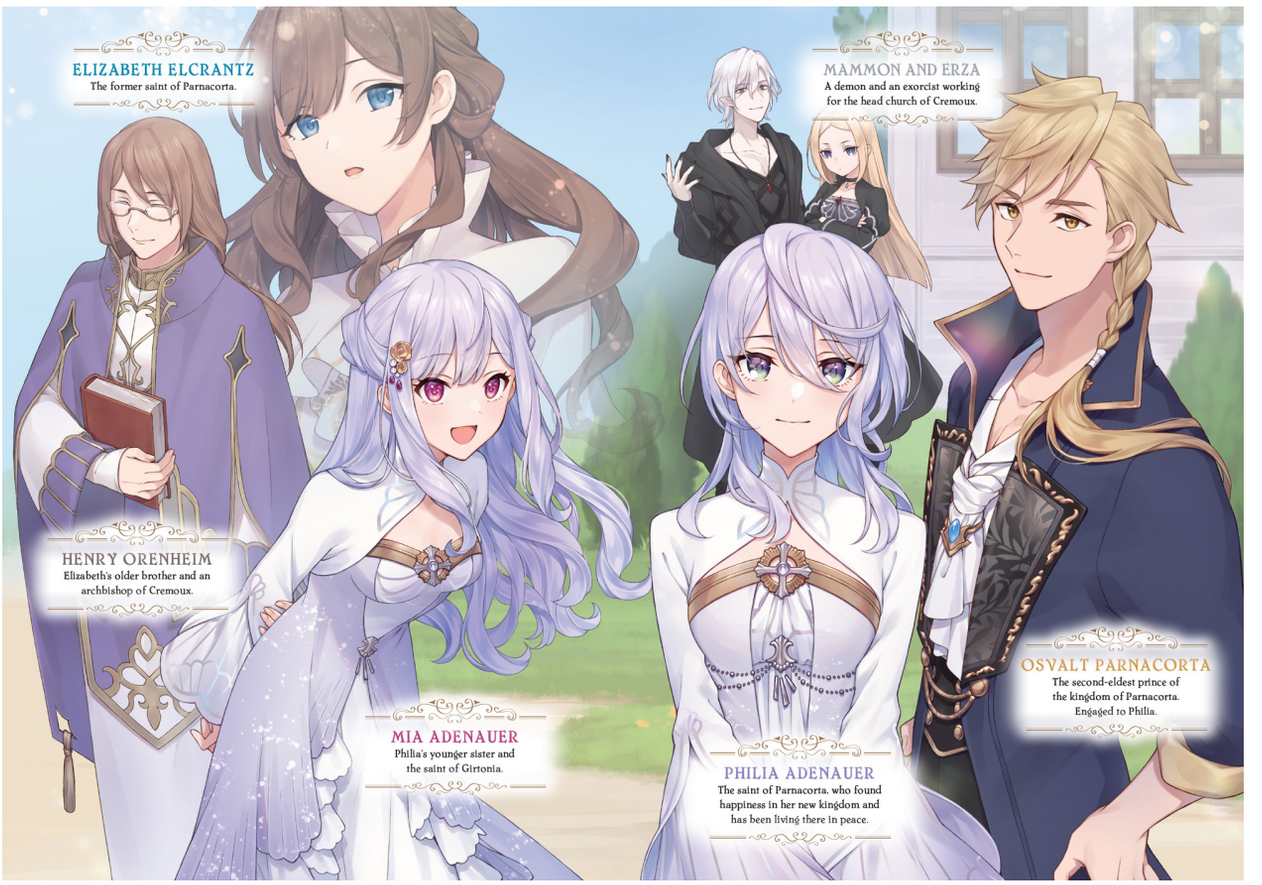
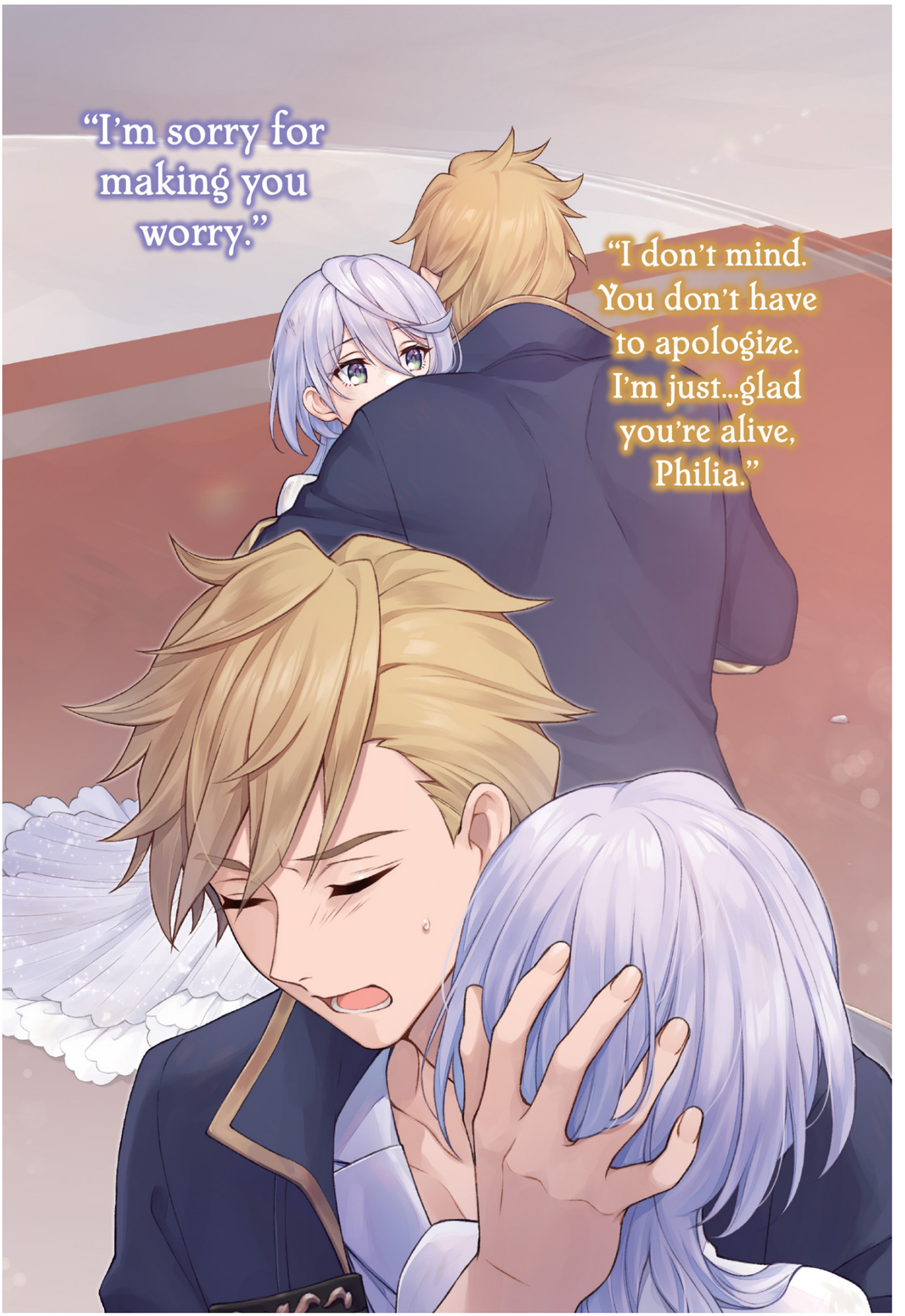

NOVEL
3
Written by
Fuyutsuki Koki
Illustrated by
Masami
The
Too-Perfect Saint
Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and
Sold to Another Kingdom

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Before I knew it,
Prince Osvalt was
holding my hand with
a look of delight on his
face. Feeling his body
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our lives together.
I would never forget
the view we shared.


ELIZABETH ELCRANTZ
The former saint of Parnacorta.
MAMMON AND ERZA
A demon and an exorcist working for the head church of Cremoux.
HENRY ORENHEIM
Elizabeth's older brother and an archbishop of Cremoux.
MIA ADENAUER
Philia's younger sister and the saint of Girtonia.
PHILIA ADENAUER
The saint of Parnacorta, who found happiness in her new kingdom and has been living there in peace.
OSVALT PARNACORTA
The second-eldest prince of the kingdom of Parnacorta. Engaged to Philia.


"I'm sorry for making you worry."
"I don't mind. You don't have to apologize. I'm just...glad you're alive, Philia."

The Too-Perfect Saint

Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and Sold to Another Kingdom

NOVEL

3

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. 3
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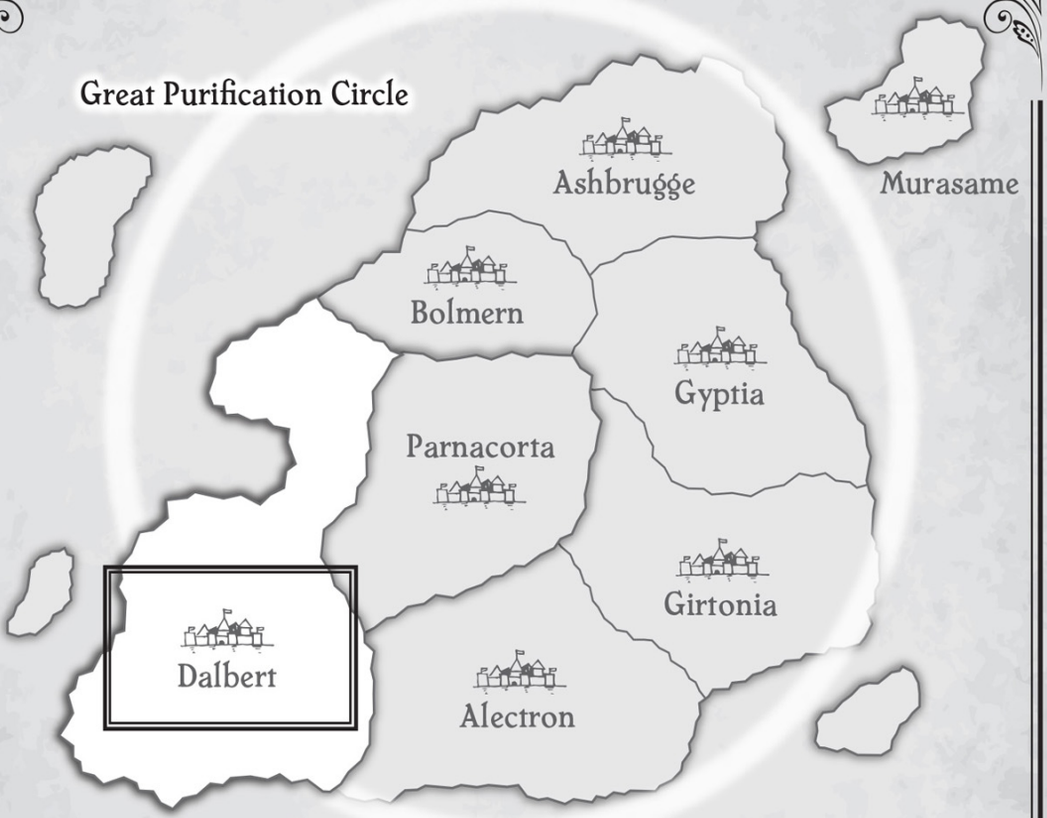
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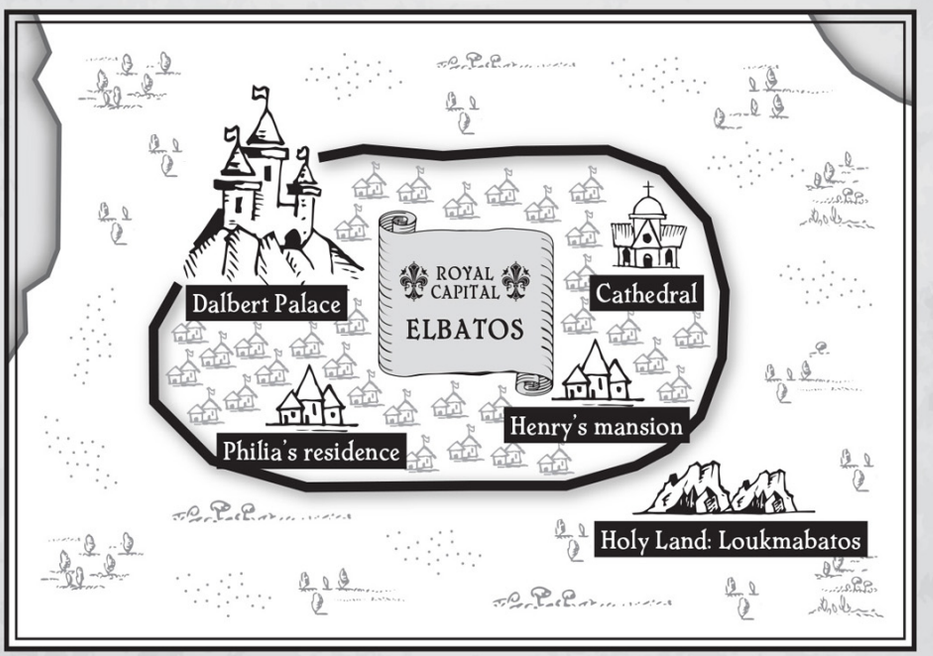
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THE CONTINENT OF SEDELGARD





THE KINGDOM OF DALBERT

Prologue

“DULL.”

“Unfriendly.”

“Far too serious. She’s just boring.”

Such were the things people said about me all my life. And then, to top it all off, my engagement was cancelled and I was sold to a neighboring kingdom.

I believed what others said about me. I thought myself a boring person, too. And yet, I managed to meet someone who professed his love for me.

That person was Prince Osvalt, the second-eldest prince of Parnacorta. When I accepted his proposal, I cried tears of joy for the first time in my life. Even now, my heart beat faster every time I remembered the moment.

When I was back in Girtonia, I could never have dreamed that my world would change right before my eyes.

“So how did His Highness propose to you? You remember every detail, don’t you? With your incredible memory, there’s no way you forgot!” Mia leaned in, her usual adorable smile on her face as she asked about Prince Osvalt’s proposal. Today was the first time we’d been able to talk since His Highness’s proposal, but she was always in high spirits. Was she really that interested in what His Highness said when he proposed to me?

“Lady Mia, don’t you think such prying questions are the least bit improper? Here, let me give you a little tip: remember the old saying, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’”

That frank scolding came from Grace, a saint from Bolmern, the kingdom northwest of Parnacorta. Mia and Grace were both at my manor, visiting Parnacorta. As soon as they saw each other, however, their expressions went sour. The two had some sort of

ongoing rivalry. I usually considered their friendly competition healthy, but they seemed to be taking things a bit too far.

Even so, I could see for myself how they were both growing into fine saints. Having friends who could help you uplift each other truly was an enviable thing.

“Come on. You want to know how His Highness proposed to Philia too, don’t you?”

“N-no, not at all…well, er, actually, I *am* interested. That’s only natural. Lady Philia is someone I admire, and she’s my teacher, after all. So, honestly speaking, I’m curious about the proposal… but asking about it would be quite improper!”

It seemed almost everyone wanted to know about the proposal. How strange. Did they want to know every word that was exchanged that badly?

Come to think of it, I’d been keen to know how my birth mother and mentor Hildegard had fallen in love with my father. Perhaps the topic of intimate personal relationships had a way of grabbing one’s attention.

“See? You should’ve been honest with yourself from the very start. Philia talks to me about anything and everything, after all. Why don’t you just keep quiet and listen?” Seeing Grace’s face turn red as she came clean, Mia grinned triumphantly.

The proposal wasn’t exactly a secret, so if someone asked about it, I’d talk—even if Grace had questions of her own. In any case, I had no experience with these things, so I fretted over how to describe the proposal. I did my best.

“His Highness gave me a present: this butterfly-shaped brooch…”

I narrated everything from the moment I gave him a thank-you present up to Prince Osvalt’s proposal. Mia and Grace looked enthralled as I recounted his confession of love—how he wanted to spend our lives and our future as one, together—and my response to those words.

Grace and Mia offered me their well-wishes once more.

“Oh, that’s such a wonderful way to put it! I hope that someday someone says that to me! Again, congratulations, Lady Philia.”

“His Highness is just as earnest as I thought him to be. Philia, he must really love you! I’m so happy for you. Congratulations, dear sister. Be happy, okay?”

Mia had once congratulated me on my engagement to Prince Julius, in the past. This time she was beaming with joy. I thought back to Prince Julius, my first fiancé. Had I ever loved him? I could only answer no. We barely knew each other when we got engaged, after all. Surely, he would say the same about me.

That was most likely why Mia was so happy for me. Knowing that I had a sister who cared so much for my happiness, I couldn’t help but feel overjoyed in turn.

“You make me feel blessed. I’d love to have the both of you at the wedding, if you’re available.”

Though we didn’t want a large wedding, the people of Parnacorta would deem an extremely no-frills ceremony unacceptable; His Highness was a prince, after all. And so, we planned to invite the people who mattered to us, near and far alike. But since Mia, Grace, and Hildegard were all saints, they might have to miss the wedding in consideration of their duties to their respective kingdoms.

While we saints had considerably more leeway now than in the past, a wedding was a completely different matter from the Saints’ Summit. I wouldn’t hold it against anyone if they couldn’t make it to the event.

“I’ll definitely be there,” Grace declared. “If there are a lot of saintly duties to carry out, I’ll ask Emily to help. You two know how she is. Just say the right words to get her all fired up, and she’ll do anything.”

“But wouldn’t that be too much for poor Emily?” Though Grace sounded sure of herself, I felt guilty thinking of the trouble I’d be causing Emily. At the same time, I was touched that Grace would go that far to attend my wedding.

“Naturally, Mother and I will be there. We’re family, so how could we miss your special day?” Mia said this as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Hmm, what dress should I wear? Oh, right—Prince Fernand plans to attend too.”

I’d had a feeling that Mia and Hildegard would accept my invitation, but hearing those words directly from Mia delighted me.

I heard that ever since Julius was stripped of his power, Prince Fernand had been roused to action and was dedicating himself to rebuilding Girtonia. It was largely thanks to His Highness that Mia’s hard work had begun to pay off, or so Mia told me whenever we exchanged letters.

Speaking of Prince Fernand…Mia had also mentioned that she and His Highness dined together often. With just the two of them sharing those meals, could this be the start of some kind of special relationship? Well, Mia was a charming girl, so I wouldn’t blame His Highness for falling in love with her at first sight.

“By the way, Philia, do you have a date yet?”

“Huh? A date?”

As Mia’s question broke my train of thought about her and Prince Fernand, I fumbled for an answer. What was she talking about again?

“Jeez, I obviously meant the date of the wedding! Weren’t you paying attention?”

Mia clarified that she was asking when the wedding would be taking place. Right, of course. What else could she have been talking about?

“We haven’t narrowed down an exact date yet, but we were thinking of having it be around six months from now.”

“Huh, that’s still pretty far off. Then again, I guess a lot of preparation goes into marrying a prince.”

“That’s right. Besides, the cathedral where we’d like to hold the ceremony was destroyed during Asmodeus’s rampage. We decided that it would be better to put the wedding off until rebuilding of the capital was mostly finished.”

The damage Asmodeus had done was so far-reaching that his trail of destruction was still visible all across the land. Though the reconstruction efforts spearheaded by Prince Reichardt were well underway, it would take a while before things returned to the way they were before. Reconstruction was likely to take longer than initially estimated, but Prince Reichardt was also working hard behind the scenes. He was a very competent man and quite the asset to his kingdom.

“Oh, I see. Things must still be quite rough for Parnacorta.”

“And how are things in Girtonia?”

“Hmm. Prince Fernand is doing his best, but Girtonia also has a long way to go.”

Mia described the situation in our homeland. As I’d feared, Girtonia also had a long way to go before the rebuilding was done, but that was understandable. Though I’d only caught a glimpse of the situation there when I rescued Mia, who was injured at the time, the devastation was far greater than that in Parnacorta.

“Well, enough gloom and doom for now. Philia, what do you have planned for your dress?”

“I’ll leave such matters entirely to the Parnacorta royal family.”

“That’s so like you. Not that I’m worried about what they’ll choose, since you look good in anything, but if I were you, I’d want to have a say in things like that. This is a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony, you know. If there’s even the slightest thing that bothers you, you shouldn’t hesitate to speak up.”

“Lady Philia, I’m excited to see you in your wedding dress. I’m sure you’ll look even more ethereal than you already do!”

“Grace, that’s a bit too much. This talk is starting to make me nervous.”

For a while, we speculated about my dress, the decor, and other arrangements for the wedding. As we talked, I was surprised to learn that both Mia and Grace had their own idea of what constituted a perfect wedding. When I tried asking them more

about this, they said that they'd been imagining their dream weddings since they were young. How remarkable.

"That reminds me—remember the medicine you made for His Majesty, the king of Girtonia? He says that thanks to it, he's in perfect health now, so he wanted to pass on a word of thanks."

"Of course. How could I forget? I'm glad to hear that His Majesty is feeling better. I was planning to go mountain climbing to pick medicinal herbs that can further improve my formulation the next time around. If my refinements are successful, I'll send a brand-new formula over."

