one, until at last only five mid-ranking demons and Asmodeus remained.

As I'd thought, Erza, who'd spent so long specializing in demon extermination, had an edge on saints when it came to fighting demons.

"Miss Erza," Klaus reported, "I've evacuated everyone in the vicinity. Now all that's left is this room."

"Great job," Erza called. "Klaus and Alice, I need your support. From here on out, it's an exorcist's battle! Saints, including the archsaint, I need you to get out of here." Erza called out to Klaus and Alice to come closer while instructing the rest of us to leave.

Under normal circumstances I'd trust them to handle the fighting, but Asmodeus's power was far from ordinary. If the exorcists weren't in peak form, they'd be all the more in danger. I couldn't just leave them.

"Wait! Exorcist's fight or not, it would be a stain on the Mattilas family name to turn tail and run! I, Emily Mattilas, shall join this fight against the demon lord!"

"I'm with my sister," said Grace. "I, too, will fight!"

"Philia, I won't let you do this alone," said Mia. "Now it's my turn to protect you!"

Emily, Grace, and Mia flanked me, concentrating their magical powers in their hands.

Everyone was trying to protect me. Before, my first instinct might have been guilt, but now I was overflowing with happiness. Nonetheless, I didn't intend to sacrifice a single life.

"What a pain. How dare you come between Philia and me!"

I gasped. Asmodeus's magical power suddenly doubled—no, far more than doubled!

No sooner had I sensed this abnormally drastic increase than an enormous explosion rocked the palace.

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The moment we felt the explosion, all the saints cast shields of light in an attempt to protect everyone in the conference room. However, the impact of the blast sent us flying back.

When I came to my senses, I saw the aftermath of the demons' rampage in the rubble scattered across the room. But where was Asmodeus?

"He's looking down on you." Aunt Hildegard pointed to Asmodeus, who gazed at me while suspended in midair.

"Master...thank goodness you're all right."

By chance, Aunt Hildegard had landed close to me. I hoped Mia and the others were also unharmed.

Asmodeus's arm had regenerated, like a lizard's tail. No wonder he hadn't bothered to retrieve his severed limb, the way Mammon always retrieved his head.

I absorbed the mana around me and clad myself in a Robe of Light, taking on a battle-ready stance.

But Asmodeus urged me to stop. "Now, now, Philia. I wouldn't want to get a single scratch on that gorgeous figure of yours. What if you get hurt trying to fight me? Look, I'm holding my hand out to you. Just calm down and come with me, and no one gets hurt. Easy, right?"

Though his words dripped with concern, I couldn't forget the havoc he and his minions had wreaked. Going with him would only mean further destruction.

"As the one maintaining the Great Purification Circle, I can't leave this kingdom. I absolutely cannot accept your invitation."

"Pretty sure about that, aren't you? That's tough. To think all I wanted was to take you home in perfect condition... Ah, yes. How about this? The previous saint of Girtonia, Hildegard Adenauer... She's your aunt, right?"

"Master! Run!"

"What?"

In the blink of an eye, Asmodeus's shadow materialized and crept toward Aunt Hildegard. By the time I could react, the shadow already had her by the arm. Then, as if his actual arm had stretched out to draw her in, Asmodeus seized Hildegard in his clutches.

What did he suddenly want with her? Why did he go after her, when I was his target?

"Philia, I hoped you'd submit and come to me of your own free will. Since you refuse, I've been forced to take a hostage. Hmm... This woman seems to have worked you to the bone. I'm picking up some memories of her being your mentor."

I understood how he could know that Hildegard was my mentor. He had access to Julius's memories, after all. But I'd never told Julius a word about the kind of training she put me through. So why did Asmodeus speak as if he knew what my training under Master Hildegard was like?

"You ought to see the confused look on your face. I can read the memories of people I touch. Why, Hildegard, what's this? You have a secret you're hiding from Philia. Is it really a good idea to hide such an important thing from her?"

"What?" Aunt Hildegard cried. "Asmodeus! Stop it! Don't think anyone will believe your nonsense—argh!"

Asmodeus grabbed her by the throat. "You're so noisy. Why don't you pipe down for a while?"

My master was hiding something from me? No—it must be something she couldn't tell *anyone*. But that didn't matter right now! I had to save her as soon as possible. Asmodeus was strangling Aunt Hildegard in an attempt to threaten me, but so long as she was useful to him as a hostage, he was unlikely to kill her.

"Philia, if you care about your mother's life, join me. Swear to be by my side for all eternity!"

What was he talking about? Aunt Hildegard couldn't be my mother. If that were the case, then Mia and I weren't really sisters, and neither were Father and Mother my parents.

“This woman’s daughter was stolen by the people you think are your parents, all to preserve the family reputation! How pathetic. It seems that humans are just as capable of savagery as demons. And by the way, your sister seems to have known this for a while.”

I knew that the main branch of the Adenauer family would adopt a child if they couldn’t produce a girl with the necessary qualities for sainthood. But I never suspected *I* might be such a child. What’s more, the wording Asmodeus used—“stolen”—made it sound even more unthinkable.

It felt like everything I’d believed in was crumbling. Even though I’d cultivated the fortitude to withstand any pain, I couldn’t stop myself from trembling all over.

“Philia! Forget about me, just as I gave up on you! A mother who abandons her daughter isn’t a real parent! You’re better off thinking about yourself and this kingdom!”

My master told me to abandon her. That was all the confirmation I needed to know Asmodeus’s words were true. After all, she would only say such things if she were desperate to save me.

There was no mistaking it. Hildegard Adenauer was my mother.

But, contrary to Asmodeus’s expectations, she had no intention of letting herself be used as a hostage to keep me in line.

My master had always said, “A saint must put her kingdom first, above all else.” And now she was telling me to prioritize Parnacorta over her life. Perhaps she was trying to remind me that putting myself in danger to save her instead of protecting the kingdom would make me unfit to be a saint.

“Listen! There are times when we have to decide with our hearts before we use our heads! Lady Philia, put your hand on your chest, feel what’s right and wrong, then tell me honestly!”

Prince Osvalt’s words suddenly came to mind.

The old me might have chosen a more rational, less risky path. But at this moment, I wanted to listen to my heart first.

Even if she hadn't been my mother, or related to me by blood at all, Saint Hildegard would always be dear to me. She was the one who had given me the strength to live to see this day.

"Master, I will never, ever abandon you!" I called out in a voice so loud that it surprised even me. I held out my hand in the direction of her captor, Asmodeus, who was still floating in midair.

No matter what Hildegard told me, she was as precious to me as Mia was. Abandoning her was out of the question.

Asmodeus chuckled. "Fine, then. The barrier on the surface world will vanish, and the parade of monsters will begin again, but you won't have to worry any longer. Either way, this world has nothing in its future but destruction."

As he'd previously done, Asmodeus extended his right hand. This time, he took mine.

His hand was cold. I couldn't feel any body heat emanating from him. That further proved to me that demons were fundamentally different from humans in physical composition. I had managed to develop some theories about demon physiognomy by observing Mammon. Consequently, I also had some ideas on how to destroy it.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

As soon as he took my hand, Asmodeus screamed in agony and let go of Hildegard. She fell from midair to the ground, but, thanks to her years of training, landed safely.

From observing Mammon's regeneration many times, I realized something about demon biology. They constantly circulated magical power—not just blood—through their bodies. With that in mind, I tested out a method I'd come up with to deal with demons: letting my own magical power flow into Asmodeus to temporarily stop the circulation of his magic.



Asmodeus used immense magical power to protect himself, but if I touched him directly, perhaps I could use an ancient technique to inject my own magic into him.

One of the fundamentals of ancient magic involved absorbing power through touch to enhance one's magic and strengthen one's spellwork, although magic absorbed this way couldn't be retained for too long. By absorbing the magic that existed in nature—that is, mana—one could activate rituals and spells that required a tremendous amount of magic, such as the Great Purification Circle.

With that tenet in mind, I absorbed the magical power protecting Asmodeus's body to add to my own, then injected my magic into him. I had to burn some of my own magic to absorb his, but I was equal to the task. According to my calculations, once Asmodeus's magic circulation was cut off, his life functions would stop, leaving him unable to regenerate. If his heart stopped, he'd die.

Klaus and Erza rushed toward us. "Miss Erza! Now's our chance!"

"I know! The archsaint seems to understand demon bodies a lot better than I do!"

As Klaus and Erza rushed over to where I was, the former urged the latter to deliver the final blow to Asmodeus.

Asmodeus, poisoned by my touch, tried desperately to stop my magic from spreading from his right arm to the rest of his body. This left him vulnerable, making this a prime opportunity to defeat him.

Asmodeus howled. "Philia! Why would you do this?! Don't—don't you know how much I love you? That's why I came for you personally!"

As Erza and Klaus leapt into the air, their weapons poised to pierce Asmodeus's heart, the demon sliced off his own right arm with a strike from his other hand. Moving with brutal and indiscriminate force, he fired black arrows around the hall. Whenever they hit a mark, be it the ground or debris, they exploded, making it difficult to get close to him.

“He’s even stronger after cutting off his own arm!” cried Klaus. “Miss Erza, we should retreat!”

“Don’t be stupid! Normally, his arm would grow back right away. He’s been weakened! This may be our only chance to strike!”

Erza prepared to attack Asmodeus with all her might. As she said, there might never be another opportunity in which he’d let his guard down. The most likely reason his arm couldn’t regenerate was that my magic was preventing his own magic from circulating properly.

“You think you stand a chance against me just because I’m down to one arm? Lowly humans like you? Don’t make me laugh!”

“Waaaaaah!”

“Urgh!”

Asmodeus struck out at both Klaus and Erza. His eyes bloodshot, his face shining with ecstasy, he swooped down on them.

Raising his left hand, he turned to Erza. I couldn’t let him hurt her. Even though he was unarmed, a strike from his hand could be far stronger than a steel sword—and more lethal.

Erza hit the ground hard and lay there, unable to move. I had to protect her…

“Wha… Philia? Wh-what are you doing there?”

“Archsaint, why?”

When I came to, I realized that in shielding Erza, I had taken a blow to my side from Asmodeus.

I told myself not to panic. I was bleeding, but if I used Saint Heal right away, I’d heal in no time.

Trying to focus, I cast a healing spell…

Asmodeus clicked his tongue. “You let yourself get damaged. Never mind; I have a much better body in store for you. It’s a worthy vessel for Fianna’s soul. Time to get some sleep.”

At those cold words, a sharp pain ran through my neck.

My consciousness…was…fading…

***

Mia

I MUST HAVE PASSED OUT in the explosion. When I came to, the first thing I saw was Philia in the grip of the demon Asmodeus. For some reason, he was missing an arm.

To my horror, Philia was unconscious. What had that fiend done to my sister?

I couldn't bear the sight of my sister, a perfect saint who could hold her own against monsters and demons, so battered and beaten.

"Mother! How did Philia end up like that?"

"Mia, are you all right? Focus."

"It's all because I screwed up," said Erza. "I was supposed to protect her, but she sacrificed herself for me instead. I'll never live this down." Erza's fists trembled. She was clearly overwhelmed by humiliation.

"Never mind that. We have to save Philia!"

I tried to summon my magical power to attack Asmodeus, but Mother stopped me. "We mustn't attack rashly. Philia was stabbed in the side. Any further injuries could kill her."

Why did she stop me? I could see Philia was injured. That was exactly why I was in a rush! After all, that demon had already achieved his goal of capturing Philia. If we left him to his own devices, it'd be too late.

"We can't just stand here twiddling our thumbs!" I insisted. I held up my palm, aiming for Asmodeus's remaining arm, and prepared to cast Silver Judgment.

"Why, Mia," Asmodeus sneered. "You're not dead? Well, whatever. I'm going home. Don't get in my way."

Countless black arrows flew toward me. A cloud of dust whirled in the air, blocking my sight.

“You coward! Give me back my sister!”

What could I do? I couldn’t see Asmodeus or Philia. I’d sworn to protect my sister, but that bastard evaded me.

“Well, it was nice seeing you,” Asmodeus said.

At that moment, a shout rang out from far behind. “Lady Philia! Arrghhhhhhhhh!” A spear pierced Asmodeus’s remaining arm with incredible force.

“Wha—?!”

The sudden attack caused Asmodeus to drop Philia.

“Whoa there! Lady Philia, this spear you made for me is really something! It pierced right through that demon’s arm!”

Charging forward on horseback, His Highness Prince Osvalt caught the falling Philia firmly in his arms.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. How could Prince Osvalt injure a demon who had shrugged off my magical attacks? Philia told me that she’d made some specialized weapons for exterminating demons, but I had no idea they worked so well. The glasses Prince Osvalt was wearing were another of my sister’s creations, designed to make low-ranking demons visible.

What a relief. Thanks to Prince Osvalt, my sister had been saved. Just as I’d thought, His Highness might be the only man I could count on to take care of her.

With Prince Osvalt’s attack, Asmodeus had no arms left. He could still use magic, but, as much of a pain as that was, surely all of us working together could take him down.

“Don’t think for a moment that I’ve lost my regeneration abilities forever!”

Asmodeus’s arms regenerated in an instant. It was easy to get complacent around him when he was in Julius’s form, but his body was truly inhuman.

“D-did his arms just grow back? Come to think of it, Lady Philia said something about a demon who even survived getting

his head chopped off."

We had to make sure that he couldn't take Philia back. But wait. Why was his shadow solidifying and expanding?

"You've got to be kidding me! What's going on now?" Turning pale, Prince Osvalt tried to spur his horse to escape the clutches of Asmodeus's shadow.

"Just returning the favor, prince of Parnacorta!"

"Gah!"

Asmodeus's shadow knocked Prince Osvalt off his horse. Osvalt inadvertently let go of Philia, and Asmodeus, not wasting a beat, grabbed her. He cast a sidelong glance at Prince Osvalt, who lay collapsed on the ground, then disappeared with Philia through one of his magic doors.

"Mammon!" Erza shouted. "Follow them!"

"I won't let you get away, Lord Asmodeus! Big Sis, hop on!"

Turning into a white tiger once more, Mammon rushed after Asmodeus and Philia. A purple light radiated from his eyes, and a door similar to the one Asmodeus had just entered appeared. Was Philia on the other side?

Without a moment's delay, Erza hopped on Mammon's back. They both passed through the door, which soon vanished into thin air.

Where had they gone? Why couldn't they have taken me with them?

No, wait a minute—if Philia was no longer in this kingdom, that meant...

"Awoooooo!"

I could hear the howls of monsters from all directions.

There was no mistaking it. The Great Purification Circle that Philia had cast had fallen.

After all Philia had done for this continent... The powerful purification magic that she conjured to save me... All gone. We

were back to square one.

And now, in addition to the demons, monsters began to appear, one after another.

Seeing them took me back to the day when, ready to die in the line of duty, I faced hordes of monsters.

“This is the worst-case scenario,” I muttered. “If only we were stronger…”

Panic must have spread across the continent by now.

As if that weren’t enough, with saints from each kingdom gathered in Parnacorta for the summit, their kingdoms were left defenseless. We had to save Philia as soon as possible so she could cast the Great Purification Circle again.

Meanwhile, we had to do something. It was becoming impossible to count the monsters gathering around us.

“Emily, I sense traces of Lady Philia! This way!”

“Well, this is a turn for the worse. It’s like Girtonia all over again. I suppose that’s why we were left to deal with those fox demons.”

Grace and Emily, the saints of Bolmern, headed in my direction. From their conversation, it sounded like they’d been fighting Asmodeus’s fox-like subordinates.

I was thankful that they were here, but to ask for their help… No, even all the saints at the summit together were no match for the hordes of monsters. Based on the looks on their faces, Grace and Emily had realized the same thing.

Werewolves, evil tigers, and other monsters approached us in droves, snarling.

If this was how things were going to be, we had no choice but to fight with all our strength. No matter how many injuries I sustained, I was determined to wipe out the monsters. But just as I was about to throw down the gauntlet and fight with this resolve, huge flames and waves of cold sent the monsters scrambling.

“Mega Flame! Giga Blizzard!”

As far as I knew, no one else but Philia could use such powerful magic with such speed and flair. But the voice just now was clearly a man's, so he couldn't be a saint.

"Father!"

"How shameful for saints of the Mattilas family to be shaken to this extent!"

It was Count Mattilas.

I couldn't believe Grace's father was capable of such incredible magic. Come to think of it, Philia had said she looked up to him. To think he would look like such an unassuming, middle-aged man...

"Emily!" Count Mattilas bellowed. "There's one thing we need here and now. If the Adenauer saint can do it, I won't let you say you can't! You've been training to outdo her, haven't you?"

"Emily," said Grace, "does that mean you can cast a Great Purification Circle?"

I knew Emily regarded Philia as a rival, and Mother had acknowledged her skills. But I never thought she'd already learned how to cast a Great Purification Circle. Creating a magic circle of that scale was no easy feat.

To master the spell, you had to clear two hurdles. The first step was activating the Great Purification Circle, using magic amplified by mana. The more time you spent on this, the more of your own magic power you used up, so you had to activate the circle as quickly as possible. The second step was expanding the circle's coverage—that is, its range of effectiveness. This required extremely precise control.

Thanks to my training, I'd reached the point that I could activate a Great Purification Circle. But, despite my best efforts, I still lacked the control to expand it.

"I can cast one," said Emily, "but it still takes me too long to activate it. Besides, stabilizing and expanding the circle to cover the entire continent requires a massive amount of magic, and I expend too much of mine just casting it. As much as it pains me to

admit to falling short of Miss Philia, there's a high chance that my attempt to cast the circle will fail."

So she really could do it. Even if she had trouble casting the circle quickly enough, I was amazed that she could properly expand it.

But if that was the case, I, too, had an idea.

"Emily, is that true? If you had enough power to spare after activating the Great Purification Circle, you could expand it over the continent?"

"Mia, what are you—"

"Never mind. Just tell me: Can you do it?"

"Yes, I can. With enough magical power, that is. What of it?"

Philia, I won't let those monsters do as they please to the land you worked so hard to protect.

"In that case, I'll activate the circle, but I'll need your help expanding it. I'm not yet able to stabilize and expand a Great Purification Circle."

"You're saying that we could cast a Great Purification Circle through a tandem technique. Quite the intriguing idea."

A tandem technique referred to two people sharing their magic for a single spell or ritual. Originally, this technique was devised to help weaker mages cast powerful spells. But maybe Emily and I could team up to compensate for each other's weaknesses and make the impossible possible. Together, our magic might just be enough to expand the circle over the entire continent.

"How long would it take for you to activate the circle?" Emily asked.

"About five seconds. I'm confident that I can cast spells faster than anyone."

"Understood. In that case, there's no time to spare. Align the wavelength of your magic with my own."

I needed to collect the other saints' magical power through their necklaces, absorb it as my own magic, then activate the

Great Purification Circle.

Philia, please, somehow, stay safe. I promise I'll make this work.

"All right, then. Here goes nothing!"

I activated the Great Purification Circle. The earth glowed gold, proving that the activation had succeeded. But my magic circle only had a radius of about ten meters. That was as far as I could go when it came to stabilizing and expanding the circle.

The rest is up to you, Emily. Now's your chance to prove you're my sister's equal.

"Exactly five seconds. Well done. Now to cover the continent with this circle!"

"Go, Emily! Show us that you're not all talk!"

"Oh ho ho ho! Of course I will! The entire continent shall bear witness to the sheer power of a saint of the Mattilas family!"

She really was amazing—even if it was hard to get past her arrogant personality. Still, it was undeniable that the Great Purification Circle was expanding.

Soon, thanks to Emily, we managed to avert the worst-case scenario. With a new Great Purification Circle in place, things quickly returned to normal. The circle had no effect on demons, but the rampaging monsters, at least, were easily overpowered and neutralized.

Now all that remained was to annihilate those pesky demons.

Prince Osvalt rose to the occasion. "Damn... This is my fault for letting Lady Philia down! Take that!" With his glasses, he could detect low-ranking demons, which he pulverized with his spear.

It wasn't His Highness's fault. I was the one who had failed to protect my sister. I was knocked out at a critical moment when I was close enough to help. How pathetic of me. What was all my training for?

"Silver Judgment!"

"Hmph! Let me handle this!"

“I won’t lose to Mia!”

With Prince Osvalt, Grace, Emily, and others joining in, it didn’t take us long to defeat the demons. For the moment, the worst was behind us.

Still, remembering that Philia had been abducted to some unknown place, with no way for us to follow her, was enough to fill us with despair.

“Surely an exorcist would know where Philia is.”

“That’s right. That Erza woman seemed to have an idea. Seriously, she could’ve left us a hint before running off like that!”

The way Erza had talked made me think that she knew where Asmodeus’s base was. Since exorcists were a network of demon-eradicating specialists, her associates probably had that information, too. That must have been why Erza thought it was fine to leave without any explanation.

“That guy over there is an exorcist, isn’t he? Maybe he knows something.”

What was the exorcist’s name again? It was on the tip of my tongue…

“Ow! That hurts! Say, where’s Erza? And Philia? Don’t tell me they’re in Asmodeus’s realm!”

“Sir Nuraus!” I said. “Philia’s been kidnapped! Do you have any idea where she could be?”

“My name is Klaus! I don’t like it when people call me Nuraus or whatever…! Miss Philia’s whereabouts? I guess I have an idea, but…”

“Then tell us! Where’s Asmodeus taken her?”

“Oh, Lady Philia!” Lena lamented. “I’m a disgrace of a maid, letting my lady get kidnapped while I was distracted by those fox guys!”

“Reveal the location of Lady Philia or I’ll slay you,” hissed Himari.

“Himari, it’s not polite to threaten people,” Leonardo reminded her. “My apologies, sir. We’re so worried about our mistress that it’s hard to keep up the pleasantries.”

“This has been my greatest failure of my life!” Philip cried.

Klaus stood there, looking distressed, while everyone bombarded him with questions. He seemed like he wanted to answer, but was wilting under the concentrated pressure. What a wallflower. Although…maybe it was just that the people who surrounded Philia tended to be on the intense side.

Once the onslaught of questions settled down, Klaus explained, “Um, well. Asmodeus’s true form is in Limbo, a dimension between our world and the Demon Realm. He possessed Prince Julius’s body because Fianna sealed him away from contact with this realm four hundred years ago, leaving him unable to physically enter our world. But with the Demon Realm approaching, he was able to transport his soul here.”

A realm between our world and the Demon Realm? What did he mean? I couldn’t even imagine what the Demon Realm was like, so the concept of Limbo was even more confusing. Was it somewhere on the continent? Or another continent across the sea? If that was the case, I could possibly comprehend it and try to think of ways to get there.

“Asmodeus must have taken Miss Philia to the place where his body is. He wants to use her soul to revive the first archsaint, Fianna. He’s probably also planning to use Miss Philia’s powers to fully resurrect himself.”

I got it now. If he could resurrect the saint who sealed him away, he could make her break the seal. He talked a big game about being in love, but in the end, he was just selfish.

“Sir Klaus, do you know how to get to this in-between realm?”

“Yes, of course. We exorcists work with familiars because demons are capable of interdimensional travel. That is, they can travel to alternate realms or dimensions between worlds. My familiar, Satanachia, can open a gate to Limbo.”

Ah, that was good to know. Not only did Klaus know where Philia was, but he also knew how to get there. We could make

concrete plans to save my sister.

“That settles it!” Prince Osvalt declared. “I’ll save Lady Philia. Take me to Asmodeus!”

“Your Highness, leave it to me! I, Philip Delon, commander of the Knights of Parnacorta, will bring Lady Philia back!”

“It’s only natural for a retainer to go to his mistress’s side,” said Leonardo. “I shall go as well.”

“This kingdom is nothing without Lady Philia,” Lena added. “I’m in too.”

“There you have it. We’re all in this together.”

I wished I could join them, but if I were to leave, the Great Purification Circle that Emily and I worked so hard to cast would disappear. I had no choice but to trust the rescue party.

“What?” cried Klaus. “Limbo is the home of demons. You have no idea how dangerous it is! We should wait for Erza and Mammon to get back.”

No, no, we couldn’t wait. If I could go, I would’ve been off in an instant, no matter what awaited me. It didn’t matter how powerful Erza and Mammon might be—I couldn’t help but want to go to Philia’s aid.

“I can’t be at peace until I know Lady Philia’s safe! It’s unthinkable to stand around doing nothing!”

“Is that you, Prince Osvalt? It’s me, Philia. Can you hear me?”

“I-I can hear Lady Philia’s voice coming from my bracelet,” Lena said.

Huh?! Philia’s voice…from Lena’s bracelet?!

We all fell silent, shocked by this unforeseen turn of events.

Chapter 3:
Asmodeus's Realm

Philia

I COULDN'T BELIEVE I'd allowed myself to be captured so easily.

The air I felt on my skin was of a different quality. The amount of mana surrounding me was like nothing on the surface world. It was reasonable to assume that I'd been taken to the place known as Limbo, which Erza had told me about.

Thankfully, Asmodeus didn't seem to notice that I'd already awakened. He was soaring through the sky, as if headed somewhere.

It was fortunate that he'd been careless enough to touch me. He'd suffered crushing defeat before, and it was quite reckless of him. Then again, he'd probably gotten complacent because he was powerful enough to be nigh-invincible even with his guard down.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Once again, I injected my magical power into Asmodeus through his left arm. As when he took my hand earlier, Asmodeus screamed in agony and let go of me.

"Foolish" was the only way to describe someone who'd fall for the same trick twice in such a short time, but it helped me escape from Asmodeus's clutches. As he reflexively let go of me, I -plummeted into freefall.

If I couldn't properly break my fall, I'd be lucky if I lived to regret it.

"Honestly, you thought you could escape from Asmodeus on your own?"

"What else would you expect of Little Miss Philia? I think I'm starting to fall for you again," Mammon teased.

Not even a second after I began to fall, I was caught by Mammon, who was in cat form once more, with Erza riding him. I climbed on Mammon's back. I'd known he could open up a path to Limbo, but had never expected him to have such perfect timing.

"Thank you. You saved me."

"No, *I'm* the one who should thank you," said Erza. "But let's save that for later."

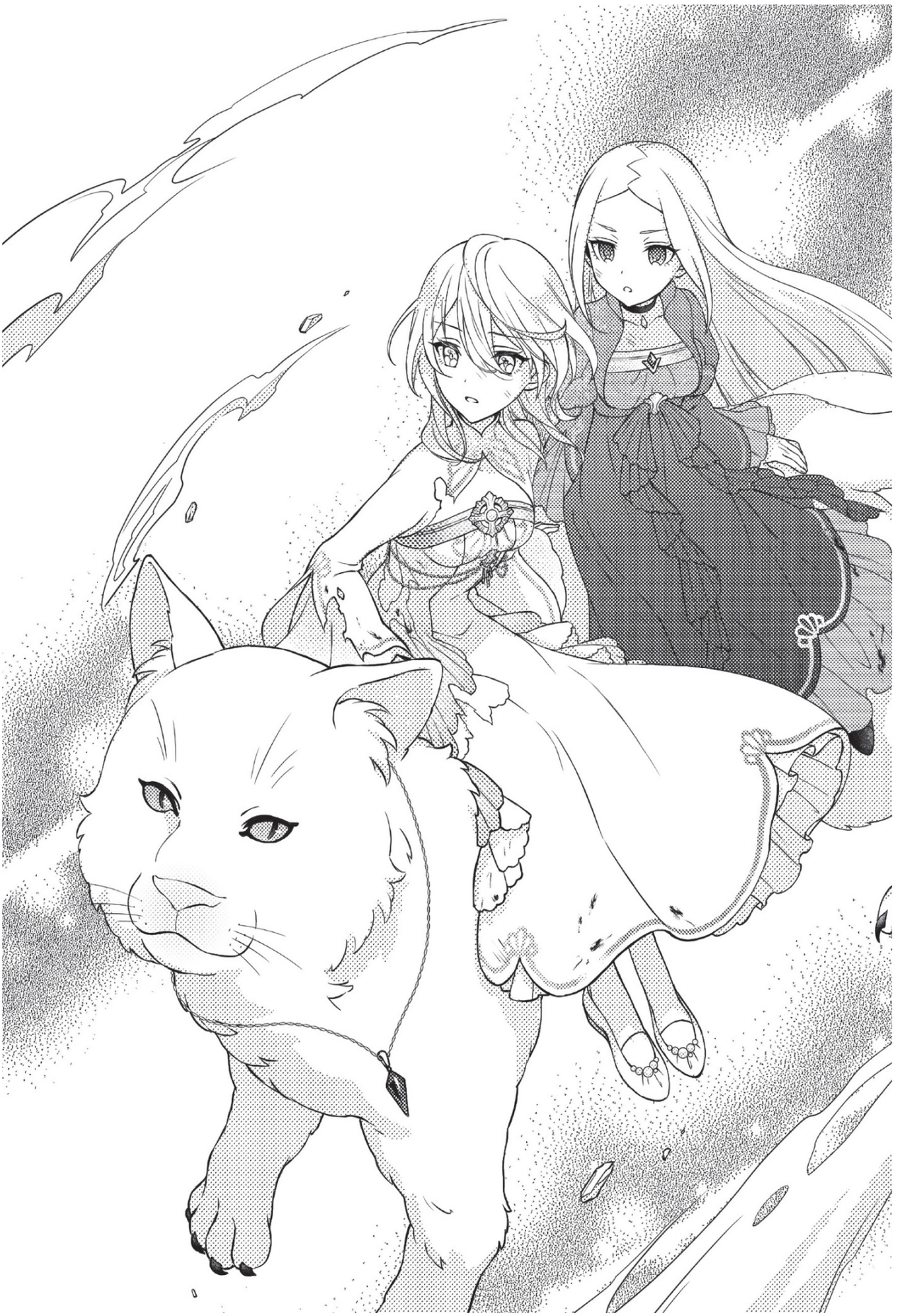
"Big Sis, Philia is hurt. Before we do anything else, let's get as far away from Lord Asmodeus as possible."

Asmodeus had already cut off his left arm. His anguished gaze turned in our direction. I was too injured to last long in a fight, so I needed to think fast.

"Damn you, exorcist! Give me back my love! Don't get in my way!"

"Erza, Mammon, please close your eyes. Flash Ball!"

I hurled a sphere of blinding light at Asmodeus.



“Wha—?! My eyes! My eyes!”

Emitting rays many times brighter than sunlight, the sphere could blind a human being who looked at it directly. This kind of magic wasn’t very useful for saintly duties, but now that I was trying to escape, it came in handy.

“Saint Heal.”

As soon as Mammon landed, I dismounted and healed the wound in my side. Since I’d consistently worked to strengthen my veins and arteries against injury over time, the bleeding was minimal, and I was done in no time.

“Saints sure are resourceful,” Mammon commented.

“This one’s special. She’s the first archsaint we’ve had in four hundred years.”

“You’re right. How can I put this? Fianna’s power was overwhelming, but I don’t think she was as skillful as Little Miss Philia.”

Our injuries healed, we took cover in the shade of a rock. This dimension truly was a bleak, barren wasteland. I couldn’t sense any signs of life around us. When I looked up, the “sky” was just a field of white, endlessly stretching into the horizon. The rocks and the ground were equally pale. This blank-looking realm seemed drained of all color.

At the same time, I could distinctly feel the mana surging all around us—far more than on the surface world. Perhaps demons were well-suited to such an environment, since they had magic flowing through them at all times.

“Archsaint,” said Erza, “I’m sorry for letting you get carried away to Limbo. We should head back soon.”

“I’m sorry too—but thank you for coming to save me. Left here on my own, I don’t know what I’d have done.”

To be honest, I shuddered at the thought of what would’ve happened if Erza and Mammon hadn’t shown up. The environment here seemed far more unforgiving than anything I’d endured in my training. I had no idea how to return to the surface world.

“I’m your bodyguard, after all.” Erza looked a bit embarrassed. “Besides, it was my carelessness that led you to get hurt while saving me. Like I said earlier, I’m the one who should be thanking you…so, thanks.”

“Think nothing of it. A saint’s job is to save everyone and everything she can. That’s all there is to it.”

Erza didn’t have to feel bad about it. I’d simply gotten careless while trying to save her, and happened to be injured. It was entirely due to my own shortcomings that Asmodeus managed to catch me off guard.

“Do my ears deceive me? A sincere ‘thanks’ from Big Sis Erza? Next thing you know, Limbo’s gonna freeze over!”

“Shut up! Hurry up and open the gate to the surface!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it. I’m opening the portal right now—”

Mammon teased Erza, but just as she raised her voice in annoyance, he raised a hand to the sky and gathered his magical power. With a crackling sound, waves of magic ran through his skin. Though he was nowhere as powerful as Asmodeus was, Mammon still possessed considerable magic.

As purple light radiated from his eyes, a familiar door—huge, towering, and adorned with sinister protrusions—appeared. This must be the entrance to the path connecting Limbo with our world.

But no matter how long we waited, the door remained shut. Eventually, it vanished. At this, Mammon muttered, “That’s strange. The gateway to the surface won’t open.”

Somehow, he was unable to create a path that would link us to the surface. What was going on?

“Don’t tell me… That Asmodeus! He must’ve used his magic to block the path to the surface.”

Erza clicked her tongue. “That sly devil! He must really be upset that the woman he’s obsessed with ran away from him!”

“In other words, we’re trapped in Limbo?”

Erza nodded. “Exactly. He probably put up measures in place in case someone came to save you. He’s the worst, isn’t he?”

We’d managed to escape Asmodeus’s clutches, but it seemed that he wouldn’t let us return home so easily. How troublesome. Everyone we’d left behind in the surface world was sure to be worried. If I could do nothing else, I had to at least let them know I was safe.

“It’s no use.” Shaking his head, Mammon opened a tiny door. “This is the largest gate I can open. It’s only big enough to let low-ranking demons through.”

The “door” was more like a small window. It was hard to imagine any of us squeezing through.

“I could try this,” I said. “It’s just a prototype, so I’m not sure whether it’ll work properly.”

“What’s that? A bracelet?”

I stroked the bracelet on my arm with my fingertips. I’d created it so I could keep in touch with Lena and everyone else at the mansion while I was out on saintly duties.

The bracelet I’d given Lena as a gift was capable of catching the magical power emitted by *my* bracelet, making it possible for us to communicate. But with everything that had happened recently, I hadn’t tested its effectiveness or told Lena how it worked. When I gave it to her, she’d been so excited by the notion I’d developed a sense of style that it had been hard to mention anything else.

The question was whether my magic waves could reach our world from Limbo. If this tiny door provided a connection, it was worth a try.

Pouring magic into the bracelet, I tried to establish a line of communication with Lena’s bracelet.

“I can’t be at peace until I know Lady Philia’s safe! It’s unthinkable to just stand around doing nothing!”

“Is that you, Prince Osvalt? It’s me, Philia. Can you hear me?”

“I-I can hear Lady Philia’s voice coming from my bracelet…”

Somehow, my attempt at communication had worked. Admittedly, I'd gotten my hopes up. The theory was solid.

At any rate, since I seemed to have shocked everyone into silence, I had to explain the situation. After I told them that the link between my bracelet and Lena's allowed me to speak to them, Mia was the first to respond.

"That's all well and good, Philia, but are you okay? You were injured, right?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry for worrying all of you." I reassured everyone that my injuries had already healed and I was in good condition.

"Lady Philia, I'm so glad you're safe," said Prince Osvalt. "You're on your way back, huh? We were just about to head over there and get you. That was close... We might've missed each other."

"Your Highness... I'm afraid we seem to be trapped in Limbo."

Prince Osvalt cried out in shock. "Wh-what did you just say? How could that happen?! I mean, isn't Lady Erza's demon companion supposed to open a pathway back here? That's what Sir Klaus said!"

Klaus must have told him the basics of Limbo. It wasn't that I'd been anxious or anything, but just hearing Prince Osvalt's voice filled me with relief.

What was this strange feeling? I'd never felt anything like this before.

"Klaus was right. Let me briefly explain what's going on—" Erza described how the path from Limbo to the surface was blocked by Asmodeus's magic. Since Asmodeus was after me, he'd do anything to keep me here.

"But Miss Erza," said Klaus, "some of Asmodeus's demon lackeys opened a door their size and retreated through it. It's probably still possible to travel from our world to Limbo."

"In that case, come on over. I can't guarantee you'll be able to return alive, though, so you might as well write your last will."

"What a sick joke!"

Klaus said that it was still possible to get here from the surface. Somehow, those fox-like demons were able to open a door big enough for them to pass through. That meant that there was still a path left for those subordinates to make their return…

Lowering his tone, Prince Osvalt asked, “Lady Erza, is there really no way for you to get back here?”

I could only think of one way, but it wouldn’t be a breeze.

“There’s no other choice but to defeat Asmodeus,” said Erza. “You’re thinking the same thing, right?”

Indeed, that was our only hope. If Asmodeus was blocking our way home, we could either ask him to unblock the path or open it ourselves. But of course, there was no reasoning with Asmodeus, so the first option wasn’t even worth considering. It wasn’t as if he would listen to reasoned arguments. That left us with the latter option: defeating Asmodeus so we could open the path.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Mia protested. “That’s obviously impossible! Not even you could take on that monster, Philia!”

“She’s right. Lady Philia, if anything happens to you, I’ll…” Grace trailed off.

Both Mia and Grace cautioned me that it was impossible to defeat Asmodeus. He was powerful enough to reduce the palace to rubble in the blink of an eye, and he hadn’t even used the full extent of his powers. He’d also made quick work of exorcists who knew far more about fighting demons than I did.