"You're still going to refine that medicine, even though His Majesty said it worked like a charm?" Mia asked.

"I was struck with an idea as to how to improve it," I explained.

"That's so like you, Lady Philia," said Grace. "I should learn a thing or two from your unwavering drive for knowledge."

I knew that the medicine I made for the king of Girtonia still had room for improvement. When a way to improve the formula suddenly occurred to me, I knew I had to head to the mountains to collect the necessary ingredients. After all, I couldn't feel at ease until I tested my ideas out.

"When we last had lunch, Prince Fernand praised you too. He said he'd never known anyone else who was so passionate about research."

"I'm embarrassed to receive such praise."

At the mention of Prince Fernand, Grace asked about Mia's relationship with His Highness. Like me, she seemed to be curious about whether there was anything going on between the two of them.

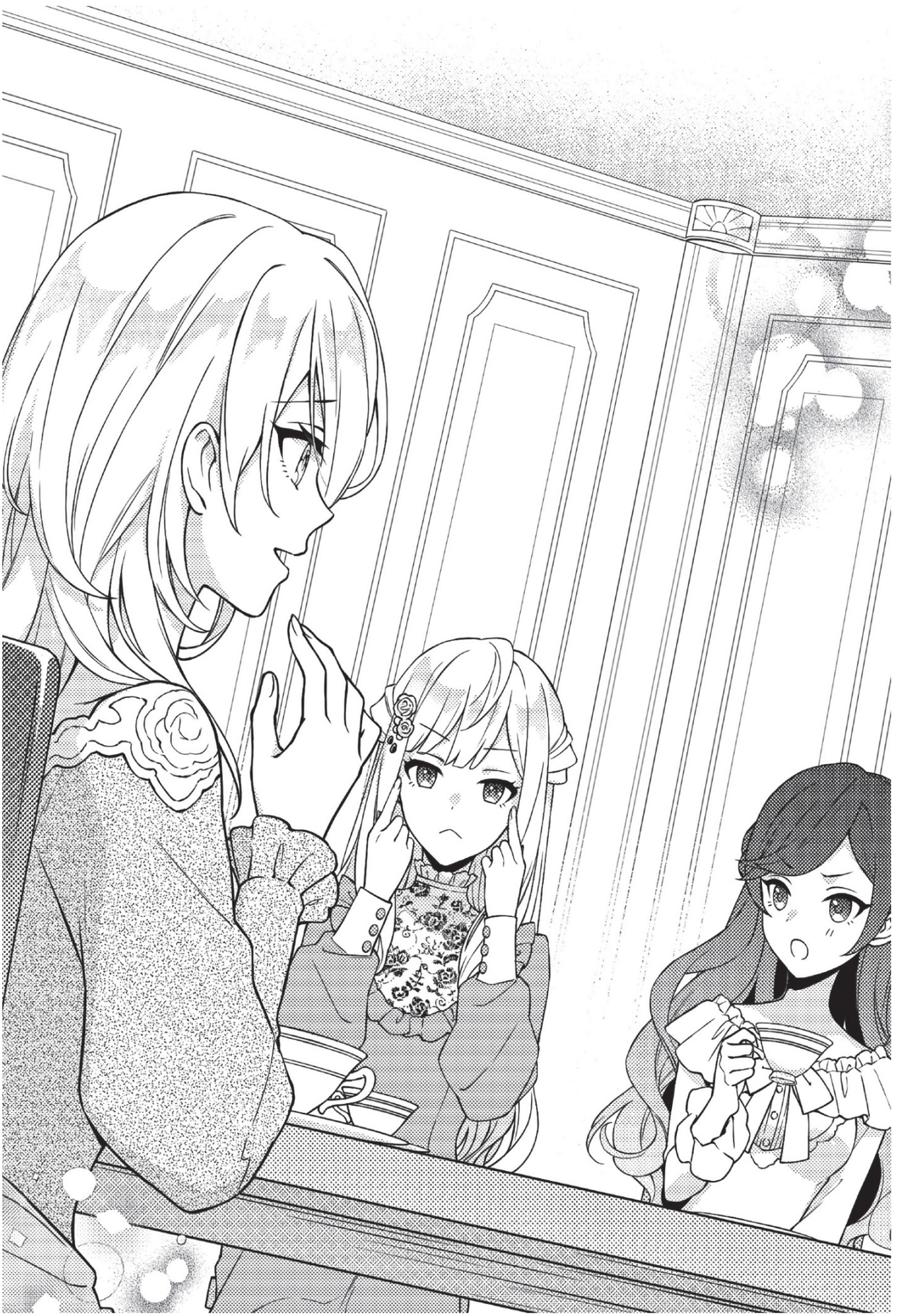
"Mia, lately all you've been talking about is Prince Fernand. Could it be that you have feelings for him?"

At first, all Mia could say was, "Huh?" Then she stammered, "I-i-it's not like that! Anyway, why should I tell you? You're not entitled to that kind of information!"

“You’re digging yourself deeper by getting so worked up over a simple question, you know. You really *do* like him, don’t you?”

“I-I’m not getting all worked up! Grace, there must be something wrong with your hearing.”

The two stood up as their words flew back and forth. As silly as the argument was, I’d grown accustomed to their boisterousness.



“Hee hee hee…the two of you have been getting along so well these days.” Hearing me laugh, Mia and Grace went silent.

Mia looked at me in disbelief. “Um, Philia, does it look like we’re getting along?”

With their faces turned toward me as one, they didn’t just look like friends to me, but sisters.

“But hey,” Mia continued with a half smile, “at least we’ve got you laughing more often these days.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Your face used to always look like this.”

“What? I don’t remember making such a stern-looking face.”

“Mia, Lady Philia has always been beautiful. Please don’t say such outlandish things.”

Still, Mia had a point. I’d been noticing that I was able to find joy in little things more frequently than before. Mia was once the only person I considered dear to me, but now I had many other people whom I cherished. I’d even found someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Perhaps it was because I had learned to treasure the time spent with my loved ones that I was now able to laugh more often.

Chapter 1:
A New Pope

"OH! THERE ARE SOME HERE, TOO. Hey! Lady Philia! Over here! There are lots of those herbs you were talking about!" Prince Osvalt called out to me as he stepped from the shade. His golden blond hair seemed to glow with the sunlight shining through the trees.

"There's this much here? This is all I need."

"Excellent! In that case, climbing all the way up here was worth it."

His Highness and I were in the mountains, gathering herbs for the new medicine I was making. At first, I had planned to come with Lena and Leonardo as I usually did, but His Highness said that he could make time for me, so we figured that we might as well head out together.

Ever since our engagement, His Highness and I had been going out like this more often.

"Now I'm free to ask you out anytime I like." He'd said that as a joke, so I hadn't thought that he'd make good on it.

How strange that even something as simple as picking herbs could become such a blissful experience with His Highness around.

"I didn't know such valuable herbs grew on this mountain, though," he said.

"This one isn't a very effective anti-inflammatory on its own, so it's not very useful. But if you dry it, boil it with other herbs, let it cool quickly, then crush it under a heated piece of iron for about an hour..."

"It takes a lot of work to perfect a new formula, huh?"

"Yes, that's right. Once we get home, I'm going to sun-dry this right away."

Thanks to Prince Osvalt, I was able to pick more than enough medicinal herbs. All I had left to do was to make a prototype based on the formula I'd come up with the day before.

If I could perfect this medicine, it would save even more lives. I considered developing new medicines an important part of my saintly duties.

"Well then, shall we head down soon?" It was now past noon, and since I'd done what I set out to do, I suggested to His Highness that we make our descent.

In the past, these mountains had swarmed with monsters. Thanks to the Great Purification Circle, they were peaceful now.

Prince Osvalt nodded. "Yeah, it's about time. Even though monsters don't show up much anymore, it's still safer not to stay too late. But Lady Philia, if it's all right with you, how about we try reaching the top first? We'd have to do a little more climbing."

Aim for the top? Was there something of interest at the peak of this mountain?

I had no idea what this was all about, but no particular reason to decline, so I accepted his suggestion. "If that's what you want, Your Highness, who am I to say no? Let's climb to the top, then."

"Thanks. You won't regret it—at least, I don't think you will. I hope you enjoy this!"

With that, we climbed to the summit. We weren't carrying much, and the mountain wasn't that steep, so we managed to reach the peak relatively easily.

Standing tall and seeming in good spirits, Prince Osvalt scanned his surroundings. "Whoa, we made it. It's been a while since I came up here."

This was the first time, I reflected, that I'd climbed a mountain for no particular purpose. Of course, I'd enjoyed chatting with His Highness during the climb, but somehow this felt new to me.

"Look, Philia. The view's great from here."

"The view?"

Prince Osvalt invited me to sit next to him on a rock. As I did, the landscape spread out beneath me. The verdant leaves on the trees were fresh and full of life, and the scenery seemed enchanted. I was left speechless and breathless.

"...It's so beautiful."

"I came here with my father and my brother once. Father said that in the future, if I ever found someone special, I should bring them here to see the view. But I didn't bring you because he said that...rather, I guess it's because the landscape really left an impression on me. I wanted to share it with you."

As Prince Osvalt recounted this moment from his past, we gazed out at the scenery together. I hadn't expected His Majesty to have such a sentimental side. As the king of Parnacorta, he always seemed so stern and serious.

"His Majesty is quite the romantic," I remarked.

"Ha ha! What a shock, right? I was surprised to hear Father say that, myself. Anyway, we may have picked a spot Father recommended this time...so next time, why don't we try to find a place of our own that we'll want to revisit together?"

That was a welcome suggestion.

"Yes, Your Highness. I would like to visit many places with you."

Though the scenery was lovely, I would have had a different reaction if I'd seen it on my own. I might not have been as impressed. The view laid out before my eyes seemed all the more vivid because I'd reached this place with the man I loved.

His Highness smiled, seemingly in a good mood. "Really? I'm so glad to hear that!"

Prince Osvalt was always teaching me new things. The peaceful time we spent together was truly so precious to me.

"By the way, not to change the subject, but—you've been writing a lot of letters lately. Who've you been in touch with? I don't mean to meddle with your social life, but I'm a little curious."

Prince Osvalt must have noticed me writing letters aboard our carriage and elsewhere. I had indeed been writing more often,

but not for a reason of great import.

“After the Saints’ Summit, we saints of different kingdoms began to make a habit of exchanging information. We thought pooling our knowledge might be useful if something like the mysterious vanishing incidents were to happen again.”

“I see. I remember how the Great Purification Circle broke down for a while back then. But Lady Mia and Lady Emily recreated it, and everything turned out fine. It’s scary to think of what could’ve happened if you hadn’t shared information with each other.”

As His Highness said, if I hadn’t taught other saints how to create a Great Purification Circle during that crisis, the damage caused by Asmodeus would’ve been unimaginable. It was possible Prince Osvalt and his men would not have been able to come to my aid, leading to me being defeated.

That was why we saints now strove to exchange the latest information whenever possible. We pledged to work together not only to develop our own kingdoms, but to aim for the prosperity of the entire continent. One could say that this shift in mindset was the major achievement of the Saints’ Summit.

“Now that any saint from any kingdom can cast the Great Purification Circle,” I said, “and the latest demonic cycle has ended, I think we can enjoy peace for a while.”

Prince Osvalt nodded in satisfaction. “In just three months, you’ve already outdone yourself. And yet when I see how devoted you still are to your training, I can’t help but think you’re not content to rest on your laurels.”

My training was a comfortable routine. Even though I no longer had to worry about monsters, changing up my habits made me feel uneasy, so I made sure never to miss a training session. Besides, it was good for my well-being. In fact, lately I had been training mostly for personal reasons.

“Thanks to my training,” I told Prince Osvalt, “I can now maintain the Great Purification Circle for about a week without needing to be present. I do it by infusing a surplus of magic into the Pillars of Light.”

“Amazing! Does that mean you don’t have to stay near the center of the kingdom all the time? That was the big disadvantage of casting the circle, right?”

While reflecting on my experience of being spirited away by Asmodeus to Limbo, I had come up with this idea. The major flaw of the Great Purification Circle was that it became ineffective if the saint who cast it went beyond a fixed range. Through repeated trial and error, I came up with a way to deal with this issue. Now, even if I were to get kidnapped again, the circle would hold. And…

“Now we can go on a honeymoon,” I said.

At that, His Highness went silent, face frozen in shock. Had I said something wrong? I did fear that improving my abilities for a selfish reason like travel would be deemed an impure motive for a saint.

“Your Highness?”

“A ha ha ha ha!”

Just as I began to feel uneasy over the fact that His Highness wasn’t acting like himself, he suddenly burst out laughing. Had I said something funny?

“I never thought I’d hear you say the word ‘honeymoon’!”

“Really? Mia told me that newlyweds go on trips together after the wedding, so I naturally thought that you’d want to do so.”

When I wrote to Mia about my engagement, she offered to cast a Great Purification Circle at Parnacorta for me while I was on my honeymoon. But I felt bad about taking advantage of her kind offer, so I hurried to find my own solution.

As it turned out, what shocked His Highness was not that I made improvements to the Great Purification Circle so we could take a honeymoon, but rather that I’d brought up going on a honeymoon at all. I hadn’t expected that reaction.

“Nah, sorry for laughing. It’s just that it came way out of left field.”

“Was it really strange of me to talk about our honeymoon? I’m sorry. Was what I said too forward?”

“No, Lady Philia, don’t apologize. You just told me about all the hard work you put in so we could go off together. Who wouldn’t find that romantic?”

Before I knew it, Prince Osvalt was holding my hand with a look of delight on his face. Feeling his body heat from the touch of our skin, I began to get a sense of what it would be like to live our lives together.

I would never forget the view we shared. I wanted us to live to have more experiences like this in the days to come. In other words, we would live for tomorrow.

After all, the clear blue skies of Parnacorta were watching over us.

***

Later, we descended the mountain and made our way home. It was already evening, and by the time we returned to the mansion it would be time for dinner.

“Speaking of letters again,” I said. “Just the other day, I got word from Alice of Dalbert that the pope was diagnosed with a grave illness. He doesn’t have much time left.”

“Say what? …Oh, I see. I’m sorry to hear His Eminence won’t be around for much longer.”

As the highest authority of the church of Cremoux, the pope oversaw all the churches on this continent. His authority even surpassed that of the ruling monarchs of each kingdom, though he almost never exercised that authority, choosing instead to rarely interfere in political matters. The pope was considered to be not only the highest power in the church, but also the most virtuous of its adherents. Someone who violated our moral code could never, ever be appointed pope.

“Unfortunate as it is, he’s quite old now. He’s lived a long life.”

“I was hoping to meet him just once, but I guess there’s not much chance of that. But who’s gonna be the new pope?”

“The general rule is that one of the archbishops will be appointed. They’re all based in Dalbert, so I haven’t met any of them, though.”

In the Cremoux religion, the pope was called “God’s kin by blood.” The pope drank divine blood—the literal blood of gods, not a metaphor or symbol—then served as the leader of the church of Cremoux until death.

As a gesture of compassion toward humanity, the gods bestowed their divine blood upon the human with the most divine soul. This human went on to become the first pope of Cremoux. Legend had it that the first pope, having received that divine blood, went on to perform many miracles and alleviate people’s suffering. Divine blood, after all, had the power to amplify a human’s magic.

At the same time, the first pope taught to the powerless but hopeful that they could find strength through prayer, and his teachings began to spread. Prayer, too, was a ritual that allows one to borrow divine power. By praying, we saints could wield our magical powers and cast spells.

When the pope dies, the divine blood is returned to the Holy Grail that the first pope received from God and drank from. The next person to become pope officially took over the role by drinking from the Grail. Through this long line of succession over months, then years, the teachings of the Cremoux religion made their way across the entire continent.

“An archbishop, huh? That makes sense.” His Highness nodded in agreement. Surely, he was aware of the protocol.

Among the Cremoux priesthood, the three archbishops, all based in the head church of Cremoux in Dalbert, were second to the pope. To be an archbishop, one had to either demonstrate their strength by enduring rigorous training or contribute significantly to missionary work. Either way, being recognized by the pope was a monumental achievement. There was an implicit understanding that the pope’s successor would be chosen from among the archbishops, and no one had ever objected to the practice.

Reflecting on the head church of Cremoux reminded me of Erza and Mammon, my former bodyguards, who worked there. I wondered how they were doing.

I was also reminded of something I'd heard from Bishop Bjorn when I visited the church last month. I mentioned it to Prince Osvalt. "By the way, I went to see Bishop Bjorn. He said that one of the archbishops was a bishop at the church of Parnacorta before him."

His Highness must have spoken with Bishop Bjorn's predecessor before, for he said, "Huh? You mean Archbishop Henry? Yeah. That guy. I know him."

Archbishop Henry. Yes, that was his name. As he recalled the archbishop from Parnacorta, His Highness suddenly turned glum. I seldom saw such a look on his face. Thinking about it, the last time had been when Julius demanded I return to Girtonia.

"...Your Highness?"

"Oops, ha ha, my bad. I was a million miles away. I think we're getting close to your mansion, so make sure you haven't forgotten anything."

"Yes, of course. I think I have everything."

"You never know. You sure you got all those important herbs?"

"Yes. I should be okay."

Clearly, he was avoiding the topic. Even someone as ignorant of the subtleties of human emotions as myself could sense that Prince Osvalt didn't want to talk about Archbishop Henry. It wasn't like His Highness to be so evasive, which made me want to ask whether there was some past incident, but I didn't want to force him to discuss something he didn't want to talk about. After all, Prince Osvalt was not the kind of person who would keep necessary information secret.

As His Highness's fiancée, what was the right approach to this situation? Maybe I should wait for him to say something before I tried to cheer him up. He still had such a somber look on his face.

The problem was how to cheer him up. What was the best method?

“All good? Nothing left behind?”

“Yes, all good. Er, Your Highness, if you don’t mind, would you like to join me for dinner?” I said, inviting Prince Osvalt to stop by my place.

We had gathered some good vegetables, so I eagerly anticipated the many dishes Leonardo would put his heart into preparing. I was sure His Highness would appreciate the meal.

“Dinner? I’m starving. Let’s have a feast tonight!”

As His Highness flashed me his usual smile, the carriage stopped in front of my mansion.

Thank goodness he said yes! Taking Prince Osvalt’s hand, I alighted from the carriage, and we walked through the gate.

***

As I returned home with Prince Osvalt in tow, Leonardo came out to greet us.

“Welcome home, Lady Philia. Oh my, what do we have here? You brought His Highness, too.”

“Leonardo, I’m so sorry for the short notice, but would it be all right if His Highness had dinner with us?”

I told Leonardo that I’d invited Prince Osvalt to join us. Apparently, we always had a surplus of ingredients in stock, so I wasn’t worried about not having enough food to entertain a guest.

“Of course. I eagerly embrace the opportunity to serve His Highness a home-cooked meal!”

Leonardo, all worked up about cooking for Prince Osvalt, flexed his biceps in clear delight. To my relief, he seemed to welcome His Highness’s sudden visit. Surely, he would make something delicious for us.

“Ha ha… Leonardo’s the same as ever.” Watching Leonardo turn and head to the kitchen, Prince Osvalt smiled. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

“When it comes to the culinary arts, no one is more passionate than him. It’s thanks to him that I learned to appreciate the pleasures of fine dining.”

The other day, Leonardo had had a cooking contest with Grace’s butler, Arnold, for the third time. Surprisingly enough, Leonardo had a competitive streak. He really put his heart and soul into his cooking. His food was made with love, and it always put my heart at ease.

“Ah, Your Highness! You came at just the right time!”

As dinner wouldn’t be ready for a while, we moved to the guest room, where Lena brought us tea.

His Highness’s visit was well-timed, yes, but what was Lena referring to?

“Bishop Bjorn dropped by earlier to share some cake,” Lena explained. “He said he made too much. Please hold on—I’ll serve it to you right away.”

How nice to know that Bishop Bjorn had thought of us. His hobby was making sweets, and he often gave me cookies, crêpes, and other pastries whenever I visited the church. They were surprisingly delicious. He also treated me to cake when I first came to Parnacorta, so I had come to associate his cakes with fond memories.

As I took a bite of the cake that Lena had cut for us, I couldn’t help but blurt out the first thing that came to mind. “This cake takes me back to the day I first met His Highness.”

I had never forgotten—not for a single moment—my conversation with Prince Osvalt that day.

“Ah! Now that you mention it, it was Bishop Bjorn who introduced me to you,” said His Highness. “I remember how surprised you looked at the time.”

“Of course I was surprised. Who would expect someone who only talked about farming and vegetables to be a prince?”

“Ha ha ha… That really was all I talked about when we first met. Yeah, there’s no denying it, that was my bad. I’m sorry.”

At that time, I’d been taken aback. I never imagined that the man who, perhaps sensing that I felt out of place at the party, greeted me with a friendly smile and struck up a conversation with me would turn out to be the second-eldest prince of Parnacorta. But what His Highness said next had made an even deeper impression.