But even so…

“I estimate that we have a non-zero chance of success. Erza, Mammon, and I must try. I want to return to Parnacorta, after all.”

“Philia…” Mia began.

Of course, as the saint of Parnacorta, I also felt a sense of duty toward my kingdom, but I really *did* love it. It was my home, where the people dear to me were waiting for my return. I was determined to make it back there, no matter what. No matter how dire the circumstances might be.

“Philia, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Master, I can hear you just fine.”

My mentor, Hildegard, was my birth mother. I still couldn’t fully process the truth that Asmodeus had sprung on me. I had to believe there was some reason behind the things she’d done, including her adoption of Mia.

But if I were to be honest…

“Master, there’s so much I want to ask you. But I’m glad to know the truth. I mean this sincerely.”

“Yes. You’ve grown up to be such a strong girl, Philia. I believe in you. I know you can overcome this ordeal and come home. I trained you, after all.”

“I treasure everything you taught me. I’ll never let your teachings go to waste.”

I’d received so much from Saint Hildegard. It was thanks to her rigorous training that I became the kind of person who, no matter what the circumstances, could find a way to get things done on her own. Now I was able to use what I learned to protect the people who mattered to me. And for this, I felt so blessed.

“Lady Philia!”

“Your Highness?”

It was Prince Osvalt again. I could detect a hint of worry in his voice.

“No matter what it takes, I’ll find you and come to your aid! Remember our agreement this morning? I want to honor that, so—”

The glow of the bracelet’s gemstone dimmed, and His Highness’s voice faded with it. The magic had been used up, cutting off the connection.

It was all well and good for His Highness to want to help, but it would be far too dangerous. I couldn’t even begin to fathom the impact it would haven on Parnacorta if one of its princes were left trapped in Limbo.

“His Highness is a strange one, isn’t he?” said Erza. “And here I thought royals just sat back and issued orders from their ivory towers.”

“That’s just how His Highness is,” I explained. “His earnestness is refreshing. But that’s exactly why I don’t want him to get hurt.”

I remembered how he carried me all the way to Girtonia without thinking of the dangers ahead. He understood my selfish wish to save Mia and plunged ahead without hesitation. But this time we faced a far greater danger. Our enemy was a being who nearly annihilated our world four hundred years ago.

“Don’t worry. Klaus will stop him. We don’t let ordinary people, let alone royalty, get involved in our work.” Cautiously, Erza emerged from behind a rocky outcropping to check the perimeter. There seemed to be no one nearby. “I’m sure you understand by now how powerful Asmodeus is,” she continued, “but let’s get this clear: The only way we can win against him is a surprise attack.”

“We’ll have to catch Lord Asmodeus off guard and stab him through the heart in one go,” Mammon agreed. “It’d speed things up even more if Little Miss Philia could inject her magic right in a vital spot.”

“I’ve already pulled the same trick twice, so he may be on his guard. But I’ll do my best. It’s the only way.”

During our previous confrontation, I’d been able to confirm that injecting magic into Asmodeus could temporarily stop him from regenerating and restrict his movements. What’s more, this technique was effective even on parts of his body that were far from his vital spots, like his arms and palms. If I could inject my magic directly into his heart, I might injure him enough to give us a chance at defeating him.

As we discussed our plan, we explored Limbo’s white-blanketed expanse. Erza and Mammon seemed to have an idea where Asmodeus was, because they strode forward without hesitation. After walking for about half an hour, we spied a

sprawling fortress atop a hill. It was jet-black and exuded an ominous aura.

“Is that Asmodeus’s castle? I sense the presence of people with magical powers, and not just one or two of them.”

“That’s the Fortress of Eternal Darkness, Lord Asmodeus’s headquarters,” Mammon explained. “It must be where he’s been keeping his human captives.”

So the kidnapped women were imprisoned there? How horrible. We had to save them at once.

“Erza, Mammon, we must free his captives.”

“Obviously, but what’s the plan? Oh, never mind—we don’t have time to hammer out the details.”

“We’d better act fast,” Mammon agreed, “before Lord Asmodeus comes up with another shortsighted idea like taking more hostages.”

We made our way to Asmodeus’s stronghold, the Fortress of Eternal Darkness.

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Even in a place as bizarre as Limbo, the Fortress of Eternal Darkness felt *wrong*. Overwhelming as it was to behold it, I reminded myself that it was where the kidnapped women were being held. And so, without a moment’s hesitation, we approached the fortress.

To my surprise, the gate was unlocked and we had no trouble entering.

“Strange,” I remarked. “I don’t sense any traps.”

“Little Miss Philia, demons have no concept of security.” Mammon resumed his human form. “Their castles are always open. If you asked them about it, they’d laugh and say that deploying guards and setting up traps are for weaklings. They even leave the paths to the surface and the Demon Realm open. Knowing Lord Asmodeus, he’s pretty confident that no matter

what his enemies throw at him, he can beat them at their own game."

So that explained it. Demon logic seemed far removed from what humans considered common sense.

"Well, this is new," said Mammon as we stepped inside. "These things weren't here last time I stopped by."

"Are these…dolls?"

The hallway was filled with dolls, all lined up in rows. All of them had silver hair and white robes.

Looking at the dolls closely, I could see that each was numbered. "This doll is number 163. The one next to it is number 164…"

What exactly did those numbers indicate? And what purpose could so many dolls possibly serve?

"Somehow, I think the dolls look like Little Miss Philia," said Mammon. "No…like Fianna."

"Now that you mention it, they do remind me of the archsaint…"

"Is that so?"

Mammon said that the dolls resembled me and Fianna, to which Erza nodded in agreement. I couldn't objectively assess my own appearance, so I couldn't say whether the dolls resembled me, but perhaps they looked like Fianna.

"When Asmodeus speaks of reviving Lady Fianna," I said, "could it be that he intends to transfer her soul into a doll? I've read that such a ritual existed in ancient times."

"You could have something there," said Erza. "According to legend, Fianna was cremated, so I've been wondering how Asmodeus retrieved her body. I guess he plans to put her reincarnated soul—that is, yours—into a doll that looks exactly like her."

"So that's his idea? Turn a doll into the real thing?" Mammon laughed wildly. "That's Lord Asmodeus for ya! What a madman!

Does he really think he can win back his darling by playing with dolls? Ew, what a loser!”

I guessed that Asmodeus was planning to revive Fianna using a doll. Ancient magic included many spells promising immortality, one of which involved transferring a human soul into a doll to grant the soul a near-eternal lifespan. But the spell required enormous magical power, so almost no magic users had ever managed to pull it off. Even in the rare successful cases, it was common for the shock of the transfer to shatter one’s sense of self.

At least…that was how it was for *humans*. It wouldn’t be surprising if Asmodeus, who possessed extraordinary magical power, could easily cast such a spell.

“Intruders detected!”

As I studied one of the dolls made by Asmodeus, a gigantic figure made of shiny black ore suddenly appeared. It looked to be about five meters tall, and it could speak… What was this creature? Clearly no ordinary living thing.

“Oh, this is bad!” said Mammon, sounding flustered. “That’s a golem, a living doll. Lord Asmodeus must’ve made it. I saw these things four hundred years ago, when he invaded the surface world.”

If Asmodeus could create and manipulate a doll of that size, his power truly was boundless.

“Intruders. Kill!”

There was no point arguing with such a thing. As it swung its fists high in the air, then brought them down with great force, we leapt out of the way. The golem’s fists left a massive crater in the ground, a testament to its superhuman strength.

“Mammon… I thought you said demons didn’t have guards.”

“Ah, I’ve been away from the Demon Realm for way too long! Maybe the trends have changed—”

“Whatever. Just destroy that thing!” Having called Mammon on his declaration that demons didn’t deploy guards, Erza ordered him to destroy the golem.

If demons had no ordinary concept of security, what lay ahead, past this guarded area?

“Geez, Big Sis, give me a break… Fire away, Dark Matter!”

A hexagram appeared above Mammon’s head and unleashed a compressed mass of dark magic. It exploded with a thunderous boom that echoed across the hallway and hit the golem directly in what seemed to be its face. That blow alone would have killed a dragon of the same size, but…

“Intruders. Kill, kill, kill!”

“Hey, that didn’t work at all! That was useless!” Erza yelled.

“It’s pretty tough, and it doesn’t seem to feel pain. It’s gonna be hard to take that thing down.”

“In that case…er…I think running away would be a good idea.”

The golem was clearly not built like most living things. If we had no effective way to fight it, flight did seem like the best option.

“Let’s head in the direction the golem came from,” I suggested. “Asmodeus may be guarding something important there.”

“Makes sense. Mammon, fire another shot.”

“Okay, okay.” Mammon temporarily stopped the golem in its tracks with another blast of his Dark Matter spell. “Y’know, playing tag isn’t much fun at this age. Hop on, ladies!”

With that, Mammon transformed into a cat once again. We vaulted onto his back, slipped past the golem, and moved deeper into Asmodeus’s fortress.

I’d heard of the game called “tag” before, but I never thought my first time playing it would turn out like this.

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Mia

WHEN WE HEARD Philia's voice coming from Lena's bracelet, we were all relieved to know she was still alive. But our relief turned to shock when she told us that she couldn't return to the surface. Apparently, Asmodeus, the demon possessing that idiot prince, was blocking the path home.

Prince Osvalt urged Klaus to let him go in after Philia. "I'm begging you, Sir Klaus! Take me to Lady Philia!"

"I told you, no means no. I'm sorry, Your Highness, but no matter how much you beg, I really can't. I could get in trouble for that."

Who knew Klaus could be so stubborn? Couldn't he show a little sympathy for His Highness?

Did Prince Osvalt have feelings for Philia? It would explain why he was so desperately pleading with Klaus…but then again, if I hadn't just cast the new Great Purification Circle, I'd have been begging to see Philia too. I was too worried about her to think straight. My chest tightened with worry every time I thought of something happening to Philia.

"In the first place, demons fall under the exorcists' jurisdiction. We can't let others get involved, not even royals or saints!"

No matter what we said, Klaus wouldn't budge. Exorcists might pride themselves on their demon-slaying expertise, but hadn't Prince Osvalt proven himself by severing Asmodeus's arm with his spear? Couldn't Klaus be a little more flexible?

I was getting impatient. Philia's safety was on the line—wasn't it obviously better to seek strength in numbers? If Klaus kept this up, I'd have to take him aside for a one-on-one talk…

"I get what you're saying, Sir Klaus, I really do." Prince Osvalt grabbed Klaus by the collar. "But right now, the life of the person most important to me is at stake! Sorry, but I can't stand around debating!"

"Wasn't that a love confession?"

“Sure, if Philia were around to hear it.”

How should I put it? His Highness was so pleasantly straightforward. I was sure he’d make a good match for Philia, who had a tendency to fixate on the oddest and most random details. Mother, who knew Philia better than I did, seemed to feel the same way.

But never mind that. We had to focus on saving Philia.

Please, Klaus, listen to Prince Osvalt’s pleas!

“Your Highness, please let go of me. You don’t seem to understand just how terrifying demons are.”

“Let go of you? Not until you agree to take me with you!”

“Then I guess you leave me with no other choice. I hate to do this to a foreign prince, but… Satanachia, come out.”

“Ngaaaaaah!” With a snap of Klaus’s fingers, a large, hooded figure stepped out from the shadows and pinned Prince Osvalt’s arms behind his back.

“Wh-what?! What’s this?”

“I’m Satanachia, Sir Klaus’s familiar.” Satanachia had the face of a black wolf, complete with sharp fangs. There was no mistaking him for a human being. He reminded me of the fox-like demons we’d encountered earlier.

“Satanachia was no match for me,” said Emily, “but his strength is still fairly impressive.”

“It took all *four* of us to subdue him, not just you,” Grace reminded her sister.

Ah, so he was another familiar, just like Mammon was Erza’s. But a wolf that walked on two legs obviously couldn’t pass for human. Satanachia probably stayed hidden in the shadows most of the time to avoid causing a stir.

“Do you get it now, Your Highness? Satanachia is a mid-ranking demon. If you’re powerless against a demon of his caliber, how do you expect to stand a chance against Asmodeus, one of the most powerful demons in existence?”

“I don’t care! Ugh! Let go!”

We were running out of time. This back-and-forth was frankly pointless. But somehow, when I saw the look in His Highness's eyes, I couldn't bring myself to step in.

As Klaus had just said, demons were extremely powerful—and Asmodeus was a monster even among demonkind. But His Highness completely refused to back down. I could sense his unwavering conviction to save Philia.

Stepping over a pile of debris, His Highness Prince Reichardt, crown prince of Parnacorta, interrupted the fight.

"I heard most of the conversation. Osvalt, you're being disgraceful. Don't insist on getting your way like a spoiled brat."

"Br-Brother..."

When Prince Reichardt had greeted us earlier, I'd thought him quite intelligent and gentlemanly. He'd made a favorable impression, though we'd never properly spoken before.

"Brother, are you here to stop me? Isn't it the duty of a prince to save Lady Philia?"

Prince Osvalt seemed convinced that Prince Reichardt had come to stop him from rescuing my sister. Indeed, from a rational perspective, it was unwise for a prince—even the second prince—to put himself in danger to rescue a saint. On the other hand, I understood Prince Osvalt's feelings painfully well. After all, we shared the same desire to protect Philia.

"Does Miss Philia really matter to you so much that you'd put your life on the line for her?" In a low voice, Prince Reichardt asked his brother whether he wanted to protect Philia that badly, even if it meant risking his own life.

We fixed our eyes on Prince Osvalt, waiting for his answer.

"Of course! I'd rush to Lady Philia's aid no matter what! We made a promise, and not even death will make me break it! We... agreed to have dinner together sometime!"

What a letdown. And here I thought he was going to confess his love. Oh well. That was something he should do in front of Philia, anyway.

At any rate, Prince Osvalt seemed to already have made up his mind. In that case, I figured that I should back him up…

“Don’t be rash.”

“Ugh… Yes, Mother.”

Mother must have noticed me itching to do something, for she took me by the shoulder and reminded me to practice self-restraint.

But if this kept up, His Highness wouldn’t be able to go save my sister.

“Sir Klaus, I apologize for my rude and foolish brother, but could you please indulge his wishes?”

“Br-Brother?”

Prince Reichardt bowed low as he asked Klaus to let Prince Osvalt do as he wished. It was no exaggeration to say that it was a big deal for a person of Prince Reichardt’s position—next in line to the throne—to bow his head before everyone, even if it was for his brother’s sake.

But Klaus refused him as well. “Um, please lift your head. This is really putting me in a tight spot. Look at Satanachia! Would you really want your brother to go to a place crawling with beasts like him?”

Demons were indeed terrifying, but it wasn’t as if Prince Osvalt would be helpless against them. As long as he had his spear, I believed he could manage to hold his own. Personally, I’d be in trouble if I couldn’t use magic with my bare hands.

“Demons? What about them? Arghhhhh!”

“Ngh?! Ngaaaaaagh! Ngh!”

Prince Osvalt hit Satanachia in the face with his gauntlet. When Satanachia recoiled, His Highness grabbed him by the arm and threw him across the room.

The gauntlets, which were made of red ore, looked like another of Philia’s inventions. Even so, it couldn’t have been easy to throw a demon like Satanachia across the room. Prince Osvalt

must excel at physical combat if he'd been able to flip Satanachia with his own strength.

I heard that His Highness was into farming. Maybe that was where he'd developed his sturdy physique? It got me thinking that I should encourage Prince Fernand to try working the land. It would be good for his health.

"Did you just throw Satanachia across the room? No, but still..."

What? Even after seeing that, Klaus was *still* hesitant? I couldn't hold back one more moment.

Considering His Highness's feelings for Philia, I'd done my best not to step in as he made his case for rescuing her. But I couldn't stand to hear another round of bickering.

"Klaus, please! His Highness has proven how strong he is! Please let him go save my sister in my place!"

"Miss Mia? You too?"

Klaus seemed to falter. Just one more push would do it.

"Klaus, I-I'm asking you too. If the pope scolds you for this, I'll take responsibility."

"Even Miss Alice is against me..."

Alice, like Klaus, came from Dalbert. Surely he'd listen to her, especially since she offered to take responsibility.

"...All right, I concede defeat. Your Highness, please lend me your strength. However, please know that there's no guarantee that you'll return alive."

"Leave it to me! I won't hold anything back!"

With that, Klaus finally gave in. For someone with such an unassuming presence, he was surprisingly stubborn.

But what a relief. Now Prince Osvalt could help rescue Philia. Even though Grace, Emily, and I couldn't go to Limbo because we had to maintain the Great Purification Circle, other people were eager to help my sister.

What about Mother? She had to be more worried than anyone. Philia was her biological daughter, after all.

After even more discussion, we hammered out a plan.

“Satanachia’s teleportation magic can carry six people besides myself,” said Klaus. “In other words, we can take His Highness and four others.”

Even though he’d been opposed to Prince Osvalt joining him, Klaus, who’d probably given up on arguing any further, offered to take four more people.

Alice, who was a saint and exorcist, decided to stay behind in case there were still demons lurking on the surface world. Ultimately, it was decided that Philip, Lena, Leonardo, and Himari would join the rescue mission. They were the ones who firmly insisted on saving Philia, to the very end. They’d all served as Philia’s bodyguards, so it wasn’t surprising that they saw it as their mission to protect her.

“Mother, don’t you want to go?”

“I’m retired. I’m no longer as physically fit as you youngsters. Besides, the people of Parnacorta—this kingdom that Philia has been protecting—have their hearts set on helping her. It would be thoughtless of me to insist on taking one of their spots.” With that, Mother stepped aside.

Apparently, while I was passed out, Philia found out that Mother—who, to her, was her Master Hildegard—was her biological mother. Once Philia was back, I’d make sure she had plenty of time to talk to Mother. It’d be my way of showing familial devotion.

“Your Highness, please take good care of my daughter.”

“Leave it to me, Lady Hildegard. I promise I’ll bring Lady Philia back. Soon we’ll all be smiling and laughing together again!”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Prince Osvalt flashed a carefree smile at Mother.

Ah, that smile must have melted the ice in Philia’s heart.

Now I was sure of it. I was going to see Philia again.

***

Philia

LOUD, STOMPING FOOTSTEPS pursued us as we ran down a corridor. Nothing lined the walls but tightly packed rows of dolls, making the place look sterile and empty.

“I think we won this round of tag.”

“It sure would be nice to know if Lord Asmodeus wants to play hide-and-seek with us while we’re at it,” Mammon said sarcastically.

After a few more minutes of “playing tag” with the golem, we reached a broad, secure-looking door with a sleek black luster. It certainly looked like the kind of door with something important beyond it. I could definitely sense the presence of people with magical powers behind it.

Could this be where Asmodeus kept the women he kidnapped?

It would have made more sense to hide something important in an inconspicuous location. But since Asmodeus’s fortress had no guards keeping watch at the entrance, perhaps demons really did have a different notion of security measures.