“What surprised me more than anything else, Your Highness, was when you said that you’d do anything to make me fall in love with this kingdom. I didn’t know what to say in reply at the time, but I’m sure I’ll remember those words for the rest of my life.”

“Really? I just wanted you to know how I felt. I didn’t think those words would have more weight for you than I intended. I hope I didn’t put extra pressure on you.”

“Not at all, Your Highness. When you said that, my anxiety was soothed, for some reason. Looking back on it, I think it’s because of those words that I began to adore you.”

Having been sold to a neighboring kingdom, I’d been crushed by the weight of my anxiety. My engagement was broken off, my own family had bartered me away, and I was separated from my beloved sister. I was on the verge of giving up on life.

Prince Osvalt’s promise gave me the encouragement I needed to keep moving on.

“Lady Philia, it sounds like you fell in love with His Highness at first sight.”

“Hey now, Lena,” said His Highness. “That can’t be true.”

“No, Lena might be right. I just didn’t realize it at the time.”

“Lady Philia…”

Like the sun, Prince Osvalt lit up my heart—but I didn’t understand that I was attracted to him at first, let alone know why. In hindsight, perhaps Lena had put it best. It was love at first sight.

“Your Highness, your face is all red! It must be because it’s almost summer, and it’s pretty hot in this room.”

“Lena, you’re making fun of me!”

“No! I would never! I’m just trembling with excitement at being able to talk about love with Lady Philia these days!”

“That’s what you find amusing? Seriously?”

We enjoyed tea and cake, courtesy of Lena and Bishop Bjorn, while we awaited the dinner Leonardo would be making for us. Until recently, I’d never known how precious it could be to simply spend time chatting with friends. This kingdom had taught me the warmth of human contact, and for that, I loved it. What was more, I realized that *I* was loved as well.

For those reasons, I was determined to carry out my duties with pride as a saint of Parnacorta.

“Dinner’s ready,” Leonardo announced. “Please come to the dining room.” Cooking had taken him longer than usual, so he must have put in a considerable amount of effort.

Anticipating something special, we followed Leonardo’s voice to the dining room.

“Incredible!” Prince Osvalt said to Leonardo, amazed by the delicious feast lined up before us. “Just as expected—or, rather, how should I put it? You said that cooking was a hobby for you. But you seem to get better and better at it!”

“It’s precisely because it’s my hobby that I take it so seriously. Not to mention, as a butler, it’s my duty to attend to Lady Philia’s personal comforts. Food is the foundation of life, after all!”

He took cooking so seriously because it was his hobby? Come to think of it, I’d begun making jewelry for fun, but I also thought of ways to equip my pieces with magical functions. Now I understood how it was possible to become invested in a craft because it was something one was interested in, not a job.

“Hmm,” said Prince Osvalt. “Maybe I should invest some more time in studying spears as a hobby. Until now, I’ve only cared about their sharpness.”

“In that case, I could study blacksmithing,” I said.

“Hey now, you’ll end up knowing more about spears than I do.”

And so, our lively dinner began with a conversation about hobbies. Prince Osvalt and I never ran out of topics to talk about, and it seemed we could go on forever.

“We spent the whole day together today,” His Highness said suddenly.

“I’m sorry for keeping you away from your duties.”

It dawned on me that I’d monopolized His Highness from morning to evening, ever since we met to collect herbs in the mountains. They say time flies when you’re having fun. Still, I couldn’t believe the day had gone by so quickly.

“Hey, why apologize? I was just thinking of how happy we’ll be once we’re married and spend each day together like this.”

“Oh? Why, yes,” I stammered, “you’re right. Once we’re married, we’ll definitely be together like this all the time.”

Prince Osvalt’s words made me lose my composure. I couldn’t look His Highness straight in the eye, even as he beamed at me, no doubt thinking of all the time we’d spend together.

But I could see a problem looming. It was so easy to take my happiness for granted that I hadn’t given it much thought, but it was a terrible concern.

“What’s wrong, Lady Philia? Why the sudden long face?”

“I don’t know how to say this, but…” I took a deep breath. “With me by your side for such a long time, won’t you get bored of me?”

“Huh?”

“Sooner or later, we’re sure to run out of things to talk about, and I’m not really very interesting…”

Although we were meeting more than ever before, we still only saw each other a few times a month. As a result, we hardly lacked news to share. But being around each other every day was

a different story, was it not? I felt uneasy thinking of the possibility of sitting together in silence.

“Is that what has you worried? Serious as ever. That’s so like you. On the contrary, even on days when nothing much is going on, when you’re around, I never feel bored. Doesn’t that bode well for our relationship?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look. After this, I’m heading back to the castle, and I’ll feel a bit lonely because we’re apart. But once we get married, we’ll be going home to the same place, and I won’t feel lonely anymore. I’ll be content whether or not we have a lot to say. You know, people can be happy as long as their hearts are content.”

Prince Osvalt dispelled my worries. Was it really true that love could overcome boredom and monotony? I wasn’t so sure. But His Highness, his smile enveloping me like a ray of sunshine, gave me a sense of security.

Perhaps, as he said, I’d feel satisfied just being by his side. And if His Highness felt the same way, I couldn’t be happier.

The more I thought about it, the more embarrassed I felt. It left me speechless for a while. All I could do was bring a spoonful of soup to my lips.

“Well, Lady Philia, thanks for inviting me to dinner tonight. That was fun. Leonardo, you’re an incredible cook. I’ll be back.”

“I’m sorry for keeping you for so long. I had a fine time, too.”

“You flatter me, Your Highness,” said Leonardo. “I’ll hone my skills and impress you even further next time.”

With a contented look on his face, Prince Osvalt returned to the palace. Just as he said, a loneliness I’d never felt before washed over me as we parted ways. Once we were married, this loneliness would dissipate. The beauty of His Highness’s words belatedly sank in.

“That reminds me,” I said to myself. “I wonder why His Highness looked so unhappy earlier.”

As I dwelled on my loneliness, I remembered Prince Osvalt's inscrutable expression just before we got out of the carriage. He'd been unusually evasive at the mention of Archbishop Henry. But since Henry was part of the head church of Cremoux—an archbishop, no less—he must be a man of high virtue.

When I visited the church tomorrow, should I ask Bishop Bjorn what Archbishop Henry was like? Perhaps by learning more about him, I could get closer to figuring out the reason behind Prince Osvalt's expression.

The matter weighed on my mind as I felt the night breeze caress me.

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The next day, I visited Parnacorta Church. I made a point of stopping there weekly to treat the injured with healing magic.

With a warm smile that reminded me of sunlight filtering through the trees, Bishop Bjorn made tea for me. "Thank you as always, Lady Philia. I've been hearing of late that far fewer of our elderly parishioners are suffering from back pain and stiff shoulders. My healing magic can't keep up with demand, so you've been a great help."

Priests and bishops of the Cremoux religion went through rigorous training, and many of them were magic users—including Bishop Bjorn, who could use healing magic. One of his duties was to cure worshippers. As a saint, I provided assistance.

"Thank you very much for the delicious cake you gave us yesterday. His Highness happened to visit, so he also enjoyed some and gave it his highest compliments."

"I am honored to hear that, though I don't deserve such praise," Bishop Bjorn said, but he looked very happy to hear that His Highness, having a sweet tooth, had enjoyed the cake. His cake gave me a pleasant opening topic for our conversation, so I was grateful for that, too.

“By the way,” I said, “I heard that construction on the cathedral has finally begun.”

“Yes, it seems the blueprints are ready at last. It took some time, because it must be rebuilt with the greatest of care. After all, it’s where you and His Highness will have your wedding—and even after that it will be a sacred place for people to offer prayers. But the long wait has been worth it. The plans look amazing. Would you like to have a look?”

“Yes, I’d love to.”

The cathedral that Asmodeus destroyed was set for reconstruction. However, perhaps because it was such an important facility for the kingdom, many things had to be taken into consideration, so the construction work hadn’t proceeded smoothly until recently, when the blueprints were finally complete and construction began.

“Here’s what it’s supposed to look like when construction is done.”

“It looks like there are plans to expand the cathedral. Does this mean that it’ll be able to accommodate more worshippers than before?”

“Yes. You can invite as many people as you like to your wedding.”

As I looked at the rendering of the cathedral, my thoughts began to drift toward the wedding, which was in six months. Mia and Grace would be there, but what about Erza and everyone else I knew?

When I was engaged to Julius, I only planned to invite those within the Adenauer family circle. I even considered leaving the guest list up to my parents. But in just a short time, my circle of friends had expanded greatly. Just thinking about being able to see everyone again in six months got me excited.

After checking the plans, I told Bishop Bjorn about the pope’s condition, thinking that perhaps he hadn’t heard about it yet. “The other day, I got a letter from Alice from Dalbert saying that the pope’s condition is declining.”

At that, a strange look crossed Bishop Bjorn's face. "I see. So it's just as the rumors say—he doesn't have long to live."

The pope was loved by all believers of the Cremoux religion, so it was only natural for someone affiliated with the church to react that way. I would also have liked to pay my respects to His Eminence if the opportunity arose. Even when he granted me the title of archsaint, I was unable to meet him in person due to the Great Purification Circle, so all formal correspondence was done in writing.

It seemed that due to his position, Bishop Bjorn was also aware of the pope's poor health.

"Bishop Bjorn, have you ever met His Eminence?"

Bishop Bjorn thought back. "When I was young and still a novice, I once visited the Holy Land of Dalbert with a senior. There, I got to speak to His Eminence, but only for a short time."

The Holy Land was said to be the place where a god lay sleeping. It was the most sacred site in the Cremoux faith, and many believers made pilgrimages there each year.

Wait, could the senior that Bishop Bjorn mentioned be...?

"Is Archbishop Henry the senior who trained with you in Dalbert?"

It was only logical; Archbishop Henry was from Parnacorta and had been Bishop Bjorn's predecessor. Previously, I hadn't noticed anything off when Bishop Bjorn spoke about him. But the look on Prince Osvalt's face last night was still on my mind, so I wanted to find out if Bishop Bjorn knew anything. Bishop Bjorn had said that he was on close terms with the archbishop, and I took his word for it. But what was their relationship?

"Yes, that's right. Henry, my senior—Archbishop Henry now—invited me to train with him at the birthplace of our faith, so I went to Dalbert to study for about six months."

"You studied abroad?"

"Yes. As you can probably guess, I was a mediocre student, but he was different. People were so impressed by him that they

suggested he stay at the head church to be properly trained there, instead of returning to Parnacorta."

From what Bishop Bjorn said, it was clear that Archbishop Henry had been an outstanding individual from a young age. Just being part of the head church marked one as an elite among the clergy, so to be recruited was a great honor. Even in this short conversation, it was clear that Bishop Bjorn respected Archbishop Henry.

"But he returned to Parnacorta and served as a bishop here, which means..."

"Exactly. Archbishop Henry had no intention to leave Parnacorta behind. He said he wanted to devote himself to relieving this kingdom's believers of their troubles, and he put that into practice in concrete ways."

So, he prioritized taking action in his homeland over his personal advancement. But by the time I arrived at Parnacorta, he was no longer there. Bjorn had become the bishop of Parnacorta, while Henry was an archbishop in Dalbert. One could reasonably assume that Archbishop Henry no longer had any business in this kingdom.

This story was growing complicated.

"So, Lady Philia, you must be wondering why Archbishop Henry left the kingdom."

"Was the look on my face that obvious?"

"No, it's just that someone as intelligent as yourself is bound to wonder about that. I figured that you were holding back because you could tell that this was something of a sensitive issue."

"Yes. I thought it would be intrusive of an outsider like myself to ask for details."

It was exactly as Bishop Bjorn said. Even though I guessed that the situation had something to do with Prince Osvalt, I wasn't sure it was all right for me to pry into matters that didn't concern me. Did I have the right to do so, never having met Archbishop

Henry? As I thought this over, I found myself unable to ask any questions.

"Lady Philia, you're not exactly an outsider."

"Oh?"

"Archbishop Henry is the older brother of our previous saint, Lady Elizabeth. His departure and your arrival both happened because of Lady Elizabeth's passing, so this is far from unrelated to you."

Now this was unexpected.

Saint Elizabeth had come from the Elcrantz family, a branch of the Mattilas family. But Archbishop Henry's full name was Henry Orenheim. If they were siblings, shouldn't he have gone by Henry Elcrantz? The Elcrantz family name was nowhere in his official names or titles at all, so I hadn't made the connection.

"When Archbishop Henry went to Dalbert, he was adopted by Count Orenheim, the head of a powerful aristocratic family there. It's not surprising that you didn't know he was related to Lady Elizabeth."

"Yes. That would make him Grace's cousin, but she never once mentioned him, so I was surprised."

As Elizabeth's brother, Henry was also Grace's cousin. If he never came up in conversation, did that mean she didn't have nice things to say about him?

"Is that so? I'm not surprised the Mattilas family doesn't talk about him much. Henry—sorry, Archbishop Henry—was always concerned about Lady Elizabeth's poor constitution. He doted on her."

"I heard she was prone to falling sick."

"Yes, and that was why Archbishop Henry was strongly opposed to her becoming a saint. But Lady Elizabeth firmly insisted that she was the only one in this kingdom who could take on the role, so in the end, he supported her decision."

It sounded like Archbishop Henry cared deeply for Elizabeth. Being a saint was a demanding job, so I understood why his

sister's decision might worry him. But I could also understand why Elizabeth was adamant about her responsibility to the kingdom.

"Lady Elizabeth was the only one in this kingdom with enough magical power to qualify for sainthood, and she did everything she could to fulfill her saintly duties. But the monster population kept growing, as if to match the decline in her physical strength, and she was constantly injured."

"The first effects of the demonic cycle began manifesting around that time, so it's no wonder."

Parnacorta was located at the center of the continent. Geographically speaking, it was surrounded by mountains, which were typically infested with monsters, and the cyclical approach of the Demon Realm amplified the problem. The kingdom had been plagued by monsters before I arrived, so the burden placed on the frail and sickly Elizabeth must have been unimaginable.

"And then Lady Elizabeth passed away, plunging the entire kingdom into despair. Just two weeks later, Archbishop Henry left for Dalbert."

"He left out of grief over his sister's passing?"

"All he said was that he wished to go to the Holy Land of Cremoux once more to resume his training. Apparently, once he got there he applied to the head church and was accepted, but he only told me that after the fact. At the time, he left in a hurry."

That explained how Archbishop Henry ended up in the head church in Dalbert. But the first time he'd been invited to join the head church, he chose to stay in Parnacorta. Naturally, people changed their minds all the time, but it seemed obvious that he was trying to escape his memories of Elizabeth.

"Right after Lady Elizabeth's funeral," Bishop Bjorn added, "I happened to witness an argument between Prince Reichardt—her fiancé—and Archbishop Henry. I can't help but think that might have been one of the reasons he left."

"Why did they argue?"

I knew that Prince Reichardt loved Elizabeth. Why would Archbishop Henry fight with His Highness?

“Ah! Pardon me! I’m terribly sorry. I’ve said too much.” Bishop Bjorn looked embarrassed.

He didn’t have to feel bad, though. I was the one who was curious about Archbishop Henry in the first place. “No, I’m at fault for asking such rude questions.”

“Lady Philia, no one would think you rude for being interested in Parnacorta’s affairs.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, of course.”

It sank in that there was still much I didn’t know about Parnacorta. Perhaps Prince Osvalt looked upset at the mention of Archbishop Henry because he knew about the argument with Prince Reichardt.

“More tea, Lady Philia?”

“Yes, please.”

I decided that I shouldn’t probe into this any further. As I drank my tea, which had gone cold, I resolved to avoid digging up Prince Osvalt’s and Prince Reichardt’s sad memories merely to satisfy my curiosity.

***

Two weeks after my tea with Bishop Bjorn, I received a letter.

“It’s from Alice Aesfill of Dalbert.”

“Thank you, Himari.” I took the letter from Himari and opened it immediately. It was essentially an obituary informing me of the pope’s death.

“It looks like the entire continent will go into mourning,” I muttered to myself.

“Could it be that His Eminence has passed away?” Himari asked.

Once I was done reading the letter, I told her what it was all about, and she understood at once.

“That’s right. Himari, please inform everyone in the mansion of this. Be sure to tell them that we’ll be in mourning for a month, starting today.”

“Understood.”

Tomorrow, the entire continent would also hear the news, and similar observations of mourning would surely follow. However, I felt that those of us who had been told ahead of the populace should go into mourning immediately.

Lena came in holding Alexander, the kitten we’d rescued from a tree in the garden. “Lady Philia! I heard from Himari that His Eminence, the pope, has passed away. Alexander, you need to behave for the time being, got it?”

As if understanding Lena’s words, Alexander responded, “Meow!”

This little kitten had grown a lot. Lena lavished him with love, and his fur looked sleek and well-groomed.

“Now, Alexander, why don’t we say hello to Lady Philia?”

“Meo…meow!”

“Wait! Alexander! Where are you going?”

Alexander jumped out of her arms and dashed for the courtyard. It wasn’t like Alexander to try to get away from Lena. In any case, Lena and I chased him all the way to the courtyard.

“Whoa there. And here I was hoping for a warm welcome from a pretty lady or two.”

“Meow, meow!”

“Why don’t you go back to being a cat? You’re much more likeable that way.”

I couldn’t hide my amazement.

“Mammon! And Erza, too!”

Mammon held Alexander in his arms. Standing next to him was Erza. I was quite surprised to see them again. It had been about four months since we’d parted ways after the battle with

Asmodeus, and Alice hadn't mentioned in her letter that they'd be visiting.

Seeing us rush over, Erza and Mammon called out to us.

"Long time no see," said Erza.

"Hey there, Lena and Little Miss Philia. You two are as cute as ever."

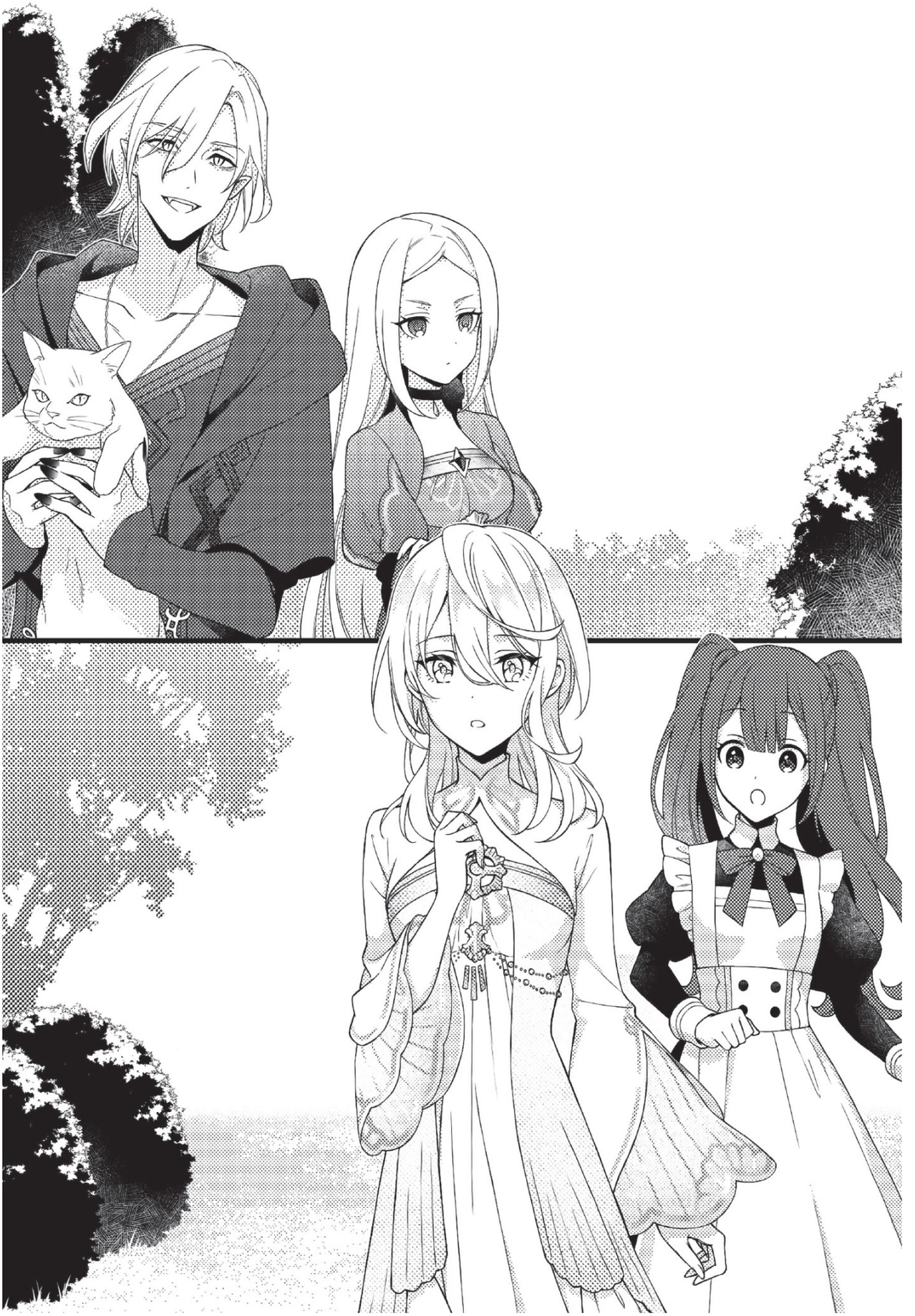
I had no idea why they were in Parnacorta, but the reunion was more than welcome. The kingdom had still been in chaos when we parted, so I wasn't able to say a proper goodbye. All the same, something was off. Erza was not the kind of person to make social calls.

"This sudden visit doesn't faze you at all, huh?" said Erza. "You haven't changed one bit."

"I *am* surprised. But more than that, I'm happy."

"Oh, really? Anyway, we need to talk. Do you have time?"

"Of course. Thank you for coming all the way here. If you'd let us know beforehand, we could've done more to entertain you. Lena, please make us some tea."



“Yes, certainly. Oh, my! Who would’ve thought we’d see Lady Erza and Mammon today?”

I ushered Erza and Mammon into the mansion as Lena fetched tea. Their visit came at the same time as the pope’s passing. Was this a coincidence, or did they have some related business? Though I had many questions, I decided to remain calm and listen carefully to what Erza had to say.

“Lena,” Mammon purred, “the tea you brew is something else. I absolutely have to marry you.”

“No way, Mammon. You’re always such a smooth talker.”

“You wound me. I’m not the type of demon who plays games. My proposal is deadly serious.”

“Mammon, take your pick: stop the flirting, or have your head chopped off.”

“Come now, Big Sis Erza. That was a joke, okay? A joke! Of course you’re the only one I’m devoted to.”

Erza and Mammon had stayed at the mansion before, so it didn’t take long for them to settle right in. It had been a while since I’d had the chance to observe their banter.

After a bit of chatting, I got down to business. “So, Erza, what brings you here today?”

Given what I knew of Erza, it was highly unlikely that she was visiting for leisure. It was more logical to assume that she was here at the request of the head church of Cremoux.

“I’m here to congratulate the new pope.”

“The new pope?”

The new pope. That was definitely what Erza had said.

With the pope’s passing, someone had to take his place…but could that successor be here in Parnacorta? Who exactly could it be? I had no idea.

As I racked my brain for ideas, Erza said something utterly unbelievable.

“Congratulations on your appointment, Pope Philia Adenauer.”

“…What?”

Did Erza just refer to me as the pope? What was this all about? Had I really been chosen to be the next pope? No, that couldn’t be. Was this a joke on Erza’s part? She wasn’t the type to fool around, but that was the only thing I could think of.

“Er, Erza, did you just call me the pope? Or did I mishear you?”

“You heard Big Sis right,” Mammon confirmed. “Little Miss Alice probably wrote to you about it, but the pope just kicked the bucket. And in his will, he named you, Archsaint Philia, as the next pope.”

I didn’t even know such a thing was possible. I was the saint of a kingdom. If I were to become pope, I’d have to leave Parnacorta for the head church of Cremoux in Dalbert. The protocol was for one of the archbishops to become the new pope. Why would the late pope break with tradition?

Lena stood up and spread her arms as if to protect me. “That can’t be! Lady Philia is the saint of this kingdom! She won’t be the new pope. She has to stay here with us!”

I was touched that Lena cared so deeply for me. Above all, I loved Parnacorta and was proud to be the saint of this kingdom.

“Exactly. I intend to stay here. It hasn’t even been a year since I became the saint of Parnacorta, but I’ve grown to love this kingdom in my own way. No matter what happens, I can’t leave it,” I agreed.

I couldn’t see myself leaving. Surely there was someone more worthy of the papacy.

“Besides, without me, this kingdom would once again be without a saint. I couldn’t allow such a crisis.”

I was this kingdom’s only saint. Parnacorta had struggled after losing Saint Elizabeth. The same thing must not happen again.

“Please don’t worry. Alice will be sent to Parnacorta in your place. She’ll be a worthy replacement, won’t she?”

“Has Alice agreed to that?”

“All I can say is that the girl wouldn’t oppose an order from the head church. She works for them, after all.”

Perhaps Erza was right: Parnacorta would be in good hands with Alice as its saint. Even so, I couldn’t accept this arrangement. Besides, surely Alice felt an attachment to her homeland too.

“This still isn’t okay,” Lena objected, raising the issue of Prince Osvalt. “Lady Philia also happens to be engaged to one of our princes, so she can’t leave!”

That was true. It was easy to imagine how His Highness would react to this news. As much as he loved me, he couldn’t abandon his kingdom.

“Ah, that’s right. Little Miss Philia, you’re engaged now! Congrats! Invite me to the ceremony, okay? And please tell your friends that I’m looking for a wife.”

“I heard from Alice about your engagement to that honest-looking prince. You have my belated congratulations.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right away.”

I thanked them for their good wishes. Apparently, they’d already heard the news from Alice.

“But, Archsaint, the pope’s role as divine representative is absolute. In other words, the appointment of the next pope is a fixed decision.” Dropping her tone of voice, Erza looked me straight in the eye. “You should know this already, right? It’s a decree on the same level as a divine revelation—one that can’t be overturned by any kingdom’s laws. You have no right to refuse your appointment.”

I knew the pope’s power was greater than that of any royal family. I also knew that refusing the pope’s orders was synonymous to making an enemy of the entire continent. Still, I didn’t want to accept such an unreasonable command. I absolutely could not agree to its terms.

“Then what happens if I decline the appointment?”

“Unfortunately, you’ll lose your title of archsaint.”

“That’s not all, is it?”

“Correct. You’ll be stripped of your sainthood entirely. As a heretic, you’ll no longer be allowed to have any contact with the church at all. You’ll just be Philia Adenauer. And if that happens, this kingdom will be without a saint once more.”

I would no longer be able to call myself a saint. The conviction in Erza’s eyes made it clear that she wouldn’t accept any further objections.

To remain a saint of this kingdom, I had to leave it.

“Little Miss Philia, this puts you in an impossible position, and of course you’re torn up about it.” Mammon suggested. “But hey, Dalbert’s a nice place. Why don’t you forget about this kingdom and think about the fun you’ll have in your new home?”

“You must be feeling overwhelmed right now. You need time to think it over, don’t you? I’ll give you a week. Just one week. Please come up with an answer within that time. If your prince will join you in Dalbert, I can guarantee that he’ll be treated well. Be sure to tell him that.”

Erza said that she’d give me just a week’s time to decide. And it seemed that I was welcome to go to Dalbert with Prince Osvalt. Just moments ago, I’d assumed I’d marry His Highness in Parnacorta and spend the rest of my life there. This new choice weighed heavily on my heart.

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The day after my reunion with Erza and Mammon, Prince Reichardt summoned me. Apparently, Erza had paid a visit to Parnacorta Palace on the way to see me.

The last time Erza and Mammon stayed with me, they served as my bodyguards, so they stayed at my mansion. This time, however, they said they would find their own accommodation.

Since they'd come all the way here, I invited them to stay at my place, but they refused. Erza said that she wanted to avoid mixing business with personal matters.

"Big Sis, I think it'd be easier to persuade Little Miss Philia if I stayed here."

"You just want to hang out with these women, don't you? I know what you're thinking."

"True enough, but aren't you letting personal matters get in the way of business by avoiding Little Miss Philia because you feel awkward?"

"Who said I felt awkward? …Fine. Archsaint, would you mind having us again?"

Since Mammon managed to persuade Erza, they ended up staying at my place. However, when they left separately the next morning I could tell that there was some kind of tension between them.

Standing in front of Prince Reichardt's office, I sensed that Erza was inside. Indeed, when I opened the door, Erza and Prince Osvalt were already there.

"Miss Philia, please have a seat."

As my eyes met Prince Reichardt's, he stood and invited me to sit on the couch meant for guests. Although I felt like I was being swallowed up by the heavy atmosphere that hung over the room, I sat next to Prince Osvalt. Noticing my anxiety, he smiled reassuringly.

"As you probably heard from Miss Erza yesterday, we received a letter addressed to the Parnacorta royal family, informing us of the pope's passing and his appointment of Miss Philia as the next pope in his will."

So, the head church of Cremoux had already informed the palace. Now Parnacorta was forced to choose whether to send me away.

Not that there was much of a choice. Even if I stayed in this kingdom, I would no longer be allowed to act as a saint. I would be branded a heretic who defied the pope's holy mandate.

In a lower tone of voice than usual, Prince Reichardt explained to us the consequences of disobedience. “I’m sure you already know this, but going against the pope’s will means making an enemy of every nation on the continent. Not only will all imports and exports come to a halt, but we could be looking at war in the worst scenario.”

Both Prince Osvalt and I were obviously aware of this, so Prince Reichardt was just laying things out for us. No doubt he wanted us to keep all this in mind before we made our choice.

“I fully understand what you’re saying, brother.” Prince Osvalt’s voice rose. “But that doesn’t mean Lady Philia should accept such an unreasonable order as leaving this kingdom! You feel the same way too, don’t you? After all, you were the one who chose to bring Lady Philia here to be our saint!”

Raising his voice, Prince Osvalt said that the decree was unacceptable regardless. He probably knew that nothing could be done about the matter, but, as was typical of him, he still needed to get his thoughts across.

“Miss Erza, allow me to confirm things with you once more. My brother is engaged to Miss Philia. There’s absolutely no problem with him living with her in Dalbert, is that right?”

Hearing his brother’s appeal to reason, Prince Reichardt confirmed with Erza whether Prince Osvalt and I could go to Dalbert together. Erza had told us yesterday that it wouldn’t be an issue, so why was His Highness still asking about it?

“Yes. As I explained yesterday, their standard of living would be guaranteed. They would be considered esteemed guests of the royal family. We would never treat the pope’s husband-to-be poorly. As befitting an archsaint and future pope, the head church promises that she won’t lack for anything—as long as she goes to Dalbert, that is.”

Erza stressed—more strongly than she had yesterday—that Prince Osvalt and I would live comfortably. This was probably the most that the head church was willing to compromise on. If I were to go to Dalbert and become pope, I would be guaranteed a

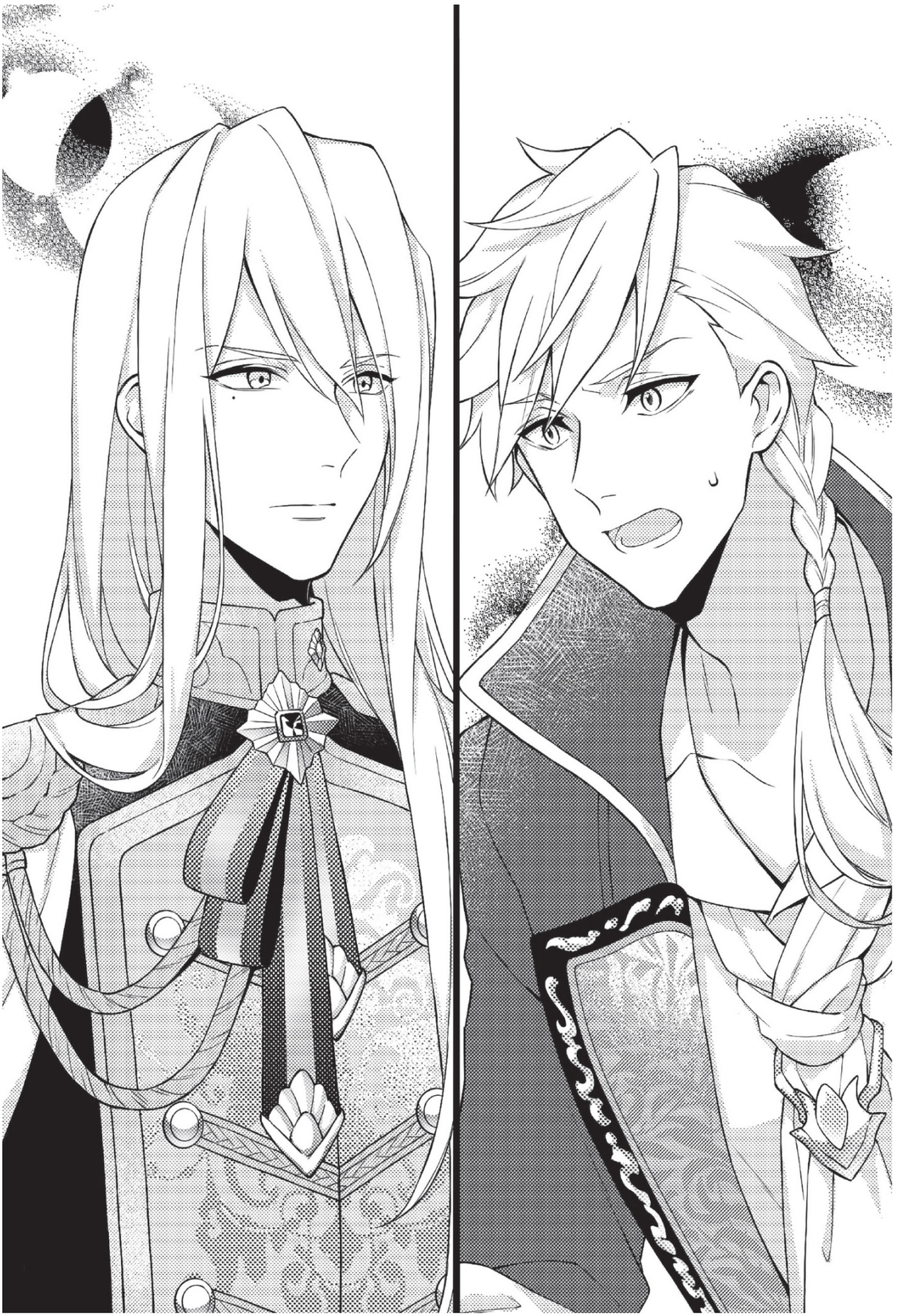
certain degree of freedom. But that wasn't what I wanted the most.

"I see. Osvalt, let me start with the conclusion. You and Miss Philia must go to Dalbert. It's the only course of action."

Prince Osvalt leapt to his feet. "Hey, brother! How can you say that? There's no way I'd agree to this! Neither Lady Philia nor I intend to leave this kingdom!"

As much as I appreciated Prince Osvalt's protests, I understood that, given His Highness's position, he had no choice but to issue that command.

For Parnacorta, a land encircled by other kingdoms, a breakdown of international relations would spell doom. If Prince Reichardt's priority was protecting the kingdom, refusing the head church's order was not an option.



“Osvalt, please think about this with a clear head. You and Miss Philia can live happily together. Is that not enough for you?”

“Good enough, you mean?”

“That’s right. You’re guaranteed to be able to live with the one you love. What’s more, the head church of Cremoux has promised to send a saint to Parnacorta, so our kingdom’s defenses won’t be at risk. You won’t have to worry about anything but looking after Miss Philia.”

Alice was both an outstanding saint and an exorcist. She could ensure Parnacorta’s safety, so there should be no problem on that front. In that respect, at least, my departure would not be a loss for Parnacorta. On the other hand, if I stayed, the kingdom would have no saint on top of its diplomatic issues.

I felt Prince Reichardt was doing his brother a kindness by uttering these words of caution. He must have concluded that this was the best course of action to ensure his brother’s future.

Even so, Prince Osvalt’s anger did not subside. Instead, he slammed his fist on the table and became even more defiant. “You’re saying I should bottle up my feelings for the sake of the greater good, or something like that?”

For someone like me, who had lived her life suppressing her feelings, Prince Osvalt’s honesty was a breath of fresh air. The past me who had just arrived at this kingdom would have gone along with this decree without question.

“Indeed. This time, you have no choice but to comply, Osvalt.” In contrast to Prince Osvalt’s rage, Prince Reichardt kept his composure and admonished his brother in a matter-of-fact tone. Observing his demeanor, I sensed a resolve in him like never before. It felt even stronger than the time he turned down my plea to let me go to Girtonia to save Mia. Getting His Highness to change his mind would be nigh-impossible. He wasn’t going to budge.

“What do you think, Miss Philia?” Prince Reichardt asked. “I was hoping you could persuade my brother. I think he’d have an easier time accepting what you have to say.”

I doubted that I could change Prince Osvalt's mind, but as an involved party, I couldn't stay silent.

"Personally, I've never wanted to leave Parnacorta. That's unthinkable for me. As of this moment, I still have no intention of leaving this kingdom."

Seemingly surprised by my words, Prince Reichardt looked deep in thought for a moment. He must have thought I would agree with him.

"So, Miss Philia, you and Osvalt are of the same mind... Well, this is a problem."

"Archsaint, do you seriously mean that? I thought you were smarter than that."

"You think too highly of me, Erza. However, some aspects of this matter have bothered me from the beginning, and I'd like those doubts to be cleared up first."

"You have your doubts? Like what?"

If, at this point, the decision really was set in stone, there was probably nothing more we could do about it. In that case, Prince Osvalt and I would have to leave Parnacorta together to avoid causing trouble to the kingdom. However, I wasn't about to accept this decree before certain questions were answered. The entire situation was just too strange for me to take at face value.

"First of all, the general rule is that the pope's successor is chosen from among the archbishops. Why was I named the new pope? I wondered whether there was a reason to deviate from the usual protocol, but I've been given no explanation whatsoever."

It deeply troubled me that I was chosen to be pope instead of sticking to convention. No matter how you looked at it, there was no reason that I absolutely had to be the new pope, especially as it meant making me give up my position as the saint of Parnacorta.

"There have been special cases," said Erza. "The fifth pope, Richard Adelbein, and the twelfth pope, David Damon, were only bishops when they were appointed. The pope's successor doesn't have to be an archbishop."

“In both those instances, the sitting archbishops were all quite old, so the head church had no choice but to find someone younger. Besides, there’s never been a single recorded case of a saint becoming pope.”

As Erza said, there were indeed cases of someone who wasn’t an archbishop becoming the pope. But the two examples she cited had involved all available archbishops being over eighty years old. They were deemed too physically frail to carry out the duties of a pope.

By contrast, the oldest of the current archbishops, Archbishop Aurustra, was only in his late fifties. Archbishop Henry was still in his twenties. In the Cremoux faith, length of service was no guarantee of rising through the ranks. It was possible to become an archbishop at a young age, if one could overcome the rigorous training and display exceptional character and ability. However, Henry was only the second person in history to reach the rank of archbishop in his twenties. There was no doubt that he was exceptionally skilled. When I heard from Alice that the pope’s illness was worsening, I assumed that he’d become the next pope.

“I understand your misgivings. But Archsaint, the lack of a precedent does not give you the right to refuse this mandate. Well, no, you *can* refuse, but the consequences will be dire. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I understand that if I refuse to comply, I will bring trouble to Parnacorta.”

“If you truly care about this kingdom,” said Erza, “please accept the papacy. You can lead us and use the power of faith to bring salvation to the entire continent. You can take on the roles of saint and pope at the same time.”

What Erza said made sense. Most likely, she was strongly urging me to accept the role of pope because she genuinely wanted the best for me.

However, I didn’t give an answer then and there. “With all respect, I can’t decide my course of action before talking it over with Prince Osvalt. You gave me six more days to respond, didn’t you?”

“Lady Philia…” said Prince Osvalt.

Erza nodded. “All right. I hope you give it plenty of thought.”

Though I only had six days left, I was confident that with careful thinking, Prince Osvalt and I could come up with some kind of solution. Our futures were at stake, so I firmly resolved to choose a path that would leave no regrets.

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With the discussion over for the moment, we left Prince Reichardt’s office. We walked in silence for a while, all too aware that we had only six days left to come up with a response.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go,” Erza said. “Mammon’s been spouting unfunny nonsense about picking up girls in town. I have to stop him from making a fool of himself.”

“My apologies for making you come all the way here, Lady Erza,” said Prince Osvalt.

“You don’t have to thank me just to be polite,” she replied in a detached tone. “I have prepared myself for the possibility that I will be hated for my actions.”

What was she talking about? We fought together as comrades last time, and I held no ill will toward her.

“It’s not like you were the one who issued the mandate,” Prince Osvalt said.

As we reached the palace courtyard, Erza lightly kicked off the ground and jumped over the wall, making her exit.

As Prince Osvalt said, she was just an emissary from the head church of Cremoux. But even so, she might have felt guilty on a personal level. Erza’s retreating figure looked strangely lonely. I felt like I could read complex emotions into her stance.

Once Erza was out of sight, His Highness shrugged his shoulders sadly. “I don’t plan on holding any grudges against Lady Erza, but this is a heck of a dilemma for us. Lady Philia, are you okay?”

I knew His Highness must be troubled. Even if he disagreed with Prince Reichardt, he couldn't reject everything his brother had said.

"I'm fine. We still have time to reach a decision, after all."

This was certainly no simple problem. It would have a huge impact on our future. But there was no time to mope. Over the next few days, we had to think positively and make the best choices for ourselves.

"Hey, Lady Philia, are you worried about me? Please don't refuse the mandate for my sake. Despite what I said to my brother, if push comes to shove, I'll leave this kingdom with you."