“I’d like to check inside,” I mused, “but there’s no sign of a key. I suppose that’s to be expected…”

“Mammon, smash that door.”

“I kinda have a bad feeling about this. But we might as well try. Dark Matter!”

Casting a magic circle, Mammon fired a black mass at the door. Once again, it caused a huge explosion accompanied by a deafening roar.

But the door stood there in perfect condition, completely undamaged. It must be sturdy indeed. I doubted my magic would be enough to destroy it.

“I suppose it was too much to hope that would work,” I sighed.

“Hold on there, Little Miss Philia! You had no faith in me from the start?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I suspected your magic wouldn’t be effective.”

“Well, at least you put it more politely than Big Sis Erza does.”

I didn’t mean to hurt Mammon’s feelings, but from the look of that door, I could guess that it was made of the same ore that was used to make the golem. If Mammon’s magic didn’t work on the golem, it was only logical that the door would be invulnerable as well.

“What should we do? The golem will be here soon. Shall we look for the key?”

“It’s not like we have any other choice,” said Mammon. “Here, there, it’s all the same.”

The hallway shook as the golem gained on us. Fortunately for us, it was slow-footed, so it would be easy enough to dodge. But if we took our time, Asmodeus might notice the commotion and show up.

“Let’s break down that door,” I said, deciding to prioritize pushing through over finding the key. The latter just wasn’t practical. “It’ll be faster that way.” We weren’t likely to find the key so quickly when we didn’t even know where to start looking.

“I don’t know about that. You just saw how my magic had no effect on that door. Or did you have some other idea? Is there an even cooler kind of magic you can use?”

“If that were the case, wouldn’t she have destroyed the golem?” Erza pointed out. “Then again, if anyone can perform miracles, it would be the archsaint…”

There was a certain amount of risk involved, but I thought I knew of a way to force the door open.

“I hope you two can work with me on this…” I began.

I explained my idea to Erza and Mammon. Though I wasn’t entirely sure things would turn out as I hoped, I estimated that we had an 80 percent chance of success.

“I see. Fascinating,” Erza said.

“Well, I can’t think of any other ideas.”

Now that both of them understood the plan, it was time to test it out. We faced the golem with our backs to the door. Up close, its massive bulk truly was intimidating.

Here’s hoping this works…

“Intruders! Kill!”

Having caught up with us, the golem raised its fists in the air. Everything was going according to plan so far. From its repetitive motions, I could tell that the golem could only carry out simple commands. We lured it as close to us as possible, then dodged.

The golem’s fists slammed into the door. In an instant, the thick door that was unaffected by Mammon’s magic shattered into pieces. We ran into the room beyond.

“It worked,” I said. “The golem’s body was made of the same ore used for the door, so I calculated that if we could get it to slam it with all its weight, the impact would be enough to break through.”

“I guess that game of tag wasn’t a waste of time, after all.”

Behind the thick door were a number of cages—each holding a captive woman with magical powers. As we suspected, this was where Asmodeus kept his victims. There were about twenty of them, as the reports stated.

“What’s that casket for? There’s a peculiar air to it.” I sensed a presence from a casket in the center of the room. It wasn’t magic but a strange feeling, like my chest was tightening.

“I don’t feel anything particularly weird,” said Mammon.

“Forget about that,” said Erza. “We need to hurry and unlock the cages. The keys are right over there… How careless of him.”

If neither Erza nor Mammon sensed anything from the casket, perhaps it was just my imagination. In any case, as Erza said, freeing the captives was the first priority.

“Intruders! Kill! Kill!”

The golem entered the room. It was about to rampage when Erza used her magic to levitate the door fragments and hurl them at the golem at immense speed.

“Geez, shut up! Since this door’s made of the same ore, take this!”

I’d thought Asmodeus would have forbidden the golem to enter this room, lest it wreck the place, but apparently I was wrong.

“Gaaah!” Ore fragments pierced the joints of the golem’s arms and legs until it was frozen in place. Though sentient, the golem was made of nigh-indestructible material and unable to feel pain. But it seemed this finally did it in.

“Please help me.”

“Someone! Anyone! Please!”

“Someone’s come to help! What a relief!”

“Lady Philia! You’re here to save us!”

I tried inserting a key into the keyhole of the nearest cage. I recognized the red-haired woman inside as Karen, whom I’d run into at the boutique.

I hoped that everyone else was all right. Seeing us, the captives looked relieved. But the feeling was short-lived.

“Who would’ve thought you’d come straight to me? You saved me a lot of trouble.”

Smiling audaciously, Asmodeus appeared before us. Having just pulled off such a bold gambit, I’d given up hope of taking him by surprise, but still couldn’t believe I’d completely missed his approach. Judging by the shocked looks on their faces, neither Erza nor Mammon had noticed either.

Still, I had to finish this. As soon as I found an opening, I’d seize my chance.

There was no turning back. I was determined to fight this powerful enemy.

“Looks like you didn’t even notice me stalking you. I’m getting used to this body, so I can easily hide my magic now.”

Until this point, Asmodeus had exuded an extraordinary magical aura. If he could now control Julius’s body with such precision as to make himself undetectable, I had to assume that he was even stronger than when he ravaged Parnacorta’s palace.

“Philia—no, the soul of Fianna! Thank you for coming! Do you have any idea how I’ve waited, these past four centuries, for the day we’d meet again? Let’s go forward into eternity together! I’ve prepared the perfect body for you.”

Asmodeus held a hand over the casket. The lid opened. A silver-haired woman, her eyes shut, rose into the air. I couldn’t sense any trace of life in the woman’s body. I thought it was a corpse at first, but then realized it was probably a doll. It was so cunningly crafted that it made the dolls lining the hallway looked like poppets by comparison.

“It wasn’t easy to recreate Fianna’s body accurately, you know. I had to look through the memories of dozens—no, hundreds, even thousands—of demons who remembered her. I believe I put the finest dollmakers to work for about two hundred years.”

If the depth of one’s feelings could be measured in time, then Asmodeus’s love—or obsession—must be incalculable. From the moment he started talking, he hadn’t really been seeing *me* at all. He was still chasing after the vestiges of Fianna’s soul within me.

“Now, why don’t we begin the ritual? First, I will transfer your soul into this new vessel and draw out Fianna’s memories, engraved within you.” Asmodeus extended his hand toward me.

As I looked at him blankly, he continued, “No need to be scared. You may lose what makes you *you*—but you’ll gain eternal life in exchange. And I will love you for all eternity.”

Eternal life seemed to be so appealing to powerful people that they’d go to incredible lengths to seek it, but it was far from

what I wanted.

Erza and Mammon interrupted. How many times had this happened? Those two kept risking their lives to protect me.

“How about you pay some attention to us for once?”

“I won’t let you lay a hand on Little Miss Philia! This time, I’m gonna rough you up for real!”

Ignoring my wounds, I grit my teeth desperately.

“You annoying pests! Don’t get cocky! I’ve been holding back for Philia’s sake!”

In a burst of rage, Asmodeus cast a magic circle and fired a black bolt of lightning. From the looks of it, Julius’s body was becoming more and more like a demon’s. The sudden attack left Erza and Mammon no time to defend themselves.

“Holy Shield!”

I protected them with a shield of light that could block the forces of evil. Defensive magic was a saint’s specialty, after all, and I was particularly confident in the strength of my barriers.

The black lightning bolt scattered in all directions and vanished. I must have hurt Asmodeus’s pride, as he glared at me sullenly. But his expression suddenly changed, and he began to laugh as if he were enjoying himself.

“Heh heh heh… You’ve beaten me again, just like the good old days when you got in my way. I challenged you with all my might, and when I lost, you shattered my pride.”

Though I didn’t think we could take Asmodeus on just yet, it seemed he’d lowered his guard ever so slightly. If Erza, Mammon, and I joined forces, our combined abilities could at least prolong the battle. We’d have to keep fighting, wait to catch Asmodeus in a moment of weakness, and be ready to improvise.

“But I guess resorting to brute force just isn’t my style. Philia, I’d rather that you willingly offer up your soul.”

As I pondered what he meant by that, Asmodeus shook his head and relaxed his combative stance. “When I saw you earlier, I was struck by your compassion. You took my hand to save

Hildegard, the mother who abandoned you, even if it meant getting captured."

Indeed, pouring my magic into him to immobilize him had been a gamble. There was no way I was going to test it on Mammon, after all.

The reason I took that risk to help my master was simple. It was what I sincerely wanted to do, even though I hadn't been sure I'd have the resolve to follow through, at the time.

"I know lots of tidbits about you, thanks to Julius's and Hildegard's memories. There's one question in particular that stoked my interest. Hey, Philia. Would you go out of your way to help *these* two?"

Asmodeus's eyes glowed purple. The magical door appeared as usual. From it emerged a man and a woman, both bound and restrained.

It couldn't be...

"Where are we? What are we doing here? Philia? What is the meaning of this?"

"Philia, are you the one behind this? What do you plan to do to us?"

"Father... Mother..."

Before me were George and Cornelia Adenauer, my parents—or rather, if what Asmodeus had said to me on the surface was to be believed, my aunt and uncle. They were supposed to be in prison in Girtonia. I never would've imagined that we'd reunite like this.

Could it be that Asmodeus left a path to our world open not out of arrogant complacence, but so he could continue to abduct humans as necessary?

"Now, then, on to phase two of hostage negotiations. Will you help these two or not? I'm really dying to know. And though I just called them hostages...I rather think I'd like to see you turn your back on the parents who raised you, Philia."

"Turn my back on them?"

“That’s right! They hated the very sight of you and tormented you for the longest time. And in the end, dazzled by promises of gold and property, they gladly sold you off to Parnacorta! I can’t forgive these humans who treated you so cruelly! Just say the word, and I’ll gladly kill them for you. A ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Asmodeus laughed as he declared that he’d gladly kill my parents, whom he’d taken hostage. He cited the fact that they sold me off and the harsh treatment I’d endured from them as reasons they weren’t worth sparing.

In a normal hostage situation, a hostage-taker would capture someone they were sure was important to their target—someone their target would want to protect. But this seemed to be pure entertainment for Asmodeus.

“Well, what’s it going to be? Either option is good for me. I could easily take your soul, or I could have the pleasure of killing for you.”

“Philia! Do you have any idea how miserable your existence has made us?”

“That’s right! If only you’d never been born, we’d still be living happily with Mia today!”

I remembered how much I yearned to be loved by those two. I worked tirelessly to become a full-fledged saint in the hopes that my parents would validate me. But no matter how capable I became, I never earned the validation I craved. Instead, they sold me to Parnacorta.

“Archsaint, abandon them!” Erza cried. “The Adenauers are criminals who’ve been sentenced to death anyway! People like that aren’t worth sacrificing yourself for!”

“Oh, Exorcist. How interesting that you’d choose to kill the hostages. The pleasure’s yours.”

“Oh yeah? Well, then, who am I to refuse?”

Erza pointed her falchion at my parents. She was prepared to get blood on her hands to spare me from having to make such a cruel decision.

“Please wait!” I yelled.

Her falchion still at the ready, Erza looked in my direction.

I'm sorry.

As a saint… No, as a human being…I didn't know the right or wrong thing to do in this case. But I knew I couldn't let anyone die.

"Asmodeus, I surrender. Please let them go." I raised both hands in a gesture of surrender.

As a saint of Parnacorta, dedicated first and foremost to the kingdom's prosperity, turning my back on my parents might have been the right option. But as a human being, I couldn't betray my beliefs and refuse to save the people right before me.

Abandoning my parents was never an option for me.

"Hmm. You made your choice without a moment's hesitation. Such unwavering strength of heart. I must say, that's typical of you."

"I won't resist. But first, let those two go."

I demanded that Asmodeus prove that my parents would be safe. After all, he said he wanted to kill them. I'd accepted Asmodeus's terms, but I had demands of my own.

"You ought to know your place, but fine. I'll release one of them now and let the other one go after I've tied you up. I can't have you pouring your magic into me again."

Is there no chance you'll let your guard down?

Asmodeus released Father from his restraints, then tied me tightly with black rope. Made of fibers reinforced with magic, it seemed quite durable. I couldn't hope to escape on my own.

After that, Asmodeus released Mother. "Run along now. Go do as you please."

Father and Mother ran out of the room, screaming. I couldn't help but worry. After all, there was no way back from here.

Asmodeus chuckled. "Fianna! Finally the time has come for our reunion! Let the ritual begin! Humans, gather your magic into one single point!"

Green light began to stream from the many cages in the room, and the doll floating above the coffin absorbed it all. The cages were made of a type of metal with a high magic absorption rate. Asmodeus must have put all his ingenuity to work devising a mechanism that could absorb his captives' magic.

As it absorbed the magic of Asmodeus's captives, the doll glowed ever brighter.

"Now, Philia, you're next. It's your time to shine!"

"Archsaint!" Erza cried out. "Why? Why would you...? For people like that?"

As I lay restrained and immobile, Asmodeus slowly reached for my heart. I had read that the soul lay deep inside the heart, but what was it like to have it extracted?

"Erza, it'll be okay. That's what I've always believed."

"Huh?"

"Argh! I won't let you harm Lady Philia!"



Rushing into the room, Prince Osvalt cut off Asmodeus's arm with his spear.

I always believed that His Highness would come for me.

If someone as sincere as he made such a promise, the least I could do was trust he would keep it.

In his arms, I felt nothing but relief.

***

Osvalt

WHEN THE DEMON Asmodeus abducted Lady Philia, I managed to get the better of him for a moment. But he made off with her anyway, whisking her away to his realm.

Why did I let go of her hand? Why did I let go of Lady Philia just because I was thrown from my horse? If I'd just held on tighter, Lady Philia wouldn't have ended up trapped in that strange realm.

I cursed my own powerlessness. I'd sworn to make Lady Philia's life in Parnacorta as easy as possible. I wanted to support her by staying by her side so that someday she'd come to love our kingdom. And yet this was how things turned out.

Doubt began to flood me…accompanied by intense regret. Why was I so devastated? Was it because people of Lady Philia's caliber were few and far between? Was it because I couldn't keep my promise?

No! It was because Lady Philia was irreplaceable to me! Just seeing her smile made me so happy. Before I knew it, spending time with her had become more important to me than anything else in the world.

That was why I wanted to save Lady Philia. I wished from the bottom of my heart to help the person most precious to me.

Maybe that was selfish of me, but I didn't want to have any regrets.

After all, I wanted to be by her side, and to someday tell her all that I felt about her.

Regardless of how Lady Philia felt about me, I just knew that if I didn't tell her my feelings, I'd regret it. It was partly for my own sake, too, that I was determined to go save her.

"Your Highness, we found your spear!" Philip handed over the spear I dropped. "Now let's show those demons what we're capable of!"

In the past, this man had taught me how to fight with a spear. He'd said things like, "This is for the day you find the one you want to protect." I'd found his training regimen pretty brutal at the time, but now I was grateful for it.

This was no time to be thinking of the past. I wouldn't be able to face Lady Philia if I wasted precious time.

"Yeah, you're right. With this spear, this time, I'll save Lady Philia."

I took the spear from Philip and swung it around. It felt natural in my grasp—easier to use than any spear I'd ever had.

Don't worry. I won't make a fool of myself again.

"Your Highness! Sir Philip! Sir Klaus is ready," Lena said.

"Coming!"

Carrying weapons Lady Philia developed, Lena, Leonardo, and Himari gathered close to Klaus.

It was a reliable, capable team. Lena had spent years training under her grandfather, who headed a self-defense dojo. Leonardo had led the Knights of Parnacorta two generations ago. Himari began serving as a bodyguard for the Murasame imperial family at a young age.

"From here on," said Klaus, "we'll travel to Limbo. It's an extremely dangerous dimension overrun with demons. We might not be able to return here alive..."

“Come on, Sir Klaus! Quit being so fainthearted! Think about how good it’ll feel to come back with Lady Philia!”

“...Seriously, I’m still adjusting to how different your kingdom’s princes are from ours. Okay, got it. Let’s all come back alive!”

“Hoo!” Raising our fists to the air, we headed into Limbo, where Lady Philia, Erza, and Mammon awaited us.

The eyes of Klaus’s familiar, Satanachia, glowed purple. A massive door covered in sinister-looking designs appeared before us.

“Now follow me.”

As the door opened without a sound, Klaus beckoned us in. Was Asmodeus’s realm on the other side?

Obediently, we stepped through the doorway. We walked a few steps in pitch-black darkness until a pure white landscape unfolded in front of us. It seemed we’d reached our destination safely.

“Is this Limbo? How should I say it—I can’t sense anything alive here.”

“There’s no vegetation at all. Even the rocks and the ground are all white. I can’t imagine this place being naturally created.”

It was just as Leonardo had said. The whole place seemed artificial. This realm was a sham—an illusion.

“You’re right. It’s said that a long time ago, a demon named Satan, the Demon Realm’s ultimate authority, created this dimension to kill time. The sun, the rocks, the earth—it’s all fake. According to legend, he got bored of it halfway through, so he never added color to it.”

“Oh wow, that’s silly,” said Lena. “Coloring things in is the best part.”

The story boggled the mind. The beings known as demons had the ability to create entire *worlds*? Once again, I was reminded that they lived on an entirely different plane of existence from humans.

According to Klaus, the demon Asmodeus hadn't even been at full power during our first encounter. *No, don't get scared. It's nothing to worry about. Don't take your eyes off the goal for a single moment…*

"Sir Klaus, do you know where Lady Philia and the others are?"

This world was so sickeningly white. One step in the wrong direction and I'd be lost right away. Then I'd have no hope of finding Philia.

From the way Erza had spoken, I got the feeling that she had some idea of Asmodeus's whereabouts. And based on Klaus's answer, I was right.

"I think they'd head for the Fortress of Eternal Darkness. It's that way."

"What's the Fortress of Eternal Darkness?"

"It's Asmodeus's stronghold. They're probably lying in wait for the right opportunity, since the only way to defeat him is to strike when his guard is down."

Ah, so this realm had castles too—and Asmodeus lived in one. Well, I certainly wouldn't want to go head-to-head with a monster like that, and Lady Philia wouldn't do anything reckless, either.

"I see," said Himari. "They're sharpening their claws in preparation to strike. I didn't expect the assassination methods I introduced to Lady Philia while we were chatting the other day to come in handy so quickly."

"Himari," chided Leonardo, "you mustn't indulge Lady Philia's interest in anything and everything. Try to talk about more cheerful topics."

"Sir Leonardo, you're always talking about cooking, huh?" Lena remarked.

Everyone in Lady Philia's house got along swimmingly. I knew this from seeing how happy Lady Philia looked whenever she talked about them. The only times she ever looked sad were when

she mentioned her failed attempts to put Leonardo's cooking advice into practice.

Listening to them chatting like this made me feel better about Lady Philia coming to Parnacorta.

"All right, then. Everyone, please follow me. I'll show you around."

Following Klaus, we headed for the Fortress of Eternal Darkness.