Even though he'd fiercely opposed what Prince Reichardt said earlier, Prince Osvalt was now open to leaving this kingdom for my sake—though his heart must have been heavy as he said it. Touched as I was that His Highness would rather compromise than cause me trouble, I wanted him to keep smiling. I wanted to always gaze upon the sight of radiant Prince Osvalt beaming under the Parnacorta sun.

"Your Highness, you love this kingdom very much. I know that you wish to dedicate your life to it."

"No, that's not it! Well, I mean, it is, but…my wish is for you to be by my side!" Prince Osvalt faced me and grasped my shoulders. "If my selfishness will bring you trouble, I'm prepared to forsake a wish or two!" His gaze was straight as ever, and the amber glow of his eyes reflected his sincerity.

His Highness was completely serious. He wouldn't use such strong words as a joke.

"Your Highness, though my love for Parnacorta may be no match for yours, I, too, love this kingdom very much."

"Lady Philia…"

"Please don't talk about sad things like forsaking your hopes and dreams. This kingdom is precious to both of us." Placing a hand on my heart, I told His Highness that we shouldn't give up on the possibility of staying in this land that we both loved. "Besides,

you once told me that in important situations, I should decide with my heart instead of my head."

Prince Osvalt looked surprised at this. But he was the one who'd taught me there were times when we had to listen to our hearts. He shattered the narrow lens through which I viewed the world, opening a much wider vista up before me as a result. To this day, my heart still beat faster every time I remembered that moment.

"Jeez, aren't I pathetic? You're throwing words back at me that I said when I was trying to look cool in front of you."

"You still look cool, Your Highness."

I always thought that His Highness was cool, but he didn't seem convinced.

"Ha ha, I wish, but that's just not the case this time. Still, I realized something: giving up right away isn't in my nature." Prince Osvalt's voice grew stronger and the powerful light in his eyes returned. Perhaps now he was ready to find a solution.

"When I tried to save Mia, and when I was trapped in Limbo, you kept telling me not to give up. Thanks to you, I was able to cling to hope and look toward the future."

"I didn't do anything. You rescued Lady Mia yourself, and it was thanks to your own strength that you came back after crushing Asmodeus's ambitions."

"That's not true. Without you, I would have lost hope. I'm not as strong or righteous as I think I am, and I'm glad that you showed me the truth."

I wasn't good with words. I couldn't properly express how much strength I drew from His Highness's honest and forthright support whenever I was in trouble. I could, however, say this much:

For me, the greatest thing that happened since I came to Parnacorta was meeting you, Your Highness.

Getting to know His Highness helped me fall in love with his kingdom.

“Talking to you like this gets me thinking about how so much has happened since you came,” Prince Osvalt reflected, “even though it hasn’t even been a year.”

“Indeed. I never thought I’d get engaged for the second time this soon.”

“You’re right. As for me, I wasn’t sure about proposing. What if I’d fallen for you too soon? But I was confident that my feelings for you wouldn’t change.”

The phrase “so much has happened” was too short to capture the events that turned our lives upside down: the rise of the Demon Realm, the crisis in my homeland, the mysterious vanishing incidents, the Saints’ Summit, the battle with Asmodeus, and our engagement. Amidst all of those were meaningful personal encounters. I’d learned to be grateful for the many people I met along the way.

“But you’re the most important thing that’s happened to me, Lady Philia,” Prince Osvalt continued. “Of course, this kingdom is important too, but I can’t live without you. So, wherever you want to go, I’ll go with you. I promise you, these are my true feelings.”

His Highness said that his commitment to put me first remained unchanged. He’d go wherever I went. I was so moved by his kind words that a decision began to form in my mind. This might be all we had. Right now, it was just a sliver of hope, but it was the only way to turn the current situation around. I couldn’t come up with anything else.

“Your Highness, would you please go to Dalbert with me?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve decided. I’ll go to Dalbert, and I’d like Your Highness to come with me.”

Prince Osvalt stared at me in surprise. I couldn’t blame him, as it was opposite of what I’d said earlier.

“I’m not sure I can catch up with your train of thought, but… does that mean that you’ve decided to be the new pope?”

As was only natural, he seemed to think that I’d decided to accept my appointment to pope. But that wasn’t the case. Instead,

I was thinking about how I could have the appointment overruled. In other words…

“No. Let’s go there and directly appeal to the head church of Cremoux to have the mandate revoked.”

“Wh-what? Can we even do that? It’s the late pope’s will. No matter what, surely it can’t be overruled!”

Even His Highness was taken aback when I said that I’d directly appeal to the head church. Indeed, the pope’s will was binding. He had absolute power. But that didn’t mean we couldn’t question his decree. If anything, I felt it was only right to fight back. I also thought that instead of worrying about it from afar, it’d be more constructive to go to the place where the mandate was issued and make myself heard directly.

“I think that if we can get our justifications across clearly, perhaps the mandate can be overruled. Of course, we’ll have to prepare evidence to back up our argument.”

“I get it. We’ll have to prove this is an unreasonable demand. I can’t think of the best way to go about that, though.”

If we could prove that the late pope’s will was groundless, the head church of Cremoux would have no reason to appoint me as the next pope. But we would need compelling grounds to make such an argument—and I already had a theory. If I could prove it, I was confident overruling the mandate would be achievable.

And, above all, I wanted to make my intentions known.

“I also want to properly convey my feelings. I want to tell the head church directly that I’m not worthy to be pope, and that I wish to spend my days as a saint of Parnacorta.”

I wanted everyone to understand that no matter what, I wished to continue serving as the saint of this kingdom.

Prince Osvalt crossed his arms and looked deep in thought. Then, in a voice quivering with emotion, he said, “You really mean that? You know, you’ve changed a lot.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had to admit that I was more proactive than before, but had I really changed all that much? I glanced up at Prince Osvalt. “I-is that weird?”

But His Highness grinned and patted my shoulder. “What are you talking about? You were always charming, but now you’re cooler than ever.”

“O-okay. Thank you.”

I got embarrassed every time Prince Osvalt said such flattering things to me. The more familiar I became with His Highness’s sincerity and honesty, the more his words went straight through my heart and sent shivers up my spine.

Not wanting him to see me blush, I unwittingly hung my head.

“Lady Philia, what’s wrong? Are you feeling sick all of a sudden?”

“No, please don’t mind me. I’m fine.”

“You sure?” Even with my head bowed, Prince Osvalt managed to peer into my eyes. “Anyway, you made your intentions clear. If that’s the case, I’ll go to Dalbert with you.”

A definite sense of security began to take root in my heart. As long as we were together, we could go anywhere without fear.

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“What’s wrong with a little bit of fun? I was this close to finalizing my plans for tonight!”

“Weren’t you the one who whined and begged to stay here? So why were you about to sneak off to spend the night at another woman’s place?”

“What, are you lonely, Big Sis? I’m happy to share your bed anytime—argh!”

I returned home to find Mammon’s head rolling down the hall. Perhaps it was wrong to feel nostalgic at such a sight…but demon bodies were quite sturdy. Asmodeus, in particular, possessed extraordinary strength. Once again, I felt grateful for the miracle that we had all survived the battle against him.

“Hey, Little Miss Philia! Welcome back. As always, I love that cool, unflappable style of yours.” Mammon grinned as his body came over to pick up its own head.

Demons did not have blood flowing through their bodies. As if he was reattaching a part of a doll, Mammon snapped his head back onto his body. He smoothed out his hair as if nothing had happened.

All the while, Erza looked at him coldly. Then she turned my way and asked whether I’d spoken to Prince Osvalt. “Welcome back, Archsaint. Were you able to talk things over with your prince?”

It seemed that she had kept her distance from us out of consideration. Her quiet thoughtfulness hadn’t changed one bit since the time she served as my bodyguard.

“Yes. I’ve talked to His Highness, and we’re now on the same page.”

“Good to hear. I hope you decided to accept your appointment as pope.”

“Unfortunately not. I doubt I can meet your expectations, I’m afraid.”

I answered frankly that I had no intentions of becoming pope. After talking to Prince Osvalt, I had decided to fight to the very end to protect our future together. There was no way I could do as Erza said.

“Archsaint, I’m truly grateful for what you did in the battle with Asmodeus. Without you, we couldn’t have defeated that beast.”

“But it’s my fault that we had to fight him in the first place,” I pointed out. “He was after my soul.”

“It doesn’t matter. In the first place, if not for Fianna, this world would’ve been destroyed a long time ago. Anyway, I’ve been a sorry excuse for an exorcist, so I know I’m in no position to say something like this when I’m indebted to you, but…”

Why was she suddenly expressing her gratitude for me defeating Asmodeus? What was she thinking, to bring that up?

“In life,” she continued, “it’s important to know when to give up. You have no choice but to become the next pope. Deep down inside, you know that, right? You’re so smart, so why do you still not get it?” Erza’s voice began to rise. It was unusual for her to shout like this.

“Miss Erza, please don’t say such things to Lady Philia!” Before I realized it, Lena was beside me, retorting indignantly. “There’s no way she’d want to leave this kingdom!”

“But didn’t she leave her homeland?” Erza countered. “How is this any different?”

“Those are two totally different circumstances and situations!”

Erza, who was even more worked up at this point, fired back at Lena, but I stepped in before the argument got out of hand.

“Lena, please calm down. I appreciate your sentiments, but we won’t reach a conclusion by arguing emotionally. And Erza, I still have six days. I promise to inform you of my decision then, so please be patient.”

It was clear to me that Lena was angry at Erza on my behalf, which I found touching. But Erza, too, had her own position to consider. It was pointless to argue, so I tried to calm them both down.

“I’m sorry for raising my voice,” said Erza quietly. “I’m going to bed.” With that, she headed upstairs to her bedroom.

Lena fixed her gaze on Erza until she was out of sight. Her agitation wearing off, she looked back at me apologetically. “I’m sorry. No matter what, I just couldn’t let her say such mean things to you.”

“I’m not going to criticize you for it,” I reassured Lena. “But Erza has her own circumstances to deal with, so please don’t get too angry at her.”

“You’re right. I’ll apologize to Miss Erza later!” Lena nodded earnestly. She was clever and kind, so my words surely got across to her. I had faith that she and Erza would make up.

Mammon, who'd been observing us silently, stepped in. "Hey, hey, Big Sis sure was in a foul mood, huh? But, Little Miss Philia, even if she wasn't at her most charming just now, you ought to know she doesn't mean you any harm. Oh, and Lena, you're so cute with your cheeks puffed out like that—but you're even cuter when you laugh."

"Don't worry, Mammon," I said. "I don't have any hard feelings toward Erza."

Since Mammon served Erza and was always by her side, he probably understood aspects of her that others didn't.

"Truth is, back at the head church, it was Big Sis Erza who was most vocally against this whole thing. She said it was beyond shameless of them to take away her benefactor's freedom."

That was unexpected. Erza had never mentioned that at all. If anything, since she arrived, she'd been giving the impression that she wouldn't accept any objections to the church's decision. The quiet kindness that I sensed from her must be real, after all.

"But no matter what she said, the late pope's will couldn't be overruled, so Big Sis Erza negotiated with the head church of Cremoux. She got them to promise that they'd give you as much freedom as possible."

So, Erza had been looking out for me from the start, doing everything she could for me. Come to think of it, she had also helped arrange for Prince Osvalt to live with me in Dalbert and for me to have a week to think things over. As the pope's will was absolute, the head church could have just whisked me off without waiting for my answer. Thinking it over, this was quite lenient of them.

"As long as you go to Dalbert to become the new pope as per the will, you can do whatever you want. Big Sis Erza should be able to guarantee that much for you. Meet us halfway here, Little Miss Philia. Please try to understand where Big Sis is coming from."

Mammon must truly care about Erza to confide in me about her kindness. "Yes," I replied, "I'm thankful to Erza for her consideration."

“You’re a stubborn one, Little Miss Philia. I love that tough aura of yours, but you’ve gotta admit you’re backed into a corner.”

He was implying there was no other solution. I rejected his assertion. “No, that’s not necessarily the case. Mammon, do you know who was entrusted with His Eminence’s will? I assume it was one of the archbishops.”

This was the crucial question to support a certain theory of mine.

“The will? Ah, that’d be Archbishop Henry. He gathered a bunch of his colleagues at the head church and made a big show of revealing the will.”

“So, the will was in Archbishop Henry’s custody.” *I see.*

I figured that one of the three archbishops must have been entrusted with that letter. If my theory was correct, I’d already guessed it was highly likely to have been with Archbishop Henry. Mammon’s answer made me feel that my speculations were gradually getting closer to the reality of what happened.

“When I heard that His Eminence had entrusted his will to Archbishop Henry,” Mammon continued, “I thought that guy would be the next pope for sure. Until recently, that’s what it always meant when the pope left his will with you.”

He went on to add that in all the transitions he’d personally witnessed through the ages, whoever was entrusted with the previous pope’s will was chosen as the next pope. That made sense, as the will named the successor.

“Maybe Archbishop Henry is a little young for the job, but he must be really talented to become an archbishop at his age. His Eminence thought highly of him. I was surprised when you were chosen as His Eminence’s successor, but what surprised me even more was that the kid wasn’t the pick.”

So, Archbishop Henry was perfectly qualified to be pope, and the late pope recognized his worth. Archbishop Henry must be exceptional for even a demon—a being with superhuman powers—to acknowledge how highly capable he was.

Noticing that I'd gone silent, Mammon asked, "Everything okay, Little Miss Philia? You look pretty deep in thought. Is there something on your mind?"

Listening to Mammon got the wheels in my head turning. If my theory was correct, in order to prove it, I...

One way or another, I needed to investigate some things—beginning with what had happened in Parnacorta in the past.

"Thank you, Mammon. You've been very helpful."

"Okay? I don't think I said anything important, though."

Organizing my thoughts in my head, I called for Himari. She was the best person to handle this task, as I was confident that she could quickly gather the information I needed.

"Himari, I have a request for you."

As soon as I said Himari's name, she appeared in front of me, broom in hand. "You called, Lady Philia?"

"There's something I'd like you to look into. Actually—"

I gave Himari the details of what I wanted her to investigate. She listened in silence, nodding occasionally. Once I was done telling her everything, Himari took off her apron, handed the broom to Lena, and immediately changed into what she called her shinobi attire.

"Lady Philia, I have clearly understood your orders. I beg your patience for a moment. I vow to carry out my mission to your full satisfaction."

Having said that, Himari left without a sound, as if she'd vanished into thin air. I had no doubts about her abilities. Surely, she'd be able to collect the information I wanted.

"Well, that was fast," said Mammon, in typical Mammon fashion. "Ninja are no fun—no time to fool around and flirt." Even the demon seemed in awe of her speed and resourcefulness. "I have no idea what you asked Miss Himari to do, but you have to come up with a decision in six days. Are you sure you can do that? Somehow, I doubt you're gonna have an answer that'll satisfy Big Sis Erza."

“I’ve already made a decision. I’m still unclear about some details, so I can’t tell you yet, but it’s more or less settled.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

At this point, I was firm in my decision to talk directly to the head church of Cremoux, just as I told Prince Osvalt. I already had, to some extent, some basis for my objections.

“But since I still have some time left,” I declared, “I’ll make use of every last minute of this grace period—to make absolutely sure this mandate is overruled!”

Mammon cackled. “I knew I’d seen that strong light in your eyes somewhere. It’s the same shine I saw a long time ago in the eyes of the previous archsaint, Fianna. You really were the only mortal who could’ve taken down Lord Asmodeus. Even to a demon like me, you’re pretty scary, Little Miss Philia.”

Mammon continued to laugh as he sauntered off to his room.

I resolved to do what I could in the six remaining days. Prince Osvalt and I would seize the future we both wanted and return from Dalbert to Parnacorta.

With iron-clad determination in my heart, I began my research, and the time passed by in an instant.

Chapter 2:
To the Kingdom of Dalbert

PRINCE OSVALT, ERZA, MAMMON, and I gathered in the courtyard of my mansion. It was noon, exactly a week after the grace period Erza had given us. With the early summer sun blazing down on us, Prince Osvalt and I prepared to announce our decision.

Erza brushed aside her long hair. “Since you came here without a fuss, you must have decided to go to Dalbert. That’s a relief.” She was right. That was what we decided six days ago, as the head church of Cremoux was located in Dalbert.

To maintain the Great Purification Circle while I was gone, I infused extra magic into the Pillars of Light. Alice, the saint who would serve in Parnacorta in my stead, could also create a Great Purification Circle, but I didn’t want to saddle her with that responsibility if possible.

“Yes, we’ve decided to go to Dalbert,” I affirmed. Mammon would use his dimensional-travel spell to transport us there.

“Good to hear. That was the right decision. Thank you for agreeing to go.”

However, I had to be honest with Erza about the true purpose behind our journey to Dalbert. It might make her angry, but I wanted to start things off without any misunderstandings.

“Erza, I’m not heading to Dalbert to become pope, but to convince the head church of Cremoux to let me stay in Parnacorta. Prince Osvalt and I would like them to understand that I shouldn’t be the next pope.”

“I’ll accompany Lady Philia and ask that her wishes be respected,” Prince Osvalt said.

I really wasn’t the right person to be pope, and I was confident that I could explain why. I had to hope the church would listen.

“I already tried that, but no matter what I said, they declared it was impossible. The pope’s will is absolute. They said there was

simply no way to overturn his decision."

The presumption that the pope's will was absolute was a fundamental tenet of all worshippers of the Cremoux faith. It couldn't simply be contravened or ignored. I understood that much.

For we believers of Cremoux, the pope is God's representative—a divine being. To disobey the pope's words was tantamount to turning against God. And as the highest institution of the faith, the head church of Cremoux could not tolerate such things.

"I feel bad for you. I really do. So, Archsaint, just accept the papacy, and I'll arrange for all your wishes to be granted to the maximum extent possible. Please don't cling to false hope. I'd hate for you to be disappointed."

As I thought, Erza really was a kind person. I understood that she shot down our wishful thinking out of concern for us. But we weren't about to give up hope. The words "give up" weren't even part of our vocabulary.

For one brief moment, the place was so quiet that only the buzzing and chirping of insects could be heard. Erza never took her accusatory gaze off me.

I repeated my intentions. "Even if it proves truly impossible, I don't think fighting for it is meaningless. I believe that if we can state our case, it may change what lies ahead of us. Living in this kingdom together with His Highness is my greatest wish."

"Why do you persist in this pointless endeavor? There are no other possibilities!"

I wished to spend my married life with Prince Osvalt in our beloved kingdom and to continue to serve as its saint. For the sake of that future, I could cling to any possibility, however unlikely it might be. No matter what others said, so long as not all hope was lost, our resolve would not waver.

"Erza, your reasoning is that what the pope says is absolute—therefore, his will is also absolute. Is that right?"

“Yes. What are you trying to get at, saying something so obvious?”

“What about a decree from someone other than His Eminence? It should have no such binding power.”

“Huh? What on earth is this about? Are you saying you think someone else wrote His Eminence’s will?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

This was the crux of the matter. This was why I had my doubts about the pope’s will, and why I was certain I wasn’t the right choice to be the next pope.

“But…that can’t be…”

“The will might have been altered.”

Erza was shocked into silence.

Yes—I was willing to take a chance on this possibility. The late pope’s will was the only basis for appointing me as the next pope, but it was likely to have been forged. If His Eminence didn’t really name me as his successor, the mandate that I become pope would become invalid. And as for evidence, I had found possibilities.

“The pope’s will was forged? Are you nuts? Do you have any basis for saying that? If you’re going to make such a claim, you’d better be ready to back it up.”

Of course, it was understandable that Erza would ask for evidence to support my claim about the will being forged. Who could imagine someone doing such a thing? The pope’s will was akin to a revelation from God. Rewriting it was an act of blasphemy. Besides, doing so benefited no one. Small wonder everyone had assumed without question that the will was genuine.

“First of all,” I said, “if His Eminence really intended to name me as his successor, I doubt he would have revealed it so suddenly. To avoid confusion, he would have made it known during his lifetime. Surely, he would have at least hinted that he was considering me for the papacy when he granted me the title of archsaint. That would be both common sense and courtesy.”

That was the very first thing that struck me as odd. Even though the pope's decisions were absolute, if he had someone unusual in mind to succeed him instead of choosing from the archbishops, he ought to have consulted others and prepared them.

Knowing that I was the saint of Parnacorta, His Eminence would have made arrangements while he was still alive by informing me of his plans…or so one would think. I heard the late pope was a man possessed of integrity and good sense. However one looked at this situation, it was hard to imagine someone like that leaving it to the head church's higher-ups to figure out his will after his death.

"You have a point, but Archbishop Henry certainly must have received the will directly from His Eminence. If someone rewrote the will, he's the only one who could've done it."

She was right. The underlying implication was that the only possible culprit was Archbishop Henry. In my mind, there were no questions as to who the culprit was.

The former bishop from Parnacorta received His Eminence's will and rewrote it to make the saint of Parnacorta the next pope. What a twisted, yet fateful, tale.

"It's just as you said, Erza. I believe Archbishop Henry rewrote the will."

When I stated my theory frankly, Erza looked shocked. "What? I-I can't believe it!"

Indeed, it was impossible to think of Henry, an archbishop, doing such a thing. But the more I thought about it, the more I could only conclude that Archbishop Henry had rewritten the will.

"I understand your shock," Prince Osvalt said to Erza. "I felt the same when I first heard this theory from Lady Philia."

His Highness had reacted the same way as Erza—understandable, given Archbishop Henry forging the pope's will was both illogical and nonsensical.

"I assumed His Eminence entrusted his will to Henry because he was going to be the next pope," said Mammon. "That way, no

one could alter the will. Throughout history, many popes left their wills with their successors."

"Yes, it's reasonable to think that."

"But even though I was surprised to hear that you'd be the next pope," Erza added, "I never once thought Archbishop Henry altered the will. You understand why, don't you?"

Like Mammon, Erza apparently also thought that Archbishop Henry receiving His Eminence's will meant that he was next in line to be pope. That, in turn, was the very reason why it was unthinkable that he'd rewrite His Eminence's will.

"Is it hard to imagine that he'd reject his appointment as pope? That he'd go so far as to change the name in the will to mine?"

"What would he gain from doing that?"

Becoming the pope meant being the head of the Cremoux faith and the most powerful person on the continent. No wonder Erza thought Archbishop Henry had no reason to reject his appointment.

"What would he stand to gain? I'm still not entirely sure about his motives," I said, "but there must have been a reason he was compelled to resort to this. I'm certain of it."

"A reason? You really think there's a reason Archbishop Henry would make you the next pope instead of himself?"

"Yes, I think so. I'd like to hear it directly from him, but it won't be that easy, will it?"

The greatest challenge to proving my theory was establishing Archbishop Henry's motives. If I was correct, the archbishop had done something seemingly ludicrous. If I were to assert my claims, people would wonder why he'd do such a thing. Unless Archbishop Henry's motives were made clear, no one would accept my theory.

"Well, whatever. My job is to take you to Dalbert. If you believe that Archbishop Henry forged the will, go right ahead. I won't complain."

"Thank you very much, Erza. You're very kind."

“Don’t think I’m getting soft or anything. Mammon, get ready.”

At least Erza had no objections to us investigating whether Archbishop Henry altered the late pope’s will. I was grateful for her kindness.

“Okay, okay. Why, Big Sis, you look flustered. That’s not like you.”

“What did you just say?” Erza demanded.

“Whoa, hands off! I’m anti-violence! Allow me to escort my two guests. Our destination? Dalbert!”

Mammon teased Erza, but whenever she got angry, he immediately put his hands up in a pose of surrender. Perhaps this banter was their way of easing the tension in the air. He concentrated his magic, and a teleportation gate adorned with sinister ornaments appeared. His skills were truly impressive.

As the gate opened, Prince Osvalt held out a hand toward me. “Now, Lady Philia, shall we go?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

I took His Highness’s hand as we stepped in.

Was Dalbert already ahead of us? It was the greatest kingdom on the continent in terms of both land and sheer power. Because it was also home to the head church of Cremoux, many worshippers made pilgrimages there. I began to feel nervous as it sank in that we were on our way to that kingdom. Going there to expose the truth sounded like a righteous cause, but it would mean defying the head church, which would be no easy feat.

Still, Prince Osvalt was with me. Erza and Mammon were on my side, too.

A blinding light consumed our vision. The next thing we knew, scenery that we’d never seen before spread out before us.

We’d reached our destination: the kingdom of Dalbert.

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Located on the western edge of the vast continent of Sedelgard, Dalbert was the largest kingdom on the continent, with a population more than twice that of Parnacorta.

Dalbert was the birthplace of the archsaint Fianna. Given its long history, the kingdom figured into many myths and legends.

According to one myth, the Demon Realm, Heaven, and Earth were once connected. Our world—Earth, the surface world—was the site of proxy wars between Heaven and the Demon Realm.

Legend had it that one of the gods, warning that not a single realm would remain standing if the fierce and prolonged fighting went on, divided the three realms. The only deity to remain on Earth was Hades, the god who presided over life and death. Hades was said to remain in a long, deep sleep here in the Holy Land of Dalbert.

As a result of this split, our world was freed from the influence of the Demon Realm, except during eruptions of demonic activity—the so-called demonic cycles. However, that also meant that humans were cut off from the gods, as they were in Heaven, and the only god on Earth, Hades, was asleep.

And so the Cremoux religion—which taught that people could tap into divine power and protection through prayer—was born.

These divine powers included healing magic to treat wounds and injuries, purification magic to keep demons at bay, and more. The priests of Cremoux learned these abilities through training and used them for the benefit of their followers. Then, with the emergence of Fianna, who could harness divine power in a purer form than ever seen before, a new role was born within the Cremoux faith—that of the saint.

In other words, for believers of the Cremoux faith, it was no exaggeration to say that Dalbert was the place where everything began.

Ever since I'd begun my training, long before I became a saint, I'd always wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land

someday. Now that dream had come true—but under the circumstances, I couldn't get too excited about it. Besides, back in Girtonia, I'd promised to come here with Mia. I felt a bit guilty about visiting the Holy Land ahead of her.

"It's been a while since I last saw it, but Dalbert's capital is thriving as ever." Prince Osvalt, who had been here before for ceremonies and other occasions, remarked as we looked around at the bustling streets. Certainly, it was livelier by far than Parnacorta or my homeland of Girtonia.

"It's lunchtime," I said, "but I imagine the restaurants must be crowded."

"Around here, there are lots of restaurants serving Dalbert cuisine to tourists," said Erza. "Look, there's a dragon butchering demonstration. Did you know that dragon meat is often used in Dalbertian dishes?"

Looking in the direction Erza was pointing, I saw a large man with a butcher knife skillfully slicing up a dragon on a stand. It was clearly a performance to entertain passersby, and His Highness and I couldn't help but look on.

"I've heard about the use of dragon meat in this kingdom's food. There are lots of places serving Dalbertian cuisine in Parnacorta," Prince Osvalt said. "Preparing the ingredients seems like a lot of work, though. Not to mention, I hear dragon meat is noted for its very strong smell. Chefs have to use dozens of different spices to make it edible."

"I heard the same from Leonardo. He said he'd take up the challenge."

Dragon meat had a stronger smell than other game meats like bear or wild boar. If cooked like ordinary meat, its distinctive, blood-like reek would make it inedible and ruin the meal. One book I read compared the taste of poorly prepared dragon meat to having an unwashed leather shoe stuck in your mouth for days.

It took considerable skill and experience to make dragon meat tasty enough to eat. What's more, since it had to be precisely seasoned, the chef had to have a keen sense of smell. And yet, Leonardo wanted to challenge himself by cooking dragon. I really

could learn a thing or two from his dedication to his hobby and his eagerness to rise to challenges.

“Do you think someday he’ll want to open his own restaurant?” His Highness asked.

“If he ever does, I’ll be sad to see him go, but I’m sure business would boom.”

His Highness laughed. “That’s for sure. It’d be the kind of place people want to visit every day.”

Leonardo always said that ultimately, he was a butler, so he had no intentions of becoming a professional chef. But if he ever wanted to start a restaurant of his own, I’d support him wholeheartedly.

His Highness and I continued chatting as we watched the dragon butchering show. However, we couldn’t waste too much time.

“Are you two good to go?” said Erza. “If you’ll be here for the long haul, you can watch a show like that anytime. Before anything else, I’d better take you to the head church of Cremoux.”

Erza immediately offered to take us to the head church. We were finally going to visit the headquarters of our faith, which made me nervous. As a saint, I had some familiarity with ecclesiastical matters, but there were areas I knew nothing about, such as exorcists like Erza. There were still many mysteries surrounding the head church that I had yet to uncover.

First of all, however, I must take care not to come off as rude. I clenched my fists and took a deep breath.

“I just thought of something,” said His Highness. “We’re going to the head church on foot. Any reason we’re not using Sir Mammon’s teleportation gate to get there directly?”

His simple question took me aback. Come to think of it, he had a point. Since this was my first time in Dalbert, I’d been captivated by the unfamiliar scenery—but Prince Osvalt’s question brought me back to my senses.

Mammon’s teleportation spell was a highly useful type of magic, since he could use it to go anywhere in the world. It was

thanks to teleportation magic that exorcists could keep their existence secret. With teleportation gates, they could operate covertly anywhere and deal discreetly with demon manifestations, thus maintaining their secrecy.

"Could it be that the head church is set up to prevent demons like Mammon from teleporting there? So the exorcists' home base can never be infiltrated by demons?"

"I'm not surprised you figured it out, Archsaint. You're used to casting barriers to keep monsters out of the kingdom, so it must seem obvious to you."

Erza belonged to a secret organization of exorcists within the head church of Cremoux. It was only natural for them to ensure that demons couldn't invade their base of operations so easily. As a preventative measure against a surprise attack, they must have had some way to block the use of teleportation magic.

"Remember when Lord Asmodeus trapped you in Limbo?" said Mammon. "It's the same principle at play. The archbishops who protect the head church use their magic to prevent me from linking a teleportation gate to the cathedral."

I recalled the way Mammon had explained it to me while we were stuck in Limbo. Back then, Asmodeus's magic had trapped us in his realm when we tried to escape. Apparently, the head church used the same method to prevent unwanted entities from breaking in.

"The head church of Cremoux is this way," Erza instructed. "Follow me."

"They say Dalbert Cathedral is the largest work of art on the entire continent, but I haven't seen it for myself yet," Prince Osvalt said.

"I, too, have heard that its incredible beauty will stun anyone who lays eyes on it. I look forward to seeing it."

We followed Erza's voice down the street. After walking for a few minutes, we arrived at Dalbert Cathedral—the world's most massive piece of art.

"This is so very..."

“Amazing! I heard it was huge, but I never thought I’d be this overwhelmed to see it in person!”

Prince Osvalt and I exclaimed in astonishment as we beheld the grandeur and elegance of Dalbert Cathedral. It was no exaggeration to say that the meticulously designed exterior, with its ancient architectural style, was beauty incarnate.

And its size! It was even larger than the palaces of Girtonia and Parnacorta. Whoever built and designed it hadn’t compromised on embellishments, which seemed infinite in their complexity. I could only stand frozen in awe, mesmerized by its splendor. It was too much to take in at once.

“It’s not just the outside that’s snazzy,” said Mammon. “Wait until you see the interior. Thanks to this cathedral, I’ve never had any problems finding a date spot in the last few hundred years.”

“I see what you mean,” I said. “Surely no other place is this romantic, and one would never get tired of seeing it…”

“It’s so cute how you respond just as seriously to jokes, Little Miss Philia. Prince Osvalt sure is a lucky guy. Anyway, now that I’ve managed to get you here safely, I’ve got a date lined up, so I gotta run.”

After recommending that we also check out the cathedral’s interior instead of just admiring its exterior, Mammon left with a wave. As Erza didn’t comment, I couldn’t help but wonder whether Mammon had work to do or if he’d really left for, as he said, a personal matter.

In any case, the three of us continued into the cathedral.

“I’m taking you to Archbishop Aurustra,” Erza explained. “He’s the one who ordered me to take you here, Archsaint.”

“Archbishop Aurustra?” said Prince Osvalt. “I was so sure it would be Archbishop Henry behind the order.”

Archbishop Aurustra was one of the three incumbent archbishops and the oldest among them. Like His Highness, I had assumed that Erza and her colleagues were operating under the orders of Archbishop Henry. This was unexpected.

“Of course, Archbishop Henry also wanted you to come here, but he’s not my direct superior,” Erza explained.

“Your direct superior?” The situation was suddenly clear.

“...I see. So you mean Archbishop Aurustra is the one who oversees exorcists like yourself, Lady Erza?”

When Erza said that she didn’t directly report to Archbishop Henry, it became clear to me who was in charge of the exorcists.

Erza slowly nodded. “Exactly. Publicly, he’s known to the followers of Cremoux only as an archbishop, but behind the scenes, he plays another role. He commands exorcists like myself, Klaus, and Alice.”

I hadn’t imagined that an archbishop was in charge of the exorcists. Like Alice, who was a saint and exorcist at the same time, it seemed that many members of the head church took on dual roles.

“What kind of person is Archbishop Aurustra?” I asked. “I heard he trained intensely for decades, but not much is known about his time as a priest and bishop.”

Like Archbishop Henry, Archbishop Aurustra was a figure shrouded in mystery. His background and career history before becoming archbishop were completely unknown. The only information on record was that he’d undergone long, rigorous training to earn the pope’s approval.

“Yes, Archbishop Aurustra was an active exorcist for quite a while. He became archbishop thanks to his achievements, but the details were kept secret. Even now, at around sixty years old, he’s still at the top of his game, no question.”

“I see.” I nodded thoughtfully. “So, he was an exorcist, he was promoted, and now he’s in charge of you and other exorcists.” Erza worked for the head church and knew firsthand what things were really like there, and she seemed to think he was a good choice to lead the exorcists.

“Lady Erza, did Archbishop Aurustra object to Lady Philia becoming the next pope?” Hearing what Archbishop Aurustra was

like, Prince Osvalt asked whether he reacted negatively to me becoming pope.

It made me wonder whether that was a common sentiment within the head church. Archbishop Henry aside, were there other church members who were against me becoming pope, but were unable to voice their opposition?

“He had no interest in becoming pope himself, if that’s what you’re asking. He thought Archbishop Henry was going to be the next pope, so he must’ve been as surprised as everyone else when you were chosen,” Erza answered. Apparently, Archbishop Aurustra didn’t want the position of pope.

We continued to walk while we admired the mystical, opulent decor. At last Erza stopped before a door. “Well, here we are. Wait here. Archbishop Aurustra will see you soon.”

I fervently hoped that we could get Archbishop Aurustra on our side.

Following Erza’s lead, we entered the room.

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After Erza showed us in, we sat on a couch and waited for Archbishop Aurustra to arrive. Archbishops were the second-highest ranking church officials after the pope and resided here at the head church. Mia and I had never met one, and neither had my master, Hildegard.

We waited for a few minutes. Then, the door quietly opened and an old man with long white hair tied back behind his head entered. Though he was of advanced age, he stood straight, he had a sharp spark in his eyes, and his appearance was impeccable. It was obvious that this was no ordinary man.

Perhaps… No, there was no mistaking it; this man was Archbishop Aurustra.

“Archbishop Aurustra, as per your orders, I have brought the archsaint here. Also with her is her fiancé, the second-eldest prince of Parnacorta.”

We stood up as Erza introduced us. Perhaps it was presumptuous of me, but I thought I should introduce myself first, instead of His Highness. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Archbishop Aurustra. I’m Philia Adenauer, the saint of Parnacorta. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“I’m Osvalt Parnacorta, the second-eldest prince of Parnacorta. As I’m engaged to Lady Philia, I’ve joined her here today to introduce myself.”

After Prince Osvalt and I introduced ourselves, Archbishop Aurustra slowly approached us. I could sense that he had greater magic power than myself or Erza. He had a long career as an exorcist, and his power hadn’t decreased with age. These must be the fruits of his training as an archbishop.

Archbishop Aurustra spoke gently as he offered me his hand to shake. “Welcome, and thank you for coming all the way here. Archsaint Philia, I’ve heard plenty about you from Erza, Klaus, and others. I wanted to meet you at least once, but I never thought it would be under such circumstances. Thank you as well, Prince Osvalt, for coming.”

So, he’d heard about me from subordinates like Erza and Klaus? When I shook the archbishop’s outstretched hand, it felt firmer and stronger than I’d imagined.

“With introductions out of the way,” said Erza, “Archbishop, could you please ask His Majesty to make sure that this couple can live together in tranquility?”

Erza, I don’t think it’s polite to make such a sudden request…

I couldn’t imagine the king of Dalbert listening to the selfish demands of someone who had just arrived from another kingdom.

…Wait, what? Did Erza just say that Prince Osvalt and I would live together? Perhaps it was the suddenness of it all, when we hadn’t even gotten the relevant authorities’ approval yet. Or perhaps it was that I still needed to prepare myself mentally.

Either way, I was nervous. In any case, Erza didn't need to go out of her way to advocate for us, as we had no intention to ask for special treatment.

"That shouldn't be a problem. The church has already arranged a mansion for Lady Philia. She also has His Majesty's approval to use it however she likes, so I'm sure there will be no issues regarding with whom she chooses to live."

I hadn't expected the church to go out of its way to prepare such elaborate accommodations for me. Still, I was already missing the things I enjoyed back home, such as Lena's tea, Leonardo's cooking, and chatting with Himari. Before I knew it, being with everyone had become a natural part of my daily life.

"Belated as this may be, congratulations on your engagement, Lady Philia and Prince Osvalt. And Prince Osvalt, please rest assured that I will advise His Majesty to arrange for a position befitting a Parnacortan royal like yourself."

The protocol for treating a foreign royal must already be quite difficult, but it didn't help that His Highness wasn't here for ordinary diplomatic reasons, such as a political marriage or seeking asylum. I couldn't predict what kind of role Dalbert would arrange for His Highness, or just how fitting it would be. Regardless, there seemed to be no doubt that we would be treated cordially.

"Hold on, please. Archbishop Aurustra, I don't want to cause you trouble."

"Are you trying to be modest, Prince Osvalt? It would be unthinkable for the head church to treat the future husband of Lady Philia, the next pope, with anything less than the utmost warmth. Please leave everything to us."

Archbishop Aurustra seemed to take His Highness's words as a sign of restraint, but that wasn't what His Highness meant. Of course, we had other reasons to decline a permanent position in this kingdom.

"I intend to return to Parnacorta with Lady Philia," His Highness clarified. "This visit is meant to convey our intentions."

“What was that just now? Are you trying to say that Lady Philia does not accept her appointment as the new pope?”

Archbishop Aurustra looked stunned. He must not have dreamed that we’d come here to overturn the church’s plans. His reaction only drove home how our decision would be seen as nonsensical.

“It’s understandable for you to be shocked, Archbishop. However, I wish not to be pope, but to serve as a saint—specifically, as the saint of Parnacorta—for the rest of my life.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I made my intentions clear to the archbishop. Never had I imagined I’d be able to say something so outrageously self-serving to a superior’s face. There were times when I was bewildered by this change in me, but I had come to accept the new version of myself. Thanks to all the people who assured me that they loved me as I was, I’d learned to love my true self too.

Besides, backing down was not an option.

“The late pope’s will is absolute. It must be painful to leave a place with which you’ve grown familiar, but it’s impossible for His Eminence’s mandate to be overturned.”

Such an answer was only natural for an archbishop. After all, he was sworn to carry out the will of the pope, the highest authority in the church of Cremoux. There was no way that an archbishop, the second in command after the pope, would accept our claims so easily.

“Archbishop Aurustra, this is just a possibility, but…what if someone had rewritten His Eminence’s will?”

“What are you saying? The will was rewritten? Lady Philia, you have some rather fascinating notions. But who would do such a thing, and why? Archbishop Henry kept that will secure. No one could lay a finger on it.”

I expected Archbishop Aurustra to find my claim irrational. I didn’t expect to be able to convince everyone, and I understood that my theory might be dismissed as nonsense.

“As I told Erza, I suspect that Archbishop Henry rewrote the will. Allow me to explain.” I proceeded to tell him what I had told Erza.

Archbishop Aurustra chimed in with the occasional “hmm,” or “I see,” but he listened to the end without interrupting. When I was done, he let out a quick sigh.

“Huh. When you put it that way, it makes some sense, but there are still holes in your story. To begin with, Archbishop Henry has no reason to refuse the papacy.”

Like Erza, Archbishop Aurustra said that Archbishop Henry had no reason to reject his appointment as pope. Certainly, Archbishop Henry’s motives were the key to the mystery. If I couldn’t establish a believable motive for him to forge the will, I wouldn’t be able to convince anyone.

But I hadn’t spent the last six days doing nothing.

“As to Archbishop Henry’s motive, I have an idea.”

During my grace period, I put considerable time and effort into pondering Archbishop Henry’s motives. I asked Himari to gather information for me and came up with suggestions based on her findings. Among them, one possibility seemed plausible.

“Hold on there! Archsaint, you know the reason? Then tell me!”

“I can, but it’s still only a hypothesis. I was hoping to meet Archbishop Henry in person and get confirmation from him.”

Either way, my explanation was still vague. I’d be able to present a clearer argument after I met Archbishop Henry in person and got a better idea of the kind of person he was. That was why I decided to stop my story for the time being.

“Archbishop Henry should be at the Holy Land preparing for His Eminence’s funeral,” said the archbishop. “If I can get in touch with him, I’m sure I can set something up for you after the funeral. I don’t think he’d refuse your request to see him.”

“Then you can arrange for us to meet?”

“I still can’t believe that Archbishop Henry would do such a thing, but if you’re convinced of it, I’ll make the necessary

arrangements.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Not at all. I’m the one who’s indebted to you.”

Thank goodness. With Archbishop Aurustra’s help, it looked like I’d be able to meet Archbishop Henry.

Sensing that we’d made some progress, Prince Osvalt looked my way. I returned his gaze, and we both nodded.

“Erza, please take Lady Philia and Lord Osvalt to their new mansion.”