As it turned out, Klaus must have ordered Satanachia to transport us to a spot near the fortress. After just a few minutes of walking, a black castle appeared before us. While the rest of Limbo was pure white, this fortress was black as night. Not that I was an artist or anything, but demons didn't seem very creative, did they?

"Miss Erza and the rest are in the Fortress of Eternal Darkness. I can sense them." Closing his eyes, Klaus told us that he sensed the magical powers of Lady Philia and the rest coming from inside the fortress. It was incredible that he could do that from such a distance.

"Got it. It's good to know they're alive."

Since none of us were blessed with magic, we had to leave these things to Klaus.

"Hmm? Wait a minute. I can sense many other magically gifted humans. Those must be Asmodeus's captives."

That made sense. Lady Philia had said that Asmodeus intended to revive Archsaint Fianna, who used her immense magical powers to save the continent from danger four hundred years ago. He'd kidnapped young women with magical power to amass the amount of magic he needed to resurrect Fianna. Of course he'd keep his captives in his hideout.

"Sir Klaus, we should hurry! Lady Philia and her companions must be trying to free the captives!"

"Your Highness, wait! For our safety, we should be stealthier in our approach…"

With that, we rushed into the Fortress of Eternal Darkness.

***

“Well, this is surprising. I expected more security—guards, at the very least. It’s a fortress, after all.”

We entered the Fortress of Eternal Darkness much more easily than we expected. Parnacorta was a peaceful kingdom, but we still had a number of soldiers stationed at the castle gate to guard against intruders. No one and nothing seemed to protect this fortress. I knew I could be a bit lax when it came to these things, but even *I* thought that this place could use more security.

“That’s just how demons are,” Klaus explained. “They’re absolutely confident in their own strength, and they scoff at things like guards and traps. They think those are for weaklings.”

Demons sure seemed to be the type to let their guards down.

“But didn’t Asmodeus take Lady Philia’s mother hostage?” Lena asked.

“Indeed. No matter how you look at it, taking hostages is a weakling’s tactic.”

“Asmodeus said he wanted to capture Miss Philia unharmed. That was probably the easiest way to do it.”

Leave Lady Philia unharmed, huh? He wreaked so much havoc, and yet, from his point of view, he probably thought he was showing restraint.

That reminded me that Asmodeus could read people’s memories. That was how it came to light that Lady Hildegard was actually Lady Philia’s mother. Apparently Lady Mia, Lady Hildegard’s adopted daughter, had already known…but Lady Philia had no idea. That must’ve been a lot to take in.

Lady Hildegard also happened to be Lady Philia’s mentor, and had made Lady Philia undergo an intense training regimen. Was that out of love?

I didn't know how Lady Philia truly felt after discovering the secret that had been hidden from her for so long. When she spoke to us from Limbo, she'd sounded like she was taking the revelation quite well…but she could be awkward about these things. At the risk of poking my nose in where it didn't belong, I wanted to help her navigate this situation if I could.

"What exactly is with these dolls?"

"Whoa!" Lena exclaimed. "So many of them, all lined up!"

"This doll-making technique was popular about two hundred years ago. All of these dolls look finely made."

Lining the hallway were rows of dolls, all of which bore the features of a silver-haired woman in a pale robe. Just like…

"I just noticed that they all look like Lady Philia!"

Philip was right. But why were there so many of them? Was this some kind of demon thing?

"Don't look at me like that," said Klaus. "I don't know every single thing there is to know about demons."

Was that so? Well, if Klaus didn't know, it'd have to remain a mystery.

Even though Klaus had said that demons didn't deploy guards, we found a large crater in the floor of the hallway, indicating that a fight had taken place. The flooring seemed very hard.

"What the—?! Just now, I felt a massive surge of magical power from that direction," said Klaus. "It must be Asmodeus. I can also sense Miss Erza and her companions in the same direction."

"We really should hurry. Everyone! Let's go!"

Hearing that the battle between Lady Philia and Asmodeus had started, we broke into a run.

Lady Philia, I'm coming to your rescue!

***

“Archsaint, abandon them! The Adenauers are criminals who’ve been sentenced to death anyway! People like that aren’t worth sacrificing yourself for!”

“Oh, Exorcist. How interesting that you’d choose to kill the hostages. The pleasure’s yours.”

“Oh yeah? Well, then, who am I to refuse?”

“Please wait!”

We arrived at the wreckage of a door. Beyond it, I could hear some kind of argument about hostages. Apparently, Lady Philia’s foster parents, the Adenauers, had been taken hostage, and Lady Philia was being urged to surrender.

We whispered among ourselves.

“We can’t afford to act carelessly here. What should we do?”

“Going for broke and jumping in now is an option.”

“True, but if the hostages got killed because of us, we wouldn’t be able to face Lady Philia.”

“Saving Lady Philia is our first priority.”

Indeed, if all that mattered was making sure Lady Philia was safe, rushing in would be the right thing to do. But if the consequences of such a decision robbed her of her smile, then I…

Just then, for the briefest moment, Lady Philia seemed to look my way. Did she notice we were nearby?

She and Asmodeus had come to an agreement: In exchange for the release of the hostages, she would let him take her captive. Was she counting on us to step in?

“Klaus, how are souls extracted?” I asked.

“How to extract a soul, you ask? I’ve never done it myself, but I believe you’re supposed to put your hand close to the target’s heart, then use magic to extract the soul from the body. You see, the soul resides in the heart, but it’s immaterial, like magic. So, magically speaking, to touch it…”

“You can save the logic behind it for next time. In short, are you saying Asmodeus will have to extend his hand toward Lady

Philia? Asmodeus himself, not his shadow?”

“The procedure requires fine and precise control of one’s magic, so yes,” Klaus confirmed. “He’ll have to touch her directly.”

There’s one particular moment when all predators are vulnerable, and that’s when they’re on the verge of capturing their prey. If it was true that demons tended to get complacent, I could close in on Asmodeus when he was about to extract Lady Philia’s soul.

I gave orders for everyone to jump out the moment Asmodeus extended his hand to Lady Philia. “Lady Philia believes we’ll take action to save her. Our chance is fleeting, so let’s move as one.”

We only had a moment’s chance at victory, so we had to make sure not to miss it...!

“Erza, it’ll be okay. That’s what I’ve always believed.”

Asmodeus reached a hand out toward Lady Philia’s heart.

Right then and there, I summoned every drop of focus I had —all for the sake of saving the person dearest to me. It was like time slowed down before my eyes. Asmodeus was moving at a glacial pace, as was everyone and everything around him. Time ticked by slowly, and the scene around me unfolded at a leisurely pace.

In that critical moment, I found a fleeting opening.

Now’s our chance!

Vaulting forward with all my strength, I charged at the heinous demon who dared lay a hand on Lady Philia.

“Argh! I won’t let you harm Lady Philia!”

“Huh?”

A look of shock crossed Asmodeus’s face. So even demons could freeze when taken by surprise, huh? It was only for a split second, but Asmodeus stood stock-still.

As far as I was concerned, this was the moment that would determine the success of our rescue mission. Not to brag, but I

think even a master spearman like Philip would've given his seal of approval.

Was I going to let this chance slip by? No, it was time to settle the score!

I cut off Asmodeus's arm and scooped Lady Philia up in an embrace, putting some distance between us and Asmodeus. The warmth Lady Philia exuded was enough to tell me that she was alive.

Good; that did the trick! But just as I thought all was well, Asmodeus extended his shadow in my direction.

"Impudent human, getting in my way!"

"I swore I'd never let Lady Philia go again!"

Asmodeus growled in response.

There was no way I'd make the same mistake twice. With all my might, I launched myself away from Asmodeus's approaching shadow. My arms instinctively tightened around Lady Philia. I wasn't going to let the most precious person in my life be taken away again.

No matter what, I'd return to the surface with Lady Philia. I'd show them all!

Chapter 4:
Love is Woven by the Ties That Bind

Philia

I KNEW THAT Prince Osvalt and others were near, and that they were observing the situation.

The bracelet that I gave Lena was designed to vibrate slightly when I was close. It was meant to alert someone to the presence of the person wearing the matching bracelet. Lena had once gotten lost while accompanying me on my saintly duties, so I'd added this function, though...I hadn't expected it to come in handy at a time like this.

Klaus had probably hidden any traces of his magic, while Prince Osvalt and his companions had no magical powers to begin with, so Asmodeus didn't seem to sense them.

That was why I wasn't worried as I prepared to be captured. I had faith that His Highness and the rest of the rescue party had a plan to ambush Asmodeus at the right moment.

If they hadn't arrived when they did, Father and Mother would have had to wait a little longer, because it would've been difficult to agree to Asmodeus's terms. I would've had to stall to buy myself some time.

"I'm so glad you're all right," said His Highness. "You really hung in there."

"I'm sorry for worrying you."

Tears welled up in His Highness's eyes. While I'd genuinely believed that he would stage an ambush and come to my rescue, the moment he held me in his arms, I reflexively started to tear up too.

These weren't just tears of happiness. I realized that I also felt something else, though I couldn't tell exactly what it was. All I knew was that it was a very precious feeling.

“Prince of Parnacorta! You think you’re all that?”

Asmodeus rushed toward us, his face contorted with rage. He must have been furious that His Highness had gotten in the way of his greatest desire. Had it not been for the ropes restraining me, I could have dealt a counterattack against him.

“No! Stay away from Lady Philia and His Highness, you bastard!”

“Flame Technique!”

With his spear, Philip blocked Asmodeus from getting any closer, while Himari scorched his face with flames.

“What the…?! How dare you?!” Taken aback, Asmodeus shut his eyes against the attacks.

“That won’t do. Closing your eyes makes you a third-rate fighter.” Leonardo kicked Asmodeus in the back of the head, knocking him to the ground.

“Guh!”

I was touched that so many people had rushed to my rescue, even knowing that they might not be able to return from Limbo.

“Lady Philia! Are you hurt?”

“Oh, Lena, you’re here, too. I’m fine. Thank you for coming.”

“Of course. I want to accompany you on your duties again, make sweets together, and…oh, do so many things with you!” Smiling, Lena used her anti-demon dagger to cut off my restraints.

It was kind of her to want to spend more time with me. I, too, had much left to do. There was no way I’d let my life end here, even if it meant gaining immortality.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Erza demanded. “Who let all these non-exorcists in here?”

Klaus tried to explain. “S-sorry. You see, Miss Alice…”

“Don’t make excuses. Isn’t that man a prince of Parnacorta? If anything happened to him, it’d become an international issue! An international issue!” Erza scolded Klaus as he rushed over.

“I-I know, okay?”

I couldn't thank Klaus enough. He'd risked the anger of his superiors to bring people along to save me.

Seeing everyone's faces made an inexplicable surge of strength well up in me.

Mammon tried to pacify Erza. "Big Sis, how about we drop it for now? At least we can gang up on Lord Asmodeus."

He had a point. Asmodeus was all alone, and there were no indications that he'd called any comrades for backup. All that he summoned were the weak low-ranking demons. That was strange, considering that he'd summoned many mid-ranking demons at Parnacorta Castle.

"All of us together might stand a chance," said Erza. "I have no idea why he's not asking his allies to help."

She might be right. At Asmodeus's current level of power, our chances of winning were high.

Asmodeus laughed. "Do you really think the ten of you all lined up in a row can take me down? You must be dreaming!"

Lena and Philip rose to Asmodeus's provocations.

"Hmph! We won't lose to you!"

"Asmodeus! As the commander of the Knights of Parnacorta, I will defeat you! Prepare yourself!"

I started to get a bad feeling about this. Had I overlooked an important detail?

"Well, aren't you haughty? Bow down before me, inferior humans!"

Lena shrieked and Philip gasped as a pair of enormous wings sprouted from Asmodeus's back. He knocked them down with a flick of a wing.

Asmodeus's hair lengthened till it reached his waist, his entire body glowed with a blinding silver light, and the look in his eyes grew so sharp that he no longer resembled Julius at all. His godlike presence was palpable. We were all so astonished by his transformation that we forgot to breathe.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha! This human I possessed is delightful! His filthy soul complements my own perfectly! I don’t even need to revive my old body anymore! The body of this man, Julius, has completely transformed into that of a demon!”

Tornadoes began to form in the room. The more Asmodeus screamed, the more the air shook. No, it wasn’t just the air—the ground, too, was shaking violently.

This was on a completely different scale from before. Asmodeus now emanated a massively threatening aura, like that of a vengeful god.

Four hundred years ago, humanity had been saved by Archsaint Fianna, who possessed extraordinary powers. But before she came along, Asmodeus’s existence was treated like a natural disaster. People didn’t even bother to resist him.

Violence without any rhyme or reason—this was what Asmodeus embodied.

“Didn’t you find it suspicious that there were no demons in this fortress? I’ve swallowed them all! In this body, I’ll paint everything black with demon blood!”

He ate his own kind?

I’d read something similar before, though not about demons. It was said that the monsters in a distant kingdom built up their powers by devouring each other. Eventually, they became powerful enough to be considered calamities in and of themselves. This seemed to be what Asmodeus was doing.

The sheer scope of Asmodeus’s magic beggared belief. Even as the demon he’d been in the past, he would have been a foe beyond me. I’d never dreamed he might become more powerful still.

“Lady Philia, we must act. The captives are in great danger.”

“You’re right, Himari. Start by unlocking the cages and freeing the captives. Their magic has been drained from them, but they don’t seem otherwise harmed.”

“Understood!”

I handed Himari half of the keys to the cages. She released the captives at such unbelievable speed that she seemed to split into several people.

“Lady Philia, let me help, too.”

“Your Highness…”

Prince Osvalt joined in. In moments, all the victims of the vanishings had been freed from their cages. To prevent them from getting dragged into the battle with Asmodeus, Himari and Lena guided them out of the room.

Asmodeus stared fixedly at me, still laughing. He seemed completely uninterested in anyone aside from me. I had the feeling that if I moved a muscle, he’d spring at me…

However, the strong winds tearing around the room made it increasingly difficult to stand. The walls and ceiling cracked and began to cave in. Was Asmodeus really planning to destroy this place, even though the doll he’d created to be Archsaint Fianna’s new body was here?

Amid the chaos, I heard my parents’ voices. It seemed that they hadn’t been able to find their way home and had ended up back at the fortress.

“Waah!”

“I can’t take this anymore!”

The cracked ceiling collapsed. Mother and Father were about to be pinned under rubble.

What to do? If I shouted a warning, they still wouldn’t make it out in time…

“Holy Shield!”

My parents stared in astonishment as the shield of light that I cast protected them from the wreckage.

That was a close call. “Father, Mother, please hurry. It won’t be long until this fortress crumbles.”

They looked at each other, then at me, shock written all over their faces.

“Philia…y-you don’t hate us?”

“I want you to pay for your crimes, but I don’t hold any particular grudge against you. I can’t speak for my mother, though.”

“So you’ve found out about that…”

Ever since I was old enough to remember, nothing ever went right in my relationship with my parents. The distance between us only grew even wider after they sent me away to a convent. But to hate them for it would be rejecting the person I’d become and the life I’d had since then.

So I didn’t hate my parents. Instead, unfortunately, I felt nothing for them.

“This is your final warning, Philia,” shouted Asmodeus, still cackling. “If you don’t want a bloodbath, surrender your soul to me! Otherwise, all your friends will die!”

Asmodeus’s words seemed to be more of an ultimatum than a threat. As he spoke, a gust of wind blew the others away, sending them crashing into a wall.

“Asmodeus,” I warned, holding on to a thin sliver of hope, “if your rampage keeps up, you’ll damage Lady Fianna’s doll.”

To craft that intricate doll, Asmodeus had spent centuries studying the memories of demons and putting talented dollmakers to work. Surely, even someone like him would be devastated to see it broken.

Asmodeus crossed his arms in silence as he listened to my words, seeming to reflect on them. The fearsome magic that he’d cast came to a stop, and the raging storms subsided.

What a relief. Perhaps he had a rational side, after all. Perhaps he’d put his obsession with Lady Fianna to rest.

“No,” Asmodeus muttered, sounding sad. “However you look at it, you’re not Fianna.”

What was happening? I sensed even greater and more sinister magical power radiating from Asmodeus.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Philia, that calculating side of yours is something Fianna never had! You may be her reincarnation, but you’re not her at all. I don’t care what happens to your body anymore! I’ll cut you into pieces and rip out your soul!”

Finally, Asmodeus had arrived at the realization that I was not Lady Fianna—albeit at the worst possible time.

“And one more thing,” he continued. “Don’t underestimate Fianna’s magic-absorbing vessel! This fortress could be reduced to a pile of rubble, and she wouldn’t get a single scratch on her!”

As Asmodeus said, Fianna’s doll had absorbed an immense amount of magic. He could afford to go on a rampage because of his confidence that nothing could destroy his doll. To me, that conviction felt like desperation.

“Everyone,” I said, “please brace yourselves. This will most likely be incomparable to what happened at the palace—”

As I said this, the silver light surrounding Asmodeus began to glow even brighter.

“Catastrophe!”

I tried to avoid looking directly at the intense light, which could easily be mistaken for the sun. The next thing I knew, an explosive series of concentric rings radiated from Asmodeus and rocked the room.

“Holy Barrier!”

No matter what, I had to move forward.

That’s right. Move forward. Even just one step.

Determined to protect everyone, I used the full extent of my magic to cast a barrier.

Unfortunately, my barrier was powerless against the blast. I was only able to keep the explosion at bay for a brief moment. Before I knew it, I found myself buried under rubble.

At the palace, I’d been caught off guard. This time, I’d tried with all my power to block Asmodeus’s attack, and still failed. My body was already in tatters. Excruciating pain ran through me.

This brief exchange of offense and defense was more than enough to drive home the gulf in our abilities. The power of Asmodeus, now a fully resurrected demon, was truly unfathomable. The destruction he caused was akin to a natural disaster.

I shuddered at the thought of this happening in our world. If an explosion this intense occurred in Parnacorta's imperial capital, it would become a barren wasteland in an instant.

In an attempt to protect everyone in the room, I'd cast Holy Barrier, a type of barrier magic that had completely shielded me from dragon fire during my training days. But this time, it had next to no effect.

I hoped the others were safe, but had no way to check. I was buried in wreckage and injured all over. Worse, I'd pushed myself too far, and my magic was running dry. I couldn't extricate myself from the rubble.

"No, I can't give up yet. I still have an appointment with Prince Osvalt, after all—"

I was surprised to hear myself say those words. At a critical time like this, I couldn't believe that the first thing that came to mind was my promise to have dinner with Prince Osvalt.

It was an important promise, of course, but as a saint, I had other things I should be thinking about...like protecting my kingdom and saving lives.

The rubble began to shift. Something fell toward me, as if to shield me. It was warm and soft. It felt like a living thing, but when I looked at it, I realized it was the doll that was supposed to host Lady Fianna's soul.