“Yes, sir. It’s not too far from here, so we can walk. I’ll arrange for a carriage tomorrow.”

Following Erza’s lead, we headed to the mansion that the church had prepared for us. Indeed, it was quite close to Dalbert Cathedral, so we didn’t need a carriage at all.

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“Oh, Lady Philia! Lady Philia! Welcome back!”

“L-Lena?” I cried. “What are you doing here?”

“Is that you, Lena? Now this is a surprise. What’s going on?”

Lena stood at the entrance to the mansion, ready to welcome us. Prince Osvalt and I couldn’t hide our surprise at the sight of her rushing over.

Two other familiar voices also made themselves heard.

“Lady Philia, Your Highness, you must be tired. I’ve prepared dinner for two.”

“Lady Philia, I detect no suspicious figures in the area. Rest assured that I shall remain vigilant.”

Leonardo and Himari were also there. What on earth was going on?

“I had Mammon get approval for you to hire servants for your mansion, then sent him to pick up these three,” Lena

explained. “I thought it’d be easier for you to adjust to life here if your home environment was as similar as possible to what you were used to in Parnacorta.”

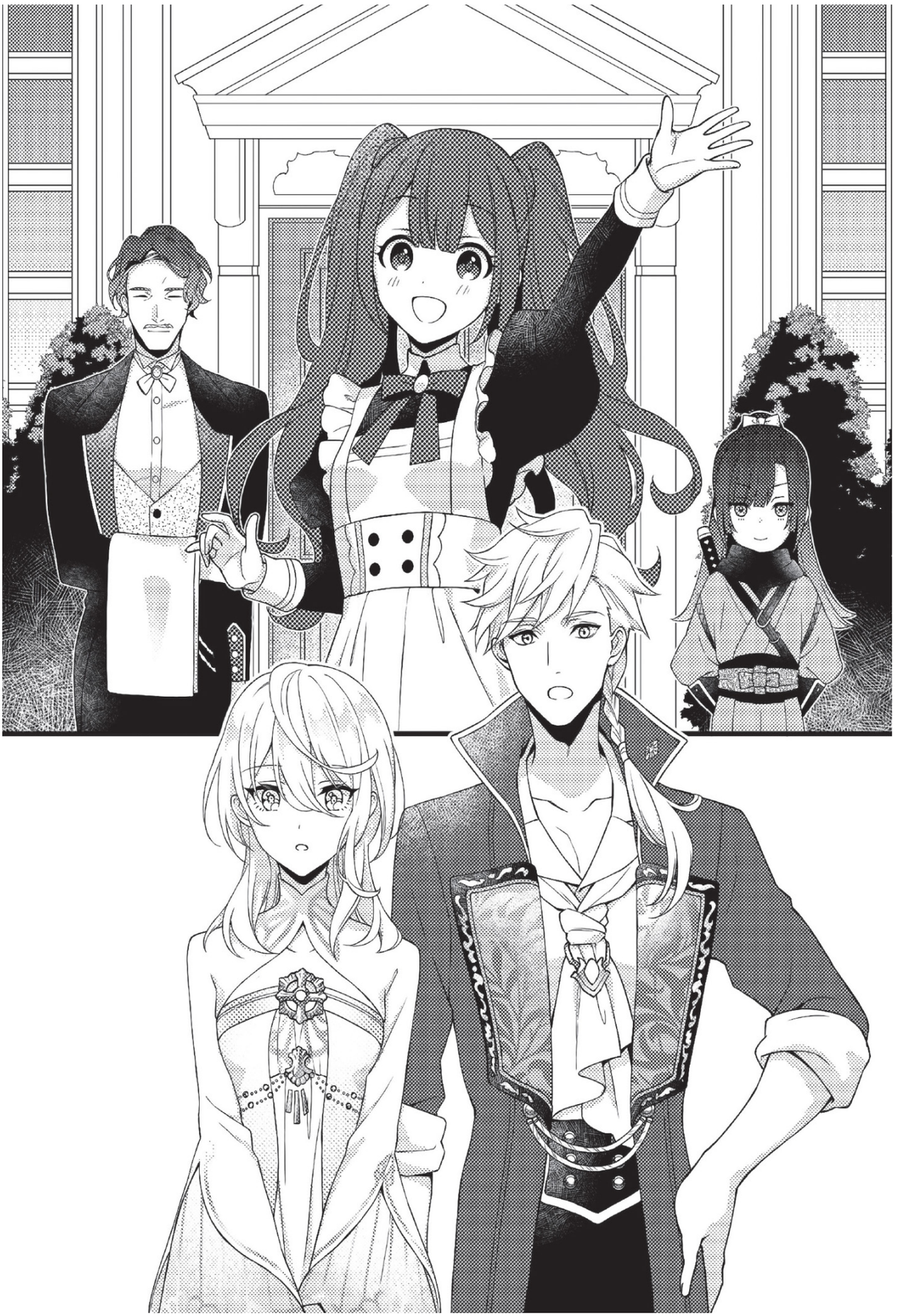
Why did just hearing those familiar voices put my heart at ease? How strange. It wasn’t as if I was really back in Parnacorta. But perhaps these precious friends coming out to greet me had brought the feeling of home with them.

“At the very least, I wanted to help you feel at home.”

“Thank you, Erza.”

“Let me thank you as well,” His Highness added. “Lady Erza, Lady Philia is right. You’re really a kind girl.”

“Who, me? Not at all. I don’t like walking around with a heavy conscience, that’s all.”



Erza’s face went red and she looked away. She had no idea how much her kindness had helped me; I simply couldn’t thank her enough.

“Whoa! I get back here after a long day of work, and what do you know; I see Big Sis making such a cute face… Whoops! Big Sis, stop! Stop! You can’t cut my head off here!”

Mammon called out to Erza, but as soon as he saw the annoyed look on her face, he raised his hands in the gesture of surrender.

Who would’ve thought that I’d feel so relaxed in a foreign land?

And so, our new life in Dalbert began.

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Early in the morning of my second day in Dalbert, I went about my daily mental concentration exercises in the garden of my new mansion.

When I first saw my mansion in Parnacorta, I was amazed by its size, but this mansion was just as expansive. I wouldn’t have felt at ease living alone in such a large home. But thanks to Erza’s thoughtfulness, Lena, Leonardo, and Himari were here. This also meant that I could carry out my usual routine.

“Good morning, Lady Philia. You’re up early, as always. Are you doing your mental concentration exercises?”

“Good morning, Your Highness. Yes, I am. I can’t feel at ease if I don’t do it every day. It’s just as much a part of my morning routine as washing my face.”

Wearing a Robe of Light, I offered my prayers to the heavens to increase the magic within me. This was my morning exercise. By acclimating myself to the process, I could quickly absorb the magic from surrounding nature during critical moments.

“If I’d brought my spear, we could’ve trained together, but I figured that I shouldn’t carry a dangerous weapon around the

city.”

“And this is a matter that can be resolved by talking it out, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Whenever possible, it’s always better to resolve things peacefully,” said Prince Osvalt.

This time, we were up against not monsters or demons, but a human being. By discussing our problems and deepening our mutual understanding, surely we could come to understand one another. It wasn’t as if we were dealing with someone who couldn’t understand human speech.

“By the way,” I added, “Erza said that she’d take us sightseeing around the capital today.”

“Yeah, I’m excited for it. All we got to see yesterday was that dragon butchering show.”

“That was quite the show, though.”

“It sure was.” His Highness grinned. “When I told Leonardo about it, he got all jealous. He said he wanted to try cutting up dragon meat himself.”

We chatted away as we took in the refreshing early-morning breeze. Of course, we didn’t exactly come here to have fun or to go sightseeing, but we still had some time until His Eminence’s funeral. That was why Prince Osvalt had suggested that we take the opportunity to tour the capital. Erza had agreed that that would be better for our mental health than sitting around staring into space, so she’d offered to show us around the capital.

As I finished my mental exercises and breakfast, a visitor arrived. “Miss Philia? Your Highness? It’s been a while.”

It was Klaus, Erza’s junior, who had served as a bodyguard for Grace and her sisters at the height of the mysterious vanishing incidents.

“Sorry, Miss Erza has some work to do. Would you mind if I showed you around the capital in her place?”

What? Erza couldn’t join us? By work, did he mean something related to demons? That was an exorcist’s job, after all.

Erza was a professional in her field, so an amateur like myself probably shouldn't get involved. However, I couldn't help but worry that another tremendously powerful demon like Asmodeus was up to something. Perhaps I should be concerned, after all…

"Did something serious happen?" Prince Osvalt asked.

"Ah, no, it's just that Archbishop Aurustra found out that Miss Erza had been slacking off on organizing her files. She'll probably be pulling an all-nighter tonight."

We didn't know what to say. Could it be that Erza had fallen behind on her work because she was busy looking after us? Prince Osvalt, who had an uneasy look on his face, was probably thinking the same thing.

"Miss Erza always puts off her paperwork. I've lost count of how many times I've had to help her. Ah, don't worry. It's not your fault that she can't focus on her work. Miss Erza's not that kind of person."

"Are you sure? Erza has gone out of her way for us."

"That's not like her. It's the first time I've heard of her being kind to others."

I was relieved to know that Erza wasn't busy fighting demons. At the same time, hearing Klaus say it was strange to hear of Erza showing kindness made me realize there was a lot I didn't know about her.

"Please leave today's tour of the capital to me," Klaus continued. "I'll take you to some popular attractions."

"Okay, we're counting on you," Prince Osvalt said.

"Yes, thank you again for this," I added.

Pounding his chest, Klaus led us to a carriage, and we kicked off our tour of the capital.

"First up is a must-see: Fianna Aesfill Memorial Park. There's a large fountain here. It's said that if a couple turns around and tosses coins into it, they'll live happily ever after."

"A local superstition, huh? Lady Philia, shall we try it?"

“Sure, that sounds fun. I’d love to see the park dedicated to Lady Fianna.”

Klaus explained that this superstition had been passed down in Dalbert for hundreds of years. No wonder the memorial park attracted so many lovers throughout the ages. That was right… Lady Fianna was the patron saint of love in this kingdom, wasn’t she? I still had so much to learn.

“Just be careful not to throw in too many coins. Rumor has it that couples who toss coins in more than three times will be cursed. They say the more times a couple tosses coins, the more cursed they’ll be.”

“A curse? That sounds scary.”

“The most popular explanation for the curse is a story that was tacked on later. Supposedly, there was a scoundrel who came to this fountain to toss coins with a different woman each time, which infuriated Lady Fianna. Not that this would be relevant to you two, though.”

Apparently, Lady Fianna didn’t tolerate infidelity. But for a man to have visited the fountain so many times that word of him tossing coins with different women continued to circulate for hundreds of years, he must have been quite the rogue.

“Just between you and me, I think that that scoundrel was Mammon,” Klaus said.

His Highness nodded. “That would explain it.”

“Mammon has lived a long life, hasn’t he?” I said.

Four hundred years ago, when Lady Fianna fought demons as a saint, Mammon was already around, aiding Erza’s exorcist ancestors. More than anything, the fact that Mammon recognized my soul as that of Archsaint Fianna was proof that he’d been around for a very long time.

Still, it was remarkable to think that he was so old as to have stories made up about him being the cause of a curse—stories that had been passed down in Dalbert for generations.

“We’re here. Welcome to Fianna Aesfill Memorial Park.”

Alighting from the carriage with Klaus, we stepped into the park where Lady Fianna was enshrined. As he had said, there was a large fountain in the center of the park. Many people were relaxing near it.

“Whoa! What a magnificent sight!” His Highness said. “Not even the royal gardens in Parnacorta are this well maintained.”

“Yes, it’s so beautiful… Your Highness, look over there. Is that a bronze statue of Lady Fianna in front of her memorial hall?”

For me, the highlight of this place was the memorial hall, a mansion where Lady Fianna lived in her later years. It was preserved as it had been in her time and open to the public as a museum. It was so beautiful that it could be easily mistaken for a palace, and when I saw it a warm sensation welled up in my heart. Perhaps Lady Fianna, whose soul lived in me, was feeling nostalgic as memories of her past stirred awake.

We walked up to the bronze statue of Fianna. Prince Osvalt read the inscription. “‘The First Archsaint, Fianna Aesfill.’ Was ‘first’ added after Lady Philia was named archsaint?”

Klaus moved in front of the statue to answer His Highness’s question. “Yes. Until then, it just said ‘The Archsaint.’ Many thought the title would never be bestowed on anyone else again.”

I was only the second person to receive the title of archsaint, after Lady Fianna. Naturally, I had been awestruck by the honor. I didn’t feel worthy of the title, and now I was supposed to be the next pope as well. I’d never thought that being granted titles could make me feel under so much pressure.

“That reminds me,” said Klaus. “Archbishop Henry was present when the late pope announced that Miss Philia would be given the title of archsaint. As soon as he heard that, a very dark look crossed his face.”

“Is that so? Are you saying Archbishop Henry didn’t want Lady Philia to be named archsaint?”

“He didn’t look happy at all. But here’s the thing: Archbishop Henry praised Miss Philia’s achievements. So did my superior, Archbishop Aurustra, and the infamously vocal Archbishop Lucia. That’s why I couldn’t understand why he looked upset.”

As I suspected, Archbishop Henry had some opinions about me after all. The fastest way to resolve this matter was to figure out what was going on in Archbishop Henry's mind, so Klaus's story was quite helpful.

"When Miss Erza told me you suspect Archbishop Henry of having rewritten His Eminence's will," Klaus added, "I remembered the look on his face back then."

"Lady Philia, do you have any idea what Archbishop Henry might have against you?" Prince Osvalt asked.

"Yes. It must be because I'm the saint of Parnacorta..."

When I got to that point, I paused without thinking. If I wasn't mistaken, Archbishop Henry was carrying a deep sense of grief. I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to talk about it here.

Before I knew it, Prince Osvalt had wrapped his arms around my shoulders. When I looked at him, he shook his head silently.

"Your Highness?"

"The saint of Parnacorta? Come to think of it, I've heard that Archbishop Henry's younger sister was also a saint of Parnacorta," Klaus said.

"You mean Lady Elizabeth. She was my brother's former fiancée, as well as a saint. She was also Lady Grace's cousin."

"I see. I had no idea. Archbishop Henry doesn't talk much about himself."

The moment Prince Osvalt mentioned that Elizabeth had been Prince Reichardt's fiancée, Klaus looked uncomfortable. Prince Reichardt loved Elizabeth and continued to do so to this day.

"Nobody likes talking about sad things," Prince Osvalt said.

"You're right, that was thoughtless of me... Oh, right! Would you two like to give it a try?" Klaus asked.

"What?"

"The fountain! How about tossing a coin into it? I brought one for you to try. Here, toss this copper coin."

In an attempt to lighten the awkward mood, Klaus took a coin out of his pouch and handed it to us. Since Prince Osvalt and I had come all the way here, we might as well try this local superstition for the sake of our future together.

“Your Highness, would you please join me in tossing this coin?”

“Of course. I, too, want to bring good luck to our future.”

Holding hands, His Highness and I made our way to the fountain. Somehow, there was something special about doing things together, even something as small as this.

Relishing this special moment, we wished for a peaceful future with each other as I threw the sparkling coin into the fountain.

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Exactly a week after Klaus showed us around the capital, the late pope’s funeral was held at Loukmabatos, the Holy Land of the Cremoux faith.

The Holy Grail, which held the divine blood, was enshrined at the funeral hall, and attendees from neighboring kingdoms gathered there to pay their respects. Prince Osvalt, Erza, and I entered the hall together.

“I always wanted to visit the Holy Land, but I never thought I’d end up here under these circumstances.”

“Yeah,” His Highness said. “It’s just like Bishop Bjorn said. As soon as we got here, the atmosphere suddenly changed. I don’t know how to put it, but it’s like there’s a prickling sensation in the air that’s been following me around.”

Amidst the vast wilderness of the southern part of the Dalbertian capital was a place where vegetation grew abundantly, like a lone oasis in the desert. This place, where one could feel the powerful breath of life, was called the Holy Land. Here was a small shrine that served as the final resting place for successive

generations of popes. Everyone who visited this land was said to sense the same mystical presence that Prince Osvalt did.

“The concentration of mana here is unbelievably dense,” I said. “Even more so than in Limbo.”

The sensation in the air that Prince Osvalt felt was most likely mana.

The ability to sense the subtle magic flowing through nature was the foundation of ancient magic. It was difficult to acquire that ability without training, but there was at least ten times more mana than usual in this area. With this much mana around, it wasn’t surprising that even those who hadn’t gone through special training could feel something different in the air.

“I don’t know much about mana, but a god sleeps here in the Holy Land of Loukmabatos. It’s not surprising this place is rich in mystical energy,” Erza said.

“The legend of the god who sleeps in Loukmabatos, right? It’s on the first page of the scriptures, so of course I know it.”

“So do I.” Prince Osvalt added. “Well, I think everyone on this continent does.”

The legend of the god who slept in Loukmabatos was in the introduction of our holy bible and was taught to our children in picture books. Many gods lived in Heaven, so we offered our prayers above. But because there were also gods who slept below the earth, it was customary for us to direct prayers to the underworld as well.

“Oh, what I’m talking about isn’t a legend, it’s a fact,” Erza clarified.

“People call it a legend, but I believe that it’s true,” I agreed.

“Well, maybe that’s because you’re a saint, but do you know what this sleeping god is like, and what his current state is? What do you believe about him?”

“What do you mean?”

Certainly, some people didn’t take the mythological tales in our scriptures as fact, but I believed in them and offered my

prayers accordingly. Was that what Erza meant when she asked what I believed in?

"A long, long time ago," Erza explained, "Heaven, Earth, and the Demon Realm were all connected. Heaven and the Demon Realm used our world as their battleground."

"Indeed. It's written in our scriptures," I said. "The gods withdrew from our world, leaving only one god behind. It says so on the first page of Cremoux's holy bible."

"Yes, that's right. But what I'm about to tell you is the history of exorcists. It's not a legend, it's a fact. Our order is older than the Cremoux faith, you know."

Erza was going to recount a very, very old tale—the tale of how exorcists came to be.

Since exorcism techniques were very similar to ancient magic, I presumed that there was a long history behind them. Still, I never imagined that their roots went so far back.

"The war between Heaven and the Demon Realm lasted for over a hundred years. Warning that our world would be completely destroyed if the war kept up, one god separated Heaven, Earth, and the Demon Realm, making them independent from one another. As a result, the war came to an end. However, the other gods purposely abandoned the god they regarded as the most troublesome of their number. Even among the other gods, that god was scorned as a heretic."

"A god who was considered troublesome and left behind? Is that the god who's said to sleep in the Holy Land?"

"Yes. He's also mentioned in the scriptures. It's Hades, the god who presides over life and death—the embodiment of chaos and a deity to be feared."

So that was how Hades ended up sleeping in the Holy Land.

I knew the legend of the sleeping god, but I was surprised Erza seemed to be familiar with details I'd never heard, like how he ended up in the Holy Land. As a saint, I dealt with the holy texts every day, but I hadn't known that even the gods had one among their number whom they treated differently.

“Legend has it that Hades is a fearsome deity who can resurrect the dead and reap the souls of the living at will,” I said. “I’ve also heard that he’s enshrined and sealed away here in the Holy Land precisely because of the dangerous power he possesses.”

“Yes, exactly. To this day, Hades is tightly sealed away underground.”

Hades possessed powers that subverted the very concepts of life and death. If such a god were to awaken, this land would be thrown into chaos. The head church of Cremoux oversaw the Holy Land to ensure that he remained sealed away. In the meantime, we went on practicing our faith, loving and sometimes fearing the gods.

“The seal on Hades is strictly guarded, isn’t it? Surely only a select few within the head church know the magic to break it. Of course, I wouldn’t know.”

“If you become pope, you might be able to learn it. Then again, even if you do, awakening magic is one of the so-called divine spells. Very few people can cast them, so there isn’t much point in learning them.”

As the name implied, awakening magic was used to awaken gods. Apparently, this was one of the divine spells—magic used by the gods themselves. It was said that only a few people had been able to wield this type of magic throughout the course of history, including the first saint—and archsaint—Lady Fianna, as well as the first director of the Magic Research Institute at the kingdom of Gyptia. I couldn’t wield divine magic myself, and had never even thought of doing so.

“A divine spell…” I murmured. “First of all, it’s extremely difficult to generate divine magic internally.”

“Is divine magic that different from normal magic?” Prince Osvalt asked.

“Divine magic is exactly what it sounds like. It’s the magic of the gods. For humans to use it, they must amplify the magic within themselves to a divine level. Then they must compress that magic and increase its density to be able to freely wield it.”

His Highness had more questions. “Hmm. Is it really that difficult?”

“Sublimating the mind and body consumes an enormous amount of one’s life force,” I explained. “Also, divine magic requires intricate manipulation of magical power. Even the slightest mistake can result in death.”

Divine spells were even more difficult to master than ancient magic, and they could easily be fatal. In fact, the risks were so high that almost no one dared try in the first place. Dying from a misfired spell defeated the purpose of learning it in the first place, so there were no particular advantages to going to such lengths to master it.