"We were blown away together, weren't we?" I said to the doll. "I'm such a wreck, and you haven't got even a scratch on you. I can see why Asmodeus takes pride in you."

Despite being subjected to a massive explosion, the doll remained in pristine condition. Having absorbed the magical power that Asmodeus gathered, it still gave off a steady, powerful glow.

Suddenly, a voice echoed in my head, and my chest started to burn. “Asmodeus, you just don’t know when to stop. I warned you that I wouldn’t let you ravage the land.”

“What was that?” I exclaimed. “I-it’s hot… My chest… My heart…!”

It felt like the magical power from Fianna’s doll flowed into my heart and settled there. At the same time, my head was filled with what seemed to be Fianna’s memories…

The glow from the doll gradually faded, and my body began to glow instead. My heart felt like it was on fire. And in my head…

“Fianna Aesfill, you’re too powerful. I’m sorry, but you’re too dangerous to be left to your own devices.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t use my powers against you. Instead, I’ll teach you how to use your own powers.”

“It’s our job as exorcists to defeat demons. Fianna, are you thinking of becoming an exorcist, too? …A saint? What’s that?”

“Nearly all the exorcists have been wiped out, Fianna. There’s no more hope left for humanity.”

“I’ll exterminate the demons. That’s my God-given mission.”

In a flash, Fianna’s memories from the world as it was four centuries ago flooded my mind, threatening to rewrite my own. If I let my guard down even a bit, I might relive her experience so vicariously that I’d lose myself in the illusion.

I was experiencing life as Fianna Aesfill.

“I can’t believe a mere human could defeat you, Lord Azael.”

“Don’t be a fool, Lord Beelzebub. It’s not like *you* can do anything about her.”

“Ha ha! I’ve found my soulmate! My fated one! Fianna, I swear you’ll be mine!”

During the approach of the Demon Realm four hundred years ago, three of the highest-ranking demons—Azael,

Beelzebub, and Asmodeus—had invaded our world. The surface world, which had already become a playground for monsters, was further devastated, leaving humanity stricken with despair.

Dalbert, the greatest kingdom on the continent at the time, trained exorcists and developed demon-fighting techniques. But the exorcists were no match for the highest-ranking demons, and they were defeated one after the other.

Amid these horrors, Fianna, who had been persecuted since childhood for her extraordinary magic power, sought refuge in Dalbert's church. She had been invited there by a priest of Cremoux who doubled as an exorcist. Lady Fianna prayed to God. When she received the tragic news that the priest who helped her had lost his life battling demons, her sorrow gave her the resolve to fight demons as a saint.

Lady Fianna used large-scale barrier magic to eliminate monsters not only across the continent, but around the world. With her exorcist allies, she traveled the world, battling demons and surviving adventures.

She easily crushed Azael and Beelzebub, whose powers were on par with or stronger than Asmodeus's, causing the other demons to lose their fighting spirit. She chased them down until they retreated back to the Demon Realm.

Even with the tables turned, Asmodeus, who was physically nigh-immortal, refused to learn his lesson. No matter how many times Fianna dealt with him, he continued to pursue her. In the end, Lady Fianna managed to separate his body and soul, neutralizing him by sealing away his body.

With that, Lady Fianna became an internationally celebrated hero, earning the title of archsaint.

I'd thought that the stories about Archsaint Fianna were mostly the stuff of myths and legends. Now, seeing her through her own eyes, I realized she was a human being who respected her mentor, treasured her friends, and was affectionate to her lover. Even though she was troubled by the magnitude of her powers, she had many people close by to support her. She

continued to feel grateful to these people until her life came to an end.

Lady Fianna was humanity's first saint.

And I was her...

"You are...you, Philia Adenauer."

Was the voice echoing in my head hers? Did this mean that her soul had awakened within me?

"That seems to be the case, one way or another," Lady Fianna answered, as if reading my thoughts. "I never thought Asmodeus would take his obsession this far. I'm terribly sorry. It seems I didn't do enough to imprison him, and now I've caused you trouble. Please lend me your help in defeating Asmodeus."

As Lady Fianna's voice rang out in my head, power welled up within me. Was I to defeat Asmodeus in her place?

But Asmodeus's magical power was tremendous. I simply wasn't equal to him.

"There you are, Philia! You were blown away so suddenly that it was a pain to find you, you know!"

Asmodeus kicked rubble aside as he made his way to me. Extending his arm, which had turned purple, he tried once again to extract my soul.

It was impossible to resist his strength. Did I have no choice but to give up?

"No, I can't give up here!"

Determined not to surrender, I mustered all my strength to grab Asmodeus by the arm. I knew that what little strength I had left was nothing to him, but I had to fight back.

"Gaaah! What is this power?!"

I heard a scream. Asmodeus's groans of agony filled the room.

Still grabbing Asmodeus's arm, I levitated into the air. What was happening? Strangely enough, his arm felt as fragile as a twig.

Then, as if a dam had broken, an unbelievable amount of magic power gushed forth within me.

“Woman! Are you trying to pour your magic into me again? Is that what you’re doing?”

Raising and twisting Asmodeus’s arm, I tried to inject my magic into him. He sliced his own arm off and ran away to put some distance between us. As I’d feared, that trick no longer worked on him. Still, the power I now wielded seemed like it could rival that of Asmodeus.

“We have to hurry and save everyone.”

Almost thirty people were nearly buried alive, and some appeared to be seriously injured. I had to take action before someone died.

“Holy Breath!”

Sensing the presence of Asmodeus’s other victims, I cast a magic circle. Wind blew the surrounding debris away. That ought to free those buried in rubble.

I dropped to the ground and offered prayers to cast a healing spell.

“Saint Heal!”

Absorbing a large amount of mana into myself, I invoked my healing magic.

Prince Osvalt, who had fallen to the ground nearby, rose and hurried over to me. “Lady Philia, you’re amazing. My injuries fully healed in an instant. Everyone else seems fine, too. You saved us!”

I scanned Prince Osvalt from head to toe. As he said, his injuries had indeed healed. I put a hand to my chest in relief.

I wasn’t going to let Asmodeus take a single life. I would protect everyone.

“Your Highness, I’m glad you’re all right. I’ll deal with Asmodeus from here on out. Please leave the fight to me.”

“Okay. As pathetic as this sounds, considering I came here to help, I get it. I know it’s the best course of action, so I’ll leave it to

you. But you should know that if things are looking dangerous, I won't just sit by and watch."

Despite the look of concern on his face, Prince Osvalt stepped back and let me face Asmodeus alone.

My magic had swelled beyond my imagination, but I felt that I could handle it. With this much power at my disposal, I wouldn't fall short of Asmodeus anymore.

Using absorbed mana to amplify and release one's own power was the basic principle of ancient magic, but the amount one could absorb wasn't infinite. The limit was approximately ten times one's own inherent magic. Any more than that would be impossible to control, and one's body would be unable to bear the strain.

But absorbing the doll's magic seemed to have increased my own magical capacity. In turn, the amount of mana I could absorb had also increased. This surge must have awakened Fianna's soul within me, and her powers with it.

"What use is a partner I can't touch?" Asmodeus yelled, looking down at us from high in the air. "That woman's not Fianna, after all!"

As his magic surged, red light shone from his eyes.

It looked like he was going to use Catastrophe, the spell that had trapped us in the rubble earlier. Based on Fianna's memories, Asmodeus had used this magic to annihilate a number of kingdoms.



Grinning, he prepared to cast it again.

Seeing Asmodeus in action, Prince Osvalt tried to step out in front of me to act as my shield. “Lady Philia! There’s another big attack coming!”

I wasn’t going to let His Highness get injured. He’d risked his life coming here to save me, and it was my turn to protect him.

“Catastrophe!”

“Silver Judgment!”

I held my hand out to Asmodeus and cast the spell that Mia was best at. It was a simple spell that could conjure countless cross-shaped silver knives. I made thousands—no, tens of thousands—of these knives appear all around Asmodeus. Before he could even activate his spell, the knives punctured him from head to toe.

“What kind of stupid joke is this?! Beating my spell activation speed… That can’t be!” Covered in silver knives, Asmodeus sank to the ground. I’d managed to avert another explosion.

While those knives were infused with sacred power, Asmodeus had high regenerative abilities and was nearly immortal, so I remained on guard. This time, at least, he showed no signs of having an ace up his sleeve.

Even so, when Asmodeus got to his feet, not a single drop of blood had spilled.

“Don’t tell me… That was just like Fianna’s attack…”

“Asmodeus, do you see me as Lady Fianna?”

Biting my finger, I let a drop of blood fall to the ground. Five Pillars of Light appeared at once. Pillars of Light were effective for increasing magical power. I’d found them essential for casting the Great Purification Circle.

The pillars released beams of silver light toward the sky, forming a magic circle. The amplified magic from the circle brought forth a huge, shining golden sword.

This was the very same magic that Lady Fianna had used to seal off Asmodeus’s body four hundred years ago.

“Excalibur! With this, I’ll end you. Prepare yourself.”

“That spell…that sword…I’ve seen them before…”

“I won’t let you return to the world so easily. I’m going to destroy every trace of your soul.”

Asmodeus’s knees buckled as he saw Excalibur shining in the sky. It must have been extremely traumatic for him to be sealed away by this magic.

Four hundred years ago, Lady Fianna was unable to destroy his soul. But this time, she was determined not to make the same mistake, and her magic conveyed that powerful will.

In a pathetic voice, Asmodeus pled for his life. “Fianna! Wait! Hold on! I…I love you! As long as I could have you, I had no intention of wreaking havoc on the surface world! I don’t care what happens to my body!”

His feelings for Fianna were real. I could tell that from the very first moment we met.

“Asmodeus, I’m not Lady Fianna. You might have plotted this because you were starved for love, but as a saint, I can’t condone your actions.”

I couldn’t deny that he was partly driven by love. Ironically, the shortsightedness that allowed him to be blinded by emotion was his most human quality. But no matter how sincere his feelings were, the fact remained that he’d left a trail of destruction in his wake and cost people their lives.

“Hold on! Philia, do you intend to kill me, Julius Girtonia? I’m human! Saints aren’t supposed to kill people, are they?”

Knowing that I wouldn’t spare a demon, Asmodeus reverted to human form and tried to win me over as Julius. Certainly, Julius was a fiend, but he was still human. It was up to Girtonia’s courts to pass judgment on him. There were no laws that allowed a saint to execute someone. Asmodeus must have learned that by reading Julius’s memories. No doubt that was also how he found out that I was a stickler for rules.

“You sure know a lot about me.”

Asmodeus chortled. “But of course. I was your fiancé, after all. I’m so very sorry about last time. Why don’t we both consider that water under the bridge—”

“Asmodeus, there’s no way I could overlook what you’ve done.”

Ignoring Asmodeus, I brought the sword of light down and stabbed him in the chest. His mouth gaped wide as he screamed, his death throes reverberating through the fortress.

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Asmodeus’s aura disappeared.

When Lady Fianna used this magic on Asmodeus four hundred years ago, his powerful demonic body had been so difficult to subdue that she was unable to seal away his soul as well. But this time, he was borrowing a human body. And so, by stabbing him with this sword of light, I was able to directly pierce his soul and completely lock down his magic.

Lying on the ground before me was Julius, fully human again.

“Archsaint, I thought you’d be soft on him, but you were surprisingly merciless,” said Erza. “Even with his jail sentence and impending execution, I wouldn’t have guessed you’d have the heart to stab him.”

I was taught to have a merciful heart, so I could understand why Erza was surprised to see me turn a deaf ear to Asmodeus’s pleas. She wasn’t wrong. There was a reason I stabbed Julius without hesitation.

“Eek! Don’t stab me! Don’t stab me! Heeeelp—huh? What?”

“He’s still alive? No way! Asmodeus, you foul…”

As Julius staggered to his feet and scanned the place warily, Erza cried out and readied her falchion.

If I didn’t step in, she might actually kill him.

“Please wait, Erza. He’s not Asmodeus. The magic I used earlier was a special kind of purification magic that Lady Fianna developed to get rid of dark magic, the source of demons’ and monsters’ power. It won’t do any harm to ordinary humans.”

This was precisely why I didn’t listen to Asmodeus’s assertions. The sword of light was purification magic taken to the extreme. Since I knew that it wouldn’t harm Julius’s body, I was able to drive the sword straight into Asmodeus’s soul. Asmodeus didn’t seem to know what kind of magic had done him in.

Julius, now in surprisingly good spirits, looked me over. “Philia?” he grumbled. “How dare you stab me, a prince? I always said you have the feelings of a block of wood! The greatest saint of all time? Don’t make me laugh!”

For someone who’d just been stabbed with a large glowing sword, he wasn’t terribly frightened. With a look of outrage on his face, he rambled on and on.

“Are you sure he isn’t really Asmodeus? Did you purify him properly?” Erza asked.

“It’s fine. He’s always been like this.”

“He doesn’t seem fine at all. It’s because of him that Girtonia got into that terrible mess, isn’t it?”

Somehow, I felt nostalgic at the sight of Julius. Was this a sign that I’d grown used to life in Parnacorta? Perhaps Erza was right. If I’d stood up to Julius earlier, the disasters he caused might have been averted.

…No, that was just hubris. After all, I didn’t have the power to change another person.

All I could say was that Girtonia was fortunate to have Mia protecting it.

“…The truth is, you wanted to kill me, right? In that case, you should’ve just done it! You’ve got some nerve, pretending to be a Goody Two-shoes!”

Seeing me stand there unfazed must have rubbed Julius the wrong way, as he kept raising his voice. It seemed that some of his

memories from when he was possessed by Asmodeus remained. But surely that didn't mean…

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"I'm saying that I bet you hate me! So much that you want to kill me! I know!"

Did I hate him? Faced with this unexpected statement, I gave it serious thought, and concluded that I just didn't know. In my opinion, the people of Girtonia and everyone else who'd gotten dragged into his misdeeds were the ones who ought to hate Julius.

"I don't hate you. Without you, I wouldn't have gone to Parnacorta and met so many people whom I now hold dear. I only want you to pay for your crimes."

With a groan, Julius indignantly cast his eyes downward.

In the end, what was the right thing to say?

Would it have been more satisfying if I said that I hated him?

Prince Osvalt laughed. "Thank you, Lady Philia. That's one worry of mine put to rest."

"A worry of yours?"

What was he talking about? Was something bothering him? I was glad to hear it had been resolved, but…

"Nah, it's nothing. Thanks, Lady Philia. Once again, you've saved the continent… No, maybe the whole world this time." His Highness patted me on the shoulder.

"Not at all. I would have died if you hadn't come to my aid. Thank you for saving me."

I truly was grateful to His Highness. When he came for me, my heart had begun to beat so fast. I'd never forget that feeling for the rest of my life.

"Of course I'd help. Because, more than anyone else, you—"

Erza stepped in. "We'd better get going. Why are we hanging out in such a depressing place? You've got to pick the right place and time, you know."

His Highness nodded. “Ugh… Now that you mention it, Lady Erza, you’re right. The ambiance matters.”

Again, he started to say something but stopped. I was growing more and more curious, but as Erza said, we needed to leave Limbo and return to our world as quickly as possible. Mia and Saint Hildegard were waiting and worrying, after all.

“Huh? Did our numbers thin out while we were distracted?”

“Mammon’s taking the kidnapped women back home,” Lena said.

“Taking on the tough work again, huh?”

I was impressed that Mammon could travel so easily back and forth, taking the women to their respective homelands across the world’s kingdoms. Teleportation certainly was convenient.

“Some of the victims are from Murasame, Lady Himari’s homeland,” Philip said.

“Murasame is no longer my homeland, for I have abandoned it,” Himari replied.

Northeast of Parnacorta, far across the sea, was the kingdom of Murasame, where Himari was born. I didn’t know why she had come to Parnacorta, and had the feeling that Murasame was a taboo topic, so I seldom brought it up. Based on her reaction to Philip’s comment, perhaps I should continue that way.

Mammon panted, apparently out of breath, as he called out to Julius. “That leaves this prince… It’s Girtonia’s dungeons for you, right?”

Mammon was in human form and doing his best to adjust the expression on his face to maintain his clean-cut good looks. It really was amazing that he’d been able to ferry so many people to the surface world in such a short time. He must have been exhausted.

“Come and get me, you!”

“I love it when pretty girls talk tough…but when it’s a cheeky brat doing it, I suddenly feel like giving them hell.”

“Aiee! Hands off! I-I-I’m a prince!” The moment Mammon glared at him, Julius’s composure gave out. His eyes went wide and he fainted.

It was a mystery why Julius was so rude to Mammon, when he was clearly terrified of him.

“Hurry up and get going,” said Erza. “Don’t do anything stupid!”

“Yeah, yeah. Big Sis, you really are a slave driver, you know that?”

Though Mammon replied in an exasperated-sounding tone, he obediently grabbed Julius by the collar and stepped through a black gate with him.

In moments, Julius would be back in Girtonia’s dungeons. I had a feeling that his return would cause a stir over there.

“Sir Klaus, don’t you think Satanachia should help out?”

“Don’t be silly, Mr. Leonardo. Satanachia can’t compare to Mammon in terms of magical power.” Klaus shrugged helplessly. “I told you, he can only carry a half-dozen people at most. He can only do one round trip a day!”

Mammon must be a fairly high-ranking demon, even if he paled in comparison to a being like Asmodeus.

“Exactly!” Mammon said. “I’m a pretty big deal for a demon, and I know I’ve got the power to back it up. That’s why my gorgeous big sis relies on me.”

“Still got some energy left, huh? I thought I’d let you rest after sending that prince back, but it looks like you don’t need it. Now it’s our turn to go home.”

“Erza, we don’t mind Mammon taking a break—”

“Think nothing of it. If a beautiful lady asks it of me, I’ll take her to the four corners of hell and back.”

“You idiot. Who in their right mind would want that?”

As I listened to the usual banter between Erza and Mammon, we materialized back at Parnacorta Castle. I was overjoyed by the feeling of setting foot on the solid ground of our world once more.

“We’re back.”

“Really makes you feel something, doesn’t it? Asmodeus left his marks all over the place, though…”

The sight of the half-destroyed palace instantly brought me back to reality.

“We just have to fix what’s broken, right?” said His Highness. “My brother and I will take charge. Lady Philia, I hope you’ll support us.”

“I’d like to do more than support you. I’m happy to help repair the damage.”

We were going to be hard at work rebuilding the capital in the days to come, and I wanted to help as much as I could. Just sitting back and watching would be too stressful for me.

“Philia!” Mia ran up to me. “Thank goodness… Really, thank goodness! You’re okay!”

“It’s thanks to everyone here. Mia, I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“Everyone, thank you for bringing my sister back!”

My heart warmed as I saw my sister’s tears of relief. I bowed to everyone who had risked their lives for me.

“By the way, where’s my master?”

“Mother? Er, she seems to have gone somewhere… She was here a moment ago.”

Saint Hildegard didn’t seem to be nearby. There was plenty I wanted to discuss with her—not just about her being my birth mother, but many more things.

His Highness spoke to me in a gentle tone. Somehow, he seemed to understand what I was thinking. “Hey, don’t look so sad. Lady Hildegard wouldn’t return to Girtonia without a proper goodbye. She’s not that irresponsible. I’m sure she’s just sorting out her feelings.”

“You’re right. I trust her.”

Master, when we talk, let's take it nice and slow... Lena taught me how to brew delicious tea, so why don't we relax over a nice cup?

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As always, I woke up before sunrise and did my daily training in the garden.

Thinking back to yesterday's events, I couldn't believe that so much had happened in a single day. It felt like I'd been gone for days. How could I ever have dreamed of traveling to a place like Limbo? It was a miracle that I'd returned to Parnacorta safely after settling the score with Asmodeus.

Sadly, the Saints' Summit ended early. Even though it was only for a moment, the Great Purification Circle was broken. All the kingdoms had had their share of chaos to clean up. Mammon was put to work helping the saints from each kingdom return home, glaring at Erza all the while.

When he was finished, Erza told me, "This is the last we'll see of each other." What did she mean by that?

Life worked in mysterious ways. I had a feeling that we'd meet again.

"So yesterday's magic was temporary, after all."

I tried to gather and increase my magical power—but just as I suspected, I couldn't draw out as much magic as I had when I fought Asmodeus.

For a short-lived moment, an incredible amount of magic had gathered within me. As a result, I felt that my capacity for storing magic had expanded, if only slightly. If I could gather mana from nature and absorb it into my body, I might be able to gain more power than ever.

What an intense experience this had all been. Impossible as it might be for me to come close to Lady Fianna, from now on, I would remember that day and strive to do better.

“Master, are you training too?”

“Yes, since I’ve returned to active duty. Ah, the flow of your magic feels smoother than before. I’m glad you’re training every day without fail.”

“I could never miss a day of training. It’s become a habit, after all.”

Saint Hildegard was nowhere to be found right after we returned from Limbo, but she turned up later that night. After much discussion, it was decided that Mia would return to Girtonia alone, ahead of our master. She’d left yesterday. She’d been considerate enough to give the two of us space to talk last night, though we’d ended up not really discussing anything in particular.

Once again, the truths that Asmodeus revealed came to mind. I thought back to how I’d felt when I learned my master was really my mother. I couldn’t forget the look on her face at that moment, as well as my own weakness, which kept me from calling her “Mother.”

“Ever since I took you under my wing, I’ve had many chances to tell you the truth. And yet I kept quiet for so long. I’m sorry.” After focusing her heart and mind, Master bowed her head and apologized to me, her words slow and careful.

I’d spent a long time with Saint Hildegard in Girtonia. Most of my training as a saint had proceeded under her guidance. Even after I became a saint, she continued to guide me until her retirement.

Though she’d been harsh on me, and I’d almost given up on many an occasion, there was kindness in it too. Her training gave me the confidence to stick it out in any environment. If not for her, I wouldn’t have made it this far as a saint.

“Master, please raise your head. I already heard the story from Mia. Based on what she told me, I understand why it was hard for you to talk about it.”

Before I was born, Hildegard had been treated coldly by the main branch of the Adenauer family, and ultimately kicked out of the household. However, the Adenauers—the people I had known as Mother and Father—were unable to produce a daughter who

could become a saint. To solve this predicament, my grandfather took Hildegard's newborn baby by force, and the Adenauers raised her as their own. This was the unbelievable story of my birth and parentage, as I'd heard it from Mia.

"Master, you've given me so much. You taught me how to live not only as a saint, but as a human. It's all thanks to you that I am where I am now."

"But you never had a mother's love, which I should have given you…"

"No, I did receive that from you—so many times that I've lost count. You, Hildegard Adenauer, are my image of the ideal saint. I was so happy to learn that the saint I respected and admired above all was my mother. This body, these powers, and this life of mine are all precious to me, and I'm so glad to know that they're all gifts from you."

There were so many times when I grew disheartened and felt like giving up. There were so many times when I cried and grit my teeth, but I had to endure. My master taught me by example to put in the effort, to keep my chin up no matter how tough things got, and to push forward. Her lessons taught me how to forge on.

Intense as Hildegard's training had been, she always practiced what she preached. Wherever I went, she was there, too. She continued to be my north star, keeping me from straying from my path.

I felt nothing but joy to know that someone I admired so highly was my mother. It felt like I'd finally gotten something I'd always wanted.

"You've already surpassed me by far. A mentor's dearest desire is to see their pupil outshine them. Since I couldn't be a mother to you, I thought I'd teach you everything I could, instead. But I can't do that anymore. Philia, you're now the ideal saint."

Was there nothing more she could teach me? When it came to the technical aspects of magic, and mental and emotional training, I agreed that she had taught me enough. But that wasn't all there was to teach. She was still my role model. I wanted to follow in her footsteps.

And as for myself…

“Master… No, Mother!”

“Th-that again? Isn’t it a bit too late for me to act as your mother?”

“Mother, there’s still something I’d like you to tell me. I’ve been wondering about it since yesterday.”

“Something you want to know? But you already know practically everything. I don’t think there’s anything else I can teach you.”

One thing had been on my mind ever since I found out that Hildegard Adenauer was my birth mother. No matter what, I had to know. I had a feeling that I’d never get an answer if I didn’t ask here and now, so I gathered my courage.

“It’s about my father. What was he like? How did you meet? Can you tell me as much as you can about him?”

“Y-your father? In as much detail as possible? Ah, right. I suppose that’s an obvious question, though for some reason, I didn’t see it coming. I thought it was too ordinary a question for you to ask.”

Was it really that strange for me to ask about my father? How curious. I didn’t expect her to look so surprised. What sort of questions did she expect from me?

Slowly, Hildegard began to speak.

“Your father was a healer, with a particular skill for treating injuries. He died in an epidemic, but was worried about you until the very end.”

So Father was a healer. Could I have inherited my knack for healing magic from him? I was fascinated, and also touched to know he’d cared for me so much. Was he a kind person?

I wanted to learn more. But my master—no, my mother—looked uncomfortable and fell silent.

“Er, is that all?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well…I’d like more details, please. I want to know things like how you met, what kind of dates you went on, whether you got married…”

I hadn’t thought she’d answer me so briefly, but it seemed that was her intention. Mother was shaking in a way I’d never seen before. It was only natural that I’d have more questions about the father I hadn’t seen since infancy. Surely she didn’t expect me to be content with that?

Perhaps I’d inherited my clumsiness with words from Mother…

“You’re a lot more enthusiastic about this than I expected. For a moment there, I thought you were Mia.”

“Have you talked to Mia about these things?”

“Tact doesn’t exist in that girl’s vocabulary.”

If she’d already told her stories to Mia, that was all the more reason to tell me, too. I wanted to hear every story, no matter how trivial or silly. I’d treasure them forever as I walked forward through life.

“All right, you win. The truth is, I never intended to say no to you.”

Smiling wryly, Mother began to talk about how she met and fell in love with my father.

Before I knew it, the sun was rising. Lena brewed some tea for us and joined the conversation. She was great at asking questions that got to the heart of the matter, so the discussion became quite animated.

In time, Leonardo called us over for lunch. He’d prepared so many dishes that they covered the entire table.

“Does it suit your palate, my lady? Lady Philia told me that you like seafood, so I, Leonardo, made this dish with all my skill and heart.”

“Leonardo, you must have been cooking all day. It’s too much. You’ll make me gain weight!”

“Ms. Lena, please don’t worry. See, Lady Philia has quite the healthy appetite.”

“Indeed, and Lady Philia’s size never changes.”

“Er, Himari, there’s a technique I picked up from my training. After eating a large amount of food, one can convert it into energy __”

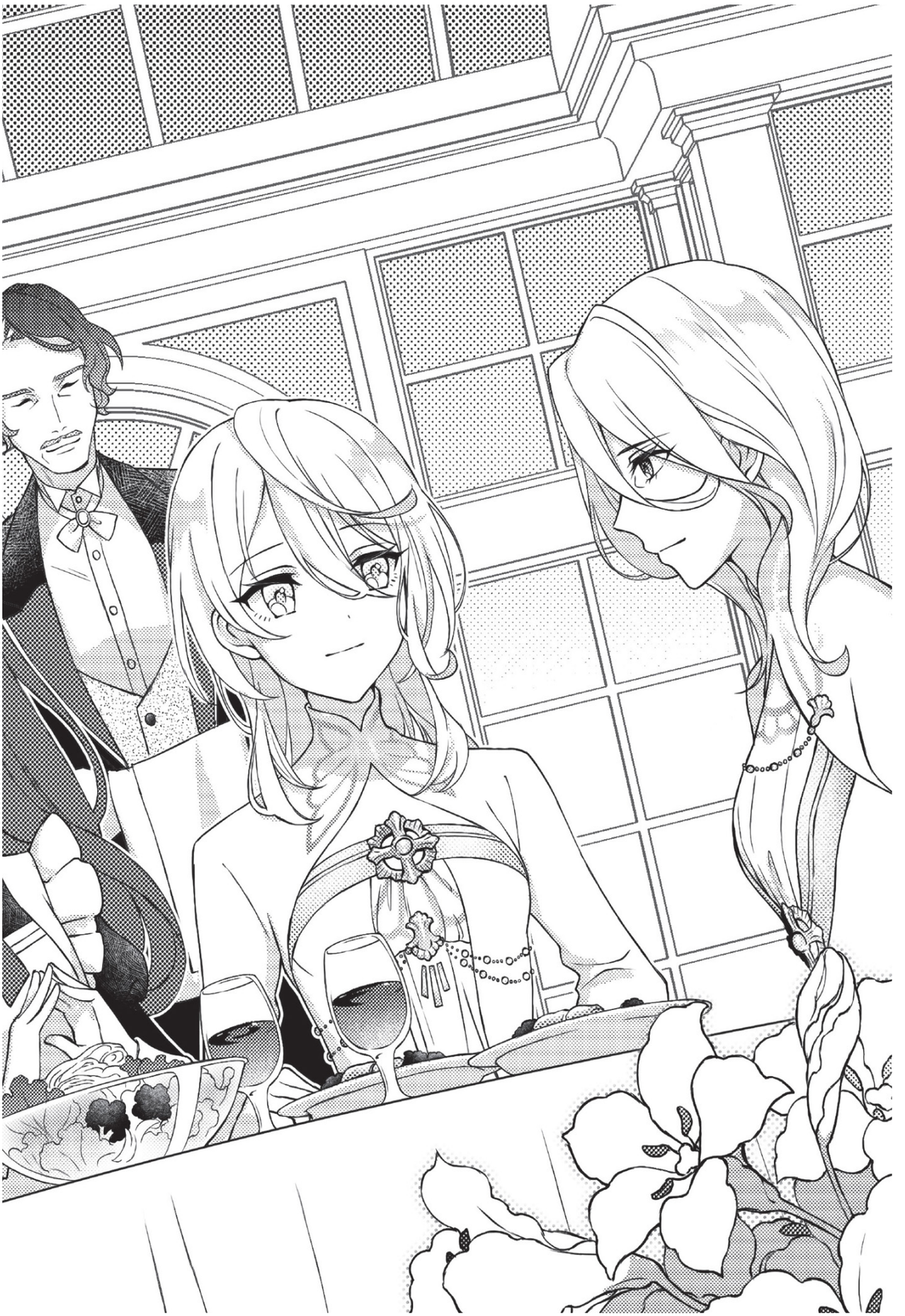
“Incredible. I had no idea that such a technique existed.”

Leonardo had put his culinary skills to good use, preparing a true feast for us. Perhaps he hadn’t realized that Mia and Erza had already gone home, because our portions this time were huge.

Before I knew it, I’d gotten used to the lively meals in Parnacorta, and I began to find joy and enjoyment in mealtime.

“Philia, you’ve been blessed with good people around you,” said Mother. “I was worried when you were sent to Parnacorta. But looking at you now, I realize my worries were unfounded.”

“Yes. Every day, I feel grateful to everyone here. It’s thanks to them that I’m able to fulfill my saintly duties for this kingdom.”



Echoing Mother's words, I expressed my gratitude to everyone at the table.

Every day, I found happiness in little things. Each new encounter was a catalyst for more encounters, forming an interconnected chain of bonds.

Learning from Mother that I was born of my parents' love, I added yet another precious connection to that chain.

***

Asmodeus didn't just leave his marks all over the palace—his trail of destruction extended across the imperial capital.

Massive tornadoes, major flooding, and on top of those, huge fires—every natural disaster one could imagine had ravaged the area. As I passed through the city, the extent of the devastation continued to unfold before my eyes. As a saint, of course, I gave the reconstruction effort my all.

But as I used my magic to clear some piles of rubble, Philip and his men stopped me. "Lady Philia! Please let us knights handle the rubble clearing and disposal! You've been working too hard this past week. Please rest!"

Apparently, I'd been overworking myself again. It wasn't my intention to take other people's jobs, but whenever I saw something I thought I could do, I'd step in and act. It was a bad habit of mine, and one of the reasons people had shunned me back in Girtonia.

"I'm sorry, Philip. I didn't mean to take work away from you."

"What are you saying? We're all inspired by your determination!" Philip thrust out his chest. "That's why we want to do whatever we can, too. You encourage us to tackle our work!"

I didn't quite know what he meant by that, but I thought that it'd be best to leave the cleanup to Philip and the knights.

"In that case, I'm counting on you."

“Yes, leave it to us!” Philip replied. He gave me a proper salute, then put his burly body to good use by taking on the reconstruction work.

What should I do now? It was still too early for my appointment.

Although the palace was half destroyed, Prince Reichardt had set up a head office for the reconstruction effort in an undamaged corner. As the person in charge, he was busy catching up on a number of tasks.

I was there to report on what had taken place in Limbo. We couldn’t rule out the possibility of a similar breach between realms occurring in the future, so His Highness asked for an official writeup.

It was just past noon, and my appointment with His Highness wasn’t until evening. Initially, I thought of returning home for the afternoon. But when I told His Highness I wasn’t busy, he offered to move up the appointment.

It was our first meeting since the day of the Saints’ Summit.

“Thank you for going out of your way to come here, Miss Philia.”

“Likewise, thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Your Highness, I am here to report on the Asmodeus incident.”

Prince Reichardt stood up and invited me to take a seat on the sofa for guests. With a reassuring smile, His Highness sat.

According to Mia, when Klaus stubbornly refused to let Prince Osvalt and his group accompany him to Limbo, Prince Reichardt bowed before Klaus to convince him to reconsider.

Hearing that, I remembered the time Girtonia was in danger and I rushed to Mia’s aid. Prince Reichardt opposed my actions then, so I wondered why he decided differently this time. Not that I considered his stance back then to be a mistake…

As I reported on the course of events in Limbo, I couldn’t help but think the matter over.

“I’m glad to hear that my brother was of help to you,” Prince Reichardt said, taking a sip of his tea as we reached a stopping point in our discussion. “To be honest, I was a little worried that he might cause you trouble.”

Prince Osvalt was far from trouble. He did nothing but help. If he hadn’t shown up to save me, the battle would have been lost.

“Do you know how uplifting it was to see Prince Osvalt come for me? He didn’t just help with the fight; he gave me mental and emotional strength.”

Those were my honest thoughts, with no exaggeration. I was the person I was today because of that man, and that was the plain truth.

“Is that so? I thought that you were always strong in mind and heart. You, too, also have your moments of uncertainty?”

“Much as I’d like to be strong at all times, yes.”

It was just as His Highness said. I took pride in the fact that I’d sharpened my mind and emotions. But as the circle of people whom I wanted to protect grew, so did opportunities to face my weaknesses. That wasn’t a bad thing at all.

“And you’re saying that my brother has become a source of support for you?”

“Yes, that’s right. Your Highness, I heard from my sister that you persuaded Klaus to take Prince Osvalt with him. Thank you very much for your consideration.”

Expressing my gratitude was the obvious thing to do. After all, his pleas managed to move even Klaus.

His Highness was silent for a few moments before he replied. “Miss Philia, for me, my kingdom is everything. I believe that a saint is the cornerstone of prosperity for her kingdom. That was how I came to realize that a saint should be treated as a top priority and protected at all times.”

I was aware of Prince Reichardt’s views on saints. That was why he had been engaged to Elizabeth, the kingdom’s previous saint, and why he proposed to me.

All the same, I suspected there was more in His Highness's heart. Somehow, I doubted that his thoughts were entirely logical and diplomatic.

"Elizabeth might not have been as powerful as you are, but she always did her best. Until she became bedridden with illness, she worked hard to carry out her saintly duties. And, just like you, she always had a positive disposition. She embodied the way a saint should be."

"You don't have to give me such high praise," I said.

"No, your dedication truly moves me. That's a fact."

Did that mean that he appreciated my efforts in the same way he once admired Elizabeth's?

"Miss Philia, I was drawn to your strength. You never get complacent in your abilities. Instead, you keep moving forward, devoting yourself to constant improvement."

I felt that Prince Reichardt's words carried more ardor than usual. It seemed to me that he was speaking from the heart this time.

"This is the most deplorable thing I've ever said in my life, but I'm no longer confident that I can help someone as strong as yourself overcome her weaknesses."

"Prince Reichardt..."

"Miss Philia, I'm not the best person to support you. Marrying someone who isn't right for you will only harm the kingdom's interests. I have to put our kingdom's prosperity above all else."

What did this mean? His Highness seemed to believe that marrying me would be detrimental to the kingdom. How should I accept those words?

"Since I haven't received a reply from you anyway, will you forgive me for this?"

"Forgive you for what?"

"Withdrawing my marriage proposal to you."

When I met His Highness for, I believe, the second time, he proposed to me with a beautiful bouquet. It hadn't been long

since I'd arrived in Parnacorta, so I remembered being rather taken aback.

And now His Highness wished to take back his proposal. Given his stoic character, that was beyond unusual.

"I'm deeply sorry. I never meant to toy with your feelings, but…"

"Your Highness, please raise your head. I'm the one who should apologize for keeping you waiting for so long. In fact, I came up with a reply today."

I hadn't forgotten about Prince Reichardt's proposal. It had been on my mind for some time, but one thing after another had interfered—the crisis in my homeland, then the Asmodeus incident—so I never found the perfect time to reply.

But no matter how much I pled with His Highness, he continued to bow his head.

"If you were planning to reply to me, then I must apologize all the more. Like my brother, I swore to make your life in this kingdom as easy as possible, and yet my selfishness put an unnecessary strain on you."

"Your Highness, I wasn't bothered at all. On the contrary, you've arranged an ideal life for me here. I'm grateful to have been welcomed into this kingdom. So, please, won't you raise your head?"

"I'm sorry. That was unbecoming of me. Thank you for your reassuring words."

Finally lifting his head, Prince Reichardt took a sip of his tea, which had already gone cold.

He looked a bit sad. I hoped he hadn't withdrawn the proposal to spare me from having to give an awkward response. I feared as much when I saw His Highness's strained smile, but I chose not to mention it.

"I was right to invite you to my kingdom, after all."

"I feel the same way. Thanks to Your Highness, I've come to know the simple joy of drinking tea with people who matter to me."

“Miss Philia, I continue to leave this kingdom in your hands.”

“Thank you. I will do my best to carry out my duties as a saint and as a part of this precious kingdom.”

I recalled hearing similar words from His Highness before. But this time, his words resonated more deeply within me. I now understood that no one else’s love for Parnacorta came close to Prince Reichardt’s. His Highness loved Parnacorta above all else. And now that I could feel the full weight of his words, I wanted to live up to them not only as a saint, but as a citizen of this kingdom.

As I chatted with Prince Reichardt about this and that, it struck me that I’d grown quite accustomed to the taste of Parnacorta’s tea.

Epilogue

"I THINK THIS is a bit too flashy, after all."

Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I started second-guessing whether the clothes I was wearing suited me. Normally, I figured that any outfit was fine as long as it wasn't utterly unsightly, but the clothes Lena had laid out for me were considerably different from what I usually wore.

"That's Lady Mia for you! She thought of what styles would suit you and took the latest trends into consideration to pick the perfect outfit for you!"

When Mia visited Parnacorta, she gave me an outfit to thank me for the hair accessory I gave her. She said it was a formal dress that could be worn for important occasions, but…

These were definitely not the colors I'd choose when shopping for clothes. When I tried the dress on, my intuition told me that something was off.

Mia would look great in a dress like this, but if I were to wear it, people would laugh at me. Just thinking of that possibility made me uneasy.

Lena, however, was all smiles. "His Highness will be so captivated he won't be able to focus on his dinner."

"Lena, please don't make fun of me like that. How can you be sure that His Highness won't laugh at me for looking strange?"

My dinner with His Highness was tonight. I'd promised to dine with him after the Saints' Summit, but with the palace half destroyed, that promise had to wait. His Highness was busy leading the reconstruction effort, after all.

Since then, a month had passed, and things had finally settled down a bit, so I accepted his invitation. But still…

What should I do? I was so nervous.

We were simply sharing a meal, so why was my heart beating so quickly? And on top of that, why was I so worried about how I

looked in my outfit?

“There’s no way he’d laugh! He’d say it suits you. I’m sure of it!”

“You’re sure? Do you really think he’ll compliment me?”

Lena nodded confidently. “Yes! Everything will be totally fine. Trust Mia’s fashion sense, okay?”

Well, if Lena said so, I ought to have faith. Everyone who knew Mia said that she was stylish, so her fashion choices could be trusted.

I could rest easy. I should rest easy, but…

“I still don’t feel comfortable. For some reason, the door seems impossibly far away.”

Leonardo laughed gently. “Lady Philia, you’re in the prime of your youth. Relax and have a good time.”

“Leonardo, there’s nothing funny about this.”

I made my way to the door, but my steps grew heavy. I wanted to see Prince Osvalt, and yet my feelings were a contradictory mess. What was this all about?

Leonardo cast an amused look my way. “My apologies, Lady Philia. It’s a relief to see you with an expression befitting your age. It’s a rare look on you; you always seem to be looking far off into the future.”

“What do you mean, Leonardo?”

I had no idea he thought I usually wore an expression that looked beyond my years.

“It’s perfectly natural to feel nervous before a meal with a gentleman. Why, when I was young…”

“Lady Philia, I am pleased to report that I did not spot any suspicious ruffians along the route to the restaurant Vermilion. Should any trouble arise, rest assured that I shall handle it.” Himari suddenly materialized, unintentionally speaking over Leonardo.

That wasn’t what I was worried about, but I sincerely appreciated her thoughtfulness nonetheless.

In any case, it was time to go. Strange as it sounded, I had to muster all my courage to head to Vermilion, where His Highness was waiting.

"Your Highness, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I thought I was on time…"

I'd planned to arrive a little earlier than the agreed time, but His Highness beat me to it.

Could I have gotten the time wrong? No, I'd read his invitation several times over, so that couldn't be the case.

"No, I just got here too early. Don't worry about it. Oh! There's something new and different about you tonight."

"I knew it. I look ridiculous, don't I?"

Just when I was relieved to learn that I wasn't late, I was thrown into a panic that Prince Osvalt found my outfit off-putting.

Lena, you were wrong. He thinks it's strange.

Certainly, this dress would look good on Mia, but on me, it was another story…

His Highness laughed. "Ridiculous? It looks great on you! I mean, you're always pretty, but… Sorry. I can't take my eyes off you."

"Huh? Wh-what…what you just said… What do you mean?"

"What I'm getting at is that you're beautiful. I'm sure this dinner will be a pleasure. And you're wearing the brooch I gave you, too. I'm so glad."

Lena had color-coordinated my look to complement the brooch from Prince Osvalt. His Highness seemed delighted as he complimented my outfit. I was sure he was exaggerating, but his words pierced my heart, warming me from head to toe.

Was I coming down with something? I'd never gotten sick before, so I wouldn't know.

“This restaurant is owned by an aristocrat from Ashbrugge with extensive business ventures across the continent. It just opened here in Parnacorta this year, but it’s earned praise for its take on Girtonian and Parnacortan cuisines.”

“From the Vermilion Group, right? Even setting aside their social standing, they’re a clan of exceptional merchants. I heard they’ve reached their fifth generation of traders.”

We enjoyed our multicourse meal while chatting about trivial things.

It was only after coming to this kingdom that I’d learned to find small talk enjoyable. Looking back at my past self, I realized that I was trying in vain to not waste a single moment of time. This was one of the things about me that had changed.

I felt that, ironically, I’d wasted more time with that mindset. Prince Osvalt assured me that it was natural to feel some regrets in hindsight.

“Er…if you don’t mind, will you please accept this? I made it to thank you for this brooch and for helping me so much.”

I handed a small, wrapped box to Prince Osvalt. Though defeating Asmodeus had kept me busy, I’d finally managed to complete my gift for His Highness. I hoped he liked it.

“A thank-you present? You already had such a fine spear made for me, so you shouldn’t have bothered… Anyway, mind if I open it?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

“Whoa! A pocket watch? The engraving is so elaborate; it’s gorgeous! You made this?”

Prince Osvalt smiled, his eyes widening, as he examined the pocket watch I made. It was a golden watch with the sun as a motif. I chose that design because for some reason, whenever I thought of His Highness, the sun came to mind.

Inspired by His Highness’s beautiful golden hair, I decorated the cover with citrine quartz. I chose a watch as a gift because, for me, time spent with His Highness was an irreplaceable treasure. That, not the brooch, was truly what I wanted to thank him for.

“Lady Philia! Thank you! I’ll treasure this forever!”

Seeing Prince Osvalt’s smile at that moment made me think that perhaps I made that pocket watch because I wanted to see his smile. Even though it always made my heart palpitate, I was eager to see His Highness smile or laugh.

Having successfully given Prince Osvalt his gift, I resumed our conversation.

“By the way,” His Highness said, “as Mammon reported, Sir Julius and the Adenauers have been thrown into Girtonia’s dungeons once more. Not that you doubted his word, but I thought I’d confirm it for you anyway.”

I’d heard from Mammon that Julius and my parents were back in prison, but did His Highness go there to check for himself? Julius had already received the death sentence, so it wouldn’t be long until he was executed.

“Lady Philia, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“There is? Go ahead; please say what’s on your mind.”

As a server took away our plates from the main course, Prince Osvalt’s tone turned serious. The look on his face was also more solemn than usual, but at the same time hesitant.

What could be the matter? Was it really such a difficult question to ask?

“Back in Limbo, you said you didn’t hate Sir Julius. Was that true? Did you really not feel resentful about ending up in this kingdom?”

I remembered what I told Julius after defeating Asmodeus. But why would His Highness bring that up? Come to think of it, Bishop Bjorn had said that His Highness was opposed to bringing me to Parnacorta until the very end.

His amber eyes looked slightly moist, so I had to give him a proper and sincere answer.

“No, I really don’t hate him. Of course, I was shocked when Julius broke the news to me. But now I quite like Parnacorta, so there’s no need for you to feel guilty at all. On the contrary, I hope you’ll stop worrying.”

The day Julius announced that he was breaking off our engagement and selling me to a neighboring kingdom, my heart sank. I felt that everything I'd worked for until then had been invalidated. But since coming to Parnacorta, I'd met people who had become precious to me.

That was quite a dramatic turn of events for me. And now I sincerely wished to dedicate myself to serving as the saint of Parnacorta.

"I see. Thanks. I'm truly grateful that you came to our kingdom. Here goes nothing!" His Highness drank his entire glass of wine in one gulp.

"Er...Prince Osvalt?"

He sounded as if he'd made up his mind to do something, but why did he drain his glass so quickly?

Setting his empty glass on the table, His Highness took a breath.

"I read once that chugging wine is bad for the health."

"Really?" His Highness laughed and gave me a wry smile. "I'll have to be more careful, then. I'd be embarrassed to ask for help in this state."

I must not have explained myself well. His Highness poured more wine into his glass, saying that he was going to need it.

"I have something important to tell you," he said in a low and quiet—but powerful—voice.

I looked straight into His Highness's eyes. Somehow, I felt like it was the proper thing to do.

"Lady Philia, you're the most important person to me. You matter so much more to me than anyone else... I love you as a person. Philia Adenauer, please, I want you to marry me."

I wondered how my face looked at that moment.

My mind couldn't process what I'd just heard. My temperature shot up, adding to my bewilderment. When I came to my senses, I noticed moisture on my cheeks.

Time continued to tick by as I remained dazed and speechless.

But I had to say something, somehow…

“Oh…um…Lady Philia?!” Prince Osvalt looked flustered. “I’m so sorry! My bad! I didn’t want to make you cry… It’s my fault for springing that on you. I’m not as good at this as my brother. Please forget what I just said!”

I was crying, wasn’t I? There was no mistaking it. Tears were spilling from my eyes. Why was this? The answer was already clear.

“No, Prince Osvalt. I think I’m crying from happiness. I read that happy moments can stimulate the tear ducts, so some people shed tears when they’re happy.”

I was so overjoyed by Prince Osvalt’s proposal that I couldn’t control myself. That was why I was crying. It was a first for me, but I was sure that those tears of mine were tears of joy.

“I’ve never seen someone explain their tears so calmly before, but that’s so like you. That’s what I love about you, Lady Philia.”

“Y-you love my eccentricities?”

“I think that’s what it’s like to fall in love with someone. So, Lady Philia, let me say it one more time: Please marry me! I want us to spend our lives and our future together, as one!”

With that, Prince Osvalt got down on one knee.

When I saw his face as he proposed to me once more, I could tell how I looked even without a mirror. I was smiling. I’d never felt this happy in my entire life.

“I’m not the best at certain things,” I said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

I felt as if the world had changed. Everything seemed to shine more brightly.

Of course, Mia was dear to me. But until I came to this kingdom, I’d never experienced my heart throbbing so quickly that it was hard to think clearly about a certain someone. I hadn’t known what it meant to want to see that person smile. It finally

dawned on me that I only started thinking and feeling that way as my feelings for His Highness grew.

When I first arrived in Parnacorta, Prince Osvalt approached me to say that he hoped I'd fall in love with this kingdom. Since then he continued to remain by my side, no matter what, bringing light to my heart like he was the sun.

Prince Osvalt, Your Highness…you've given me the one thing I wanted most.

I'll be all too happy to walk into the future side by side with you.



Side Story:
A Tiny Moment of Kindness

AFTER PRINCE OSVALT told me that the kingdom of Dalbert would be sending an exorcist to Parnacorta, I immersed myself in Dalbert's literature to find out what exorcists were like.

"Lady Philia! Lady Philia! It's an emergency!"

Those footsteps I heard were unmistakably Lena's. She sounded busy as ever. What kind of emergency was it? Could it have something to do with the vanishing incidents?

I opened the door of my study to find Lena standing outside, flustered.

"You're in a rush. What happened?"

"I-it's the worst! Th-there's a cat…a kitty…stuck in the garden's tallest tree!" Lena blurted out.

"What? A kitten? Stuck in a tree?"

"Please come with me!"

What Lena was trying to tell me was that there was no time to spare. She grabbed my hand as we ran to the garden.

Philip and the other Knights of Parnacorta who were serving as my bodyguards all stood surrounding the tree. Philip crossed his arms, trying to think of a solution.

"Er, what's going on?" I ventured. "Lena said that there was an emergency."

"Oh no, Lady Philia!" Philip turned to me with a serious look on his face. "It's not on the level of an emergency. We've just run into a bit of trouble."

That didn't seem to be how Lena regarded the situation. "Sir Philip, how can you say that? That kitty can't get down from there! Clearly an emergency!"

“Um…please pardon my rudeness! It is, as Lena said, an emergency!”

Turning my gaze in the direction Lena pointed, I saw a tiny white kitten clinging to the tip of a twig in a large tree—the garden’s tallest.

That wasn’t good. We had to do something right away. I wasted no time climbing the tree to save the kitten. It was even taller than my mansion, but I figured that I could climb or jump down just fine.

Keeping the kitten’s safety in mind, I tried to avoid startling it by moving slowly and quietly, but…

“Lady Philia! What on earth are you doing?”

“I’m trying to climb this tree to save the kitten.”

As I planted a foot on a branch, Philip rushed over to me. The kitten was in danger, so I had to get up the tree as quickly as possible. What could be wrong with that?

“Not happening! Lady Philia, think what would happen if you fell! As your bodyguards, we’d never live down the disgrace.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured Philip. “During my training days, I once had to carry a steel box up a steep cliff.”

“Still, I can’t let you risk it! Even monkeys fall out of trees, as the old folks say. Better safe than sorry!”

It was apparent that Philip did not want the slightest possibility of harm to befall me. He was under strict orders from Prince Reichardt and Prince Osvalt to protect me, so getting him to change his mind would pose a problem.

Given the situation, I came up with a safer idea. “Well then, shall I jump instead? I think I can land on that twig.”

I was sure that wouldn’t be a problem. After all, I wouldn’t be at risk of falling.

“You could miss your landing! Besides, such a superhuman jump might startle the kitten!”

“Is that so? I see…”

I could confidently say that the odds of missing my landing were infinitely close to zero, but I couldn't shake off the thought of possibly frightening the kitten.

This rescue was more difficult than I'd thought.

Lena's eyes welled up with tears. "Sir Philip, I'm so sorry! If only I weren't afraid of heights, and your face weren't so scary, either of us could just climb that tree and save the kitty."

"Drat! As a warrior, I earned praise from His Majesty for my intimidating face and aura! To think that it would ever be a hindrance…" Philip stomped his feet in frustration.

I really felt I should be the one to rescue the kitten, but that wasn't going over well with Philip.

"Isn't there anyone else who can help?" I asked.

"Most of the knights have scary faces," Lena pointed out.

"Now, Lena, that's rude to the knights."

"No, Lady Philia, it's as Lena said! We, the Knights of Parnacorta, are elite warriors who've accumulated years of training with only one thing in mind: defeating this kingdom's enemies! Things like rescuing kittens are not in our manual!"

Did cats even distinguish human faces that way in the first place? I didn't know much about the feline thought process, but somehow I doubted that the knights' facial features were relevant to rescuing the kitten.

Himari headed in our direction, broom in hand. "Lady Philia, what is this strange matter? Why do Sir Philip and Lena weep?"

I wondered how to explain to her why Philip and Lena were crying. "A kitten is stuck up there."

"Oh, the poor thing. I shall assist."

"Huh?"

It happened in a split second. Himari ran up the tree, took the kitten in her arms, and landed perfectly without making a sound. We could only stare, dumbfounded.

“Now, then,” said Himari as she held the kitten. “Explain your grief.” Lena and Philip stared blankly and responded with silence.

“Himari, they got upset because they were trying to save that kitten.”

“Is that so? I thought there was some critical matter that required urgent attention. If that is all, I shall return to cleaning.”

Himari released the kitten to the ground and vanished like the wind.

In any case, the cause of all that fuss had been dealt with. It was time for Lena and the rest to get a hold of themselves…

“Now let’s look for this kitty’s mother!”

“The mother?”

“Of course. We can’t leave the poor little thing all alone like this.”

“…You’re right. It’d be lonely on its own.”

Looking at the kitten, I had to agree. It didn’t feel right for the tiny creature to be on its own, without its parent.

And so we searched for the kitten’s mother until it grew dark.

“In the end, we couldn’t find Alexander’s mom, huh?”

“I see you’ve already given him a name.”

Lena nodded. “Sir Philip told me that a king from long ago named Alexander had a beautiful white cat, so…”

“So you named him after Alexander Granbar.”

Indeed, King Alexander, who ruled 80 percent of the continent long ago, was fond of cats. It was said that he especially loved white cats.

I had no objections to their choice of namesake for the kitten.

In the end, no matter how we searched, we couldn’t find Alexander’s mother. Lena assumed responsibility for Alexander and took care of him, settling the matter.

Afterword

FIRST OF ALL, thank you for purchasing the second volume of the *Too-Perfect Saint* series. I'm grateful that you chose to continue reading.

Philia was able to show a lot more emotion here, so I enjoyed writing this volume. Until the very end, I wasn't sure whether to have her get engaged to Osvalt. But since he's such an earnest person, I concluded that of course he'd propose to Philia.

Erza and Mammon are prototypes for Osvalt and Philia—or rather, they're the protagonists of an earlier novel of mine, reused just as they were.

I like the dynamic of a cool-and-collected woman and a cheerful man, which is why I featured two such pairs this time. In the end, I think both couples balanced each other out. As to whether Erza and her associates will show up again in future volumes, please keep your eyes peeled.

Speaking of possible future developments, I introduced saints from other kingdoms in this volume. I've been working on backstories for those kingdoms.

For example, the kingdom of Gyptia is at the forefront of magic-related research because of its harsh desert environment. It even has a sorcery research institute.

Four hundred years ago, Ashbrugge was the flourishing Brugge Empire, but it was brought to ruin by demons and little is known of it now.

I'm still not sure whether to use these backstories, but coming up with them is a lot of fun. Worldbuilding makes it easier to expand the universe of this series.

Since this is my debut series, I was still getting the hang of things when I worked on the first volume. When it came to some parts, I didn't have much leeway. But this time, as I worked on this

volume, I was able to set aside time to think about how to make my writing even more enjoyable for readers.

If there's a next volume, I'll pour all my effort into further improving my writing and bringing everyone an even more engaging story. Naturally, this is easier said than done, but writing novels has become quite enjoyable for me, so I don't mind putting in the work.

Once again, I would like to thank you for giving this volume a read.

It's thanks to readers like you that I can be here, writing this afterword. I'll continue to do my best, so your continued support would mean the world to me.

I hope to see all of you again in the next volume!

—FUYUTSUKI KOKI



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