“So, is there really no one who can use such magic? I mean, if you can’t do it, it’s not likely anyone else can.”

“I don’t know. I once tried for just a bit, but I gave up. Without considerable practice, the risk of death would be ever-present, and that scared me. Not to mention my mentor scolded me for it.”

“Of course. It’s foolish to risk death just to satisfy your curiosity.”

As Prince Osvalt said, it was silly to practice extremely risky divine spells out of half-hearted curiosity. If my goal was to serve my kingdom as a saint, I saw no benefits to learning it. That was how I regarded the divine spells. Besides, ancient magic was more practical to begin with.

“I’m just asking this as a layperson, but suppose someone manages to use this awakening magic or whatever to awaken a god. Wouldn’t they incur the wrath of the gods?”

“Of course the heavens would be angry,” Erza told Prince Osvalt. “This happened on a different continent, but apparently, a long time ago, a certain kingdom that incurred their wrath was wiped out in an instant.”

“An entire kingdom, wiped out? How terrifying. Even Asmodeus never went that far.”

“That’s why, as a precautionary measure, we in the Holy Land have the Holy Servant’s Staff. It’s a divine object that can suppress the wrath of gods and even make them obey your will,” said Erza.

Divine objects, also known as heirlooms of the gods, were items that beggared belief—a flying carpet that concealed great power, a sword that could cut through anything, and so on. Every kingdom regarded its divine objects as national treasures.

“Only the pope can use the Holy Servant’s Staff,” said Erza. “That’s the rule.”

“I see. I guess divine objects shouldn’t be handled casually by just anyone.”

“Wielding the Holy Servant’s Staff also requires divine magic. Besides, there’s never been anyone stupid enough to use awakening magic in the first place. So, really, the pope is just in charge of keeping it. No one’s ever used it.”

Since divine objects had belonged to the gods, it went without saying that divine magic was necessary to use most of them. According to Erza, not a single pope in history had ever used awakening magic or the Holy Servant’s Staff.

An announcement rang out. “The funeral of Pope Irmuska is about to begin!”

“Oops, it’s about to start.”

“Yes, let’s take our seats.”

The late pope’s funeral began on a solemn note. As his coffin was placed on a pedestal, bishops and priests used extraction magic to draw the divine blood from His Eminence’s body and return it to the Holy Grail. The milky-white liquid in the Holy Grail began to emit a mysterious glow—a sign that the pope had completed his mission on earth.

The papal succession ceremony was considered complete once the next person to be pope drank the divine blood. Until then, the Grail would be kept tightly guarded.

In short, I had to make sure that everything was resolved before the succession ceremony. And to that end, I was about to meet someone.

After the funeral, Prince Osvalt and I watched the attendees file out of the shrine.

We stayed behind, as Erza told us to. Archbishop Aurustra had managed to arrange a meeting for me after the funeral.

“Now His Eminence’s soul will rest in peace,” Prince Osvalt remarked.

“Yes. We’re now ready to embed his accomplishments into the divine blood to provide a link to the next generation.”

Embedded in the divine blood were the experiences of previous popes. This generational line of succession made it possible to remember the past while progressing toward the future. It was thanks to the pope, who linked the past to the present, that we could learn from our predecessors.

“Now all that’s left is the papal succession ceremony,” said Erza. “If things proceed smoothly, you’ll inherit the divine blood in the Holy Grail.”

“I know, but as I’ve said many times before, I came here to stop that from happening. Erza, I’m grateful to you for aiding me in this matter.”

“It’s nothing. Now I’m curious, too. Why did that man want you to be the next pope?”

Once I went through the rites at the papal succession ceremony, I would be pope for the rest of my life. I had to hurry up and prove that my appointment was a sham. And for that to happen, I had to make a certain person admit to his actions.

“I haven’t seen Archbishop Henry since Lady Elizabeth’s funeral,” said His Highness, “but you should know that he’s quite stubborn. That day, he and my brother—”

“Your Highness, Prince Osvalt. It’s been a while. Who would’ve thought we’d meet again at a place like this?”

I heard a low voice from behind me, catching His Highness by surprise. We turned to see a man with dark blue hair and glasses walking toward us.

My first impression of the man was that he looked so young. As Bishop Bjorn's senior, he should be about ten years older than I was. And yet, he looked to be around my and His Highness's age—like a young man in his twenties.

"Archbishop Henry," said Archbishop Aurustra, "I'm so sorry for making you come all the way here. Here's my new boss. I'm leaving her to you."

"No, please don't feel bad about it. I've been looking forward to today's meeting, after all. I should be the one apologizing for keeping you waiting."

Archbishop Henry looked at me with a smile. He exuded a calm, kind-hearted aura that gave me the impression that he was easy to get along with. He bore a vague resemblance to his cousins Grace and Emily; his gentle demeanor was certainly similar to theirs.

Prince Osvalt and I returned his greeting.

"I'm Philia Adenauer. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Archbishop Henry, it's been a while. Glad to see you're doing well."

We had agreed to meet here after the funeral, so everything was going as planned thus far.

"Miss Philia," Archbishop Henry said. "It truly is a delight to be able to meet the new pope. I'm sure the late pope must be pleased to have such a talented and perfect saint as yourself as his successor."

Smiling the entire time, Archbishop Henry said that he was looking forward to my future as the new pope. I heard that the devotees of Cremoux adored Archbishop Henry, and I could understand why. He seemed like an honest and sincere person. I really couldn't imagine someone like him rewriting His Eminence's will. I almost wondered whether I was terribly mistaken.

"I believe I'm still quite far from perfect, but I'm honored by your praise."

Archbishop Henry chuckled. "How humble of you. Your lack of arrogance may be one of your virtues, but you should have

more confidence. You've been called the greatest saint of all time, and even earned the title of archsaint. What other word is there to describe you but 'perfect'?"

"I feel unworthy of such lavish praise."

"What a modest person you are. On top of your excellent abilities, you also have an admirable personality. I want to learn from you. You really are a role model for the clergy. I hope that as our new pope, you'll continue to set a good example for the faithful and lead us toward a bright future."

All this praise was getting a bit excessive. Though Archbishop Henry's expression hadn't changed, there was something rather off-putting about the way he worded things. Did this person really want me to become pope so badly?

I suspected that he was hiding something behind his seemingly gentle and kind smile, but it was too soon to jump to that conclusion. I had to observe him some more.

"Master Henry, your ride will be arriving shortly."

"What's this presence?" I exclaimed in shock.

Behind Archbishop Henry were two brawny men wearing black hoods that obscured their eyes. I was familiar with the aura they exuded. It was neither human nor monstrous. Could those two be...?

"Do you have demons accompanying you?"

There was no doubt about it. The two men gave off energy similar to that of Mammon, Satanachia, and Asmodeus.

Unbelievable. The archbishop had demons for servants. What's more, in addition to possessing powerful magic, they could communicate with humans. As Mammon would put it, they must be high-ranking demons.

"I'm impressed that you were able to determine that at a glance. I'm trying something new. Demons are sturdy and powerful. They can be useful in many ways. Putting demons to work isn't the exclusive domain of exorcists. If this will serve the faithful, why not? I'm willing to use anything that can help them."

"That may be true, but isn't that dangerous?"

“Don’t worry. They’re bound to me by contract. They obey my every word.”

They were completely obedient to him?

There was clearly something like mutual trust between Erza and Mammon, while the relationship between Archbishop Henry and his demons felt detached and impersonal. But since he wasn’t breaking any rules, I said nothing more about the matter.

“Saint, Exorcist,” the archbishop continued, addressing me and Erza. “I believe power is necessary to make this continent and the world a better place. Like the two of you, I intend to obtain great power as I push forward to create an ideal world.”

On the surface, the idea didn’t sound wrong to me. After all, to achieve great things, one would need a corresponding amount of power. However, there was something about the way Archbishop Henry worded things that struck me as sinister. It felt as if a tide of dark emotion had surged forth from him.

“Miss Philia, what will you do when you become pope? Don’t you want to make this world an even more wonderful place?”

I hadn’t thought of what I would do if I became pope. Did Archbishop Henry really want to change the world that much?

“With power, you can become a great hero who will live on in people’s memories. As the memories of the weak are overwritten, and they fade into obscurity, people will be drawn to the strong.”

Archbishop Henry’s magic was nowhere on Asmodeus’s level. His aura was familiarly human. But in that moment, the energy I sensed from him was even stranger than Asmodeus’s.

Though only for a brief moment, Archbishop Henry’s expression changed from calm and friendly to a complex mix of emotions. There was sadness in there, but I also detected a touch of compassion. For some reason, I found this mixture frightening.

I had never met someone like him before, but my intuition already told me he wasn’t going to be so simple to deal with.

“Well, we’ve been standing around and talking a while. How about I show you around my home? Please let me treat you to dinner.”

Archbishop Henry's tone was gentle again. The enigmatic aura I sensed from him earlier was completely gone. Which one was his true nature? What if the side he showed earlier was the real Archbishop Henry?

Since we were both human beings, I believed that we could talk through our issues, but this brief interaction had shaken my confidence. Communication was going to be a real challenge.

Filling in the awkward silence for me, Prince Osvalt responded, "Since we're already here, we might as well dine with you. Lady Philia, you'd like that too, right?"

"Er, yes, of course."

"Thank you for accepting my invitation. In that case, I shall do my best to entertain you. This way, please."

Archbishop Henry was going to treat us to dinner at his place. When would be the best time to bring up my suspicion that he altered the late pope's will?

I pondered this and other matters as I sat in a swaying carriage. After a few hours, we arrived at Archbishop Henry's mansion at the edge of the capital.

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Prince Osvalt and I sat down to dinner with Archbishop Henry, our host for the evening. Erza had already gone home, so it was just the three of us at the table. The archbishop's demon servants stood behind him throughout the meal.

"Your casting of the Great Purification Circle surprised me," the archbishop remarked. "Not even the head church knew how to deal with the increase in monsters. You must remember, I was new here at the time."

I'd arrived at Parnacorta at around the same time Archbishop Henry left, almost as if we'd replaced each other. That meant that he himself had only been in Dalbert for a short time. But within that time, he became an archbishop, employed demons, and gained the late pope's trust to the point that he was entrusted

with His Eminence's will. He clearly had his fingers in a great many pies.

"I also heard about your feats at the Saints' Summit. You defeated Asmodeus, when even Erza was no match for him. Your fearless and determined fighting style was truly worthy of an archsaint. All I can say is that you did a splendid job."

Archbishop Henry continued to flatter me to an unnatural extent. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but his flattery evoked a feeling I'd felt before. I couldn't remember where.

I was being complimented, so why was my heart fluttering in panic?

"It doesn't matter how many other saints there are. As long as you're the archsaint, all their accomplishments will pale in comparison to yours. It's no exaggeration to say that you've changed the course of history."

And then I remembered. This feeling...it was like the time Julius listed every single thing I did and praised me for it. It had happened right after we got engaged. He told me over and over again that I was amazing. Later on, however, I found out that he resented me for the very things he praised me for.

Perhaps I was uneasy because I could sense the lies in Archbishop Henry's words. It had taken me a while to realize it, but the archbishop's sincere-sounding sarcasm felt vastly different from Julius's way of tearing me down.

"Miss Philia, I'm glad that you'll be the next pope. On behalf of the many believers of Cremoux who surely feel the same way, allow me to ask you something. Could you please tell us what your ideal world would be like?"

"No, I..."

"Oh, is it still under wraps? That's too bad. Well, anyway, you've had great luck since you were sold to Parnacorta, haven't you? And it's all thanks to the Parnacorta royal family's brave decision to buy a saint from another kingdom."

"Archbishop Henry!"

As I struggled to say or do something, Prince Osvalt shouted at Archbishop Henry, his face contorted with rage in a way I'd seldom seen. He had also realized that the archbishop was being mocking and seemed to harbor for me some kind of ill will.

"Why, Your Highness, why are you so upset? Aren't you grateful that Miss Philia came to Parnacorta?"

"I *am* grateful—so grateful that I can't put it in words! But there's a right way and a wrong way to show gratitude!"

"I apologize if I worded it poorly. But after Elizabeth died, didn't your family get together and decide to buy a new saint? You took responsibility for the decision to buy Miss Philia, and you're even planning to marry her. Your Highness's patriotism is truly heartwarming."

"Th-that's—"

Unfazed by Prince Osvalt's menacing look, Archbishop Henry continued to counter His Highness, maintaining his smile all the while.

His Highness had opposed the idea of buying me until the very end. And when I came to Parnacorta, he made a point of looking out for me. Archbishop Henry didn't have the full picture, and I didn't enjoy hearing him recount my move to Parnacorta as if it were such a tawdry tale. But if we were to go back and forth over that, we'd just be playing into Archbishop Henry's hands.

"Your Highness," I interrupted, "I am grateful to Parnacorta. I believe I am very lucky to have received the accolades I have since moving there. There's no need to argue over the truth." I understood why Prince Osvalt was angry, but it was pointless to argue here.

"If that's what you say, Lady Philia, then I have nothing more to add. Archbishop Henry, sorry for raising my voice at you." His Highness apologized to Archbishop Henry, then folded his arms and stayed silent.

"Is His Highness now in a foul mood? Miss Philia, you said you wanted to talk, but if you're feeling uncomfortable, you may leave. I wouldn't mind."

“No, I will not leave.”

“Is that so? In that case, let’s get to the point. Why did you want to talk to me?”

“I shall take you up on that offer, then. Archbishop Henry, I have a question for you: why did you rewrite His Eminence’s will?”

As soon as I posed the question, Archbishop Henry’s smile faded for the first time since we met. Was this the real him? At the same time that his smile disappeared, his eyes grew sharp, and I sensed something like coldness from him once more.

However, this, too, only lasted for a brief moment. The smile returned in the blink of an eye.

“Miss Philia, is this your attempt at humor? Heh heh…I never dreamt someone as serious as yourself would crack a joke. I’m sorry—that was so unexpected that I couldn’t respond right away. What a ridiculous idea. Of course I didn’t change the name in the will from mine to yours.”

“I’m not joking.”

Was he really choosing not to engage with the question? Of course, I wasn’t expecting him to say, “Yes, it was me” right away. I was just laying the groundwork for further investigation.

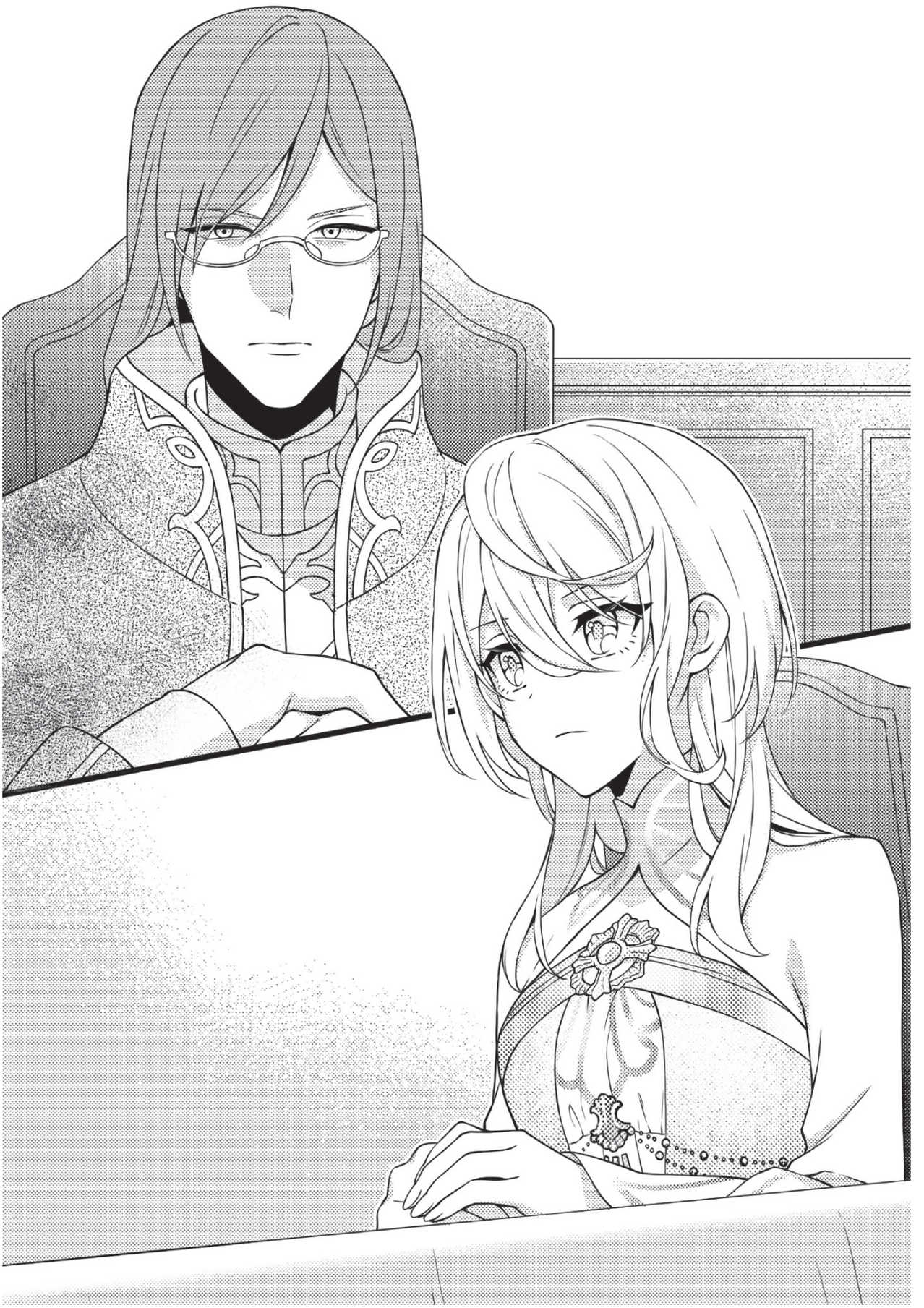
“The late pope held you in such high regard. He said you were worthy of the title of archsaint because you’re the greatest saint of all time. I never thought that someone like you would unfairly accuse me of altering His Eminence’s will.”

“It’s unfortunate that you’ve taken this as an unfair accusation,” I replied. “I said what I said based on my observations.”

Certainly, I wished to live out my days as a saint of Parnacorta. However, that didn’t mean I was calling the will into question just to get my own way. All I’d done was discover a trail of anomalies, interpret them in a way that made sense, and voice my conclusion. I had a basis for my assertion, and I asked Archbishop Henry about it because I was convinced that my theory had merit.

“Observations?” Archbishop Henry laughed. “If I were named pope, I’d graciously accept the appointment. It’d be a great honor.”

“No, Archbishop. You were indeed named the next pope, but you rewrote His Eminence’s will in an attempt to make me pope instead.”



“Let me say this once again: please stop with these false accusations. If you, the archsaint, become the new pope, it will bring hope to the entire continent. Do you want to let the followers of Cremoux down?”

Our arguments were going nowhere. I had failed to shake the archbishop. In order to drain the color from his face, perhaps I had to use stronger words to unsettle him and bring out the truth.

“No matter what you say,” the archbishop went on, “the ceremony is in a week. You will drink the divine blood from the Holy Grail and become the new pope.”

“I have no intention of becoming pope. I will continue to assert the illegitimacy of the mandate.”

“Miss Philia, you are a saint. You shouldn’t say such selfish things. Otherwise, you’ll cause trouble for your beloved Parnacorta and even more beloved Prince Osvalt. Do you want that to happen?”

Did he add in a threat this time? As he knew, both Parnacorta and Prince Osvalt were irreplaceable to me. I couldn’t sacrifice them just to have my own way.

“If the will weren’t false, I wouldn’t contest it. But Archbishop Henry, you’re lying!”

“Hmm. I see. Miss Philia, you’re a stubborn one. If you’d go as far as to accuse me like that, do you have any proof that I altered the will? If so, I’d really like to see it.”

“Not yet.”

“What’s this? You’re attacking me so confidently without any evidence? Interesting. Miss Philia, it seems you’re even more unusual than I thought.” Archbishop Henry shrugged and made an exasperated noise. A moment later, he was smiling again, seemingly in better spirits. He looked triumphant. “Unfortunately, this isn’t worth discussing. That’s enough, Miss Philia. Please leave. There’s nothing more to talk about.”

“Please wait. I may not have any proof, but I’ve guessed your motive.”

“A motive? How could I have one? What a strange thing to say.”

As Archbishop Henry was about to cut this talk short, I decided that it was time to use the ace up my sleeve. And what was that? Put simply, it was his motive—his reason to rewrite His Eminence’s will in such a way that made me the next pope.

“Could the passing of your sister, Miss Elizabeth, be a factor?”

The moment I spoke that name, the table shook slightly. Archbishop Henry’s magical power rose sharply and made itself felt. His face was simmering with anger. This time, his smile did not return.

“Elizabeth has nothing to do with this…” In a tone that was quiet yet filled with rage, Archbishop Henry made his displeasure clear.

I didn’t want to talk about Elizabeth if I could help it, but I couldn’t leave without getting at least one clue.

“Lady Philia, let’s leave it at that.” Seeing the sudden change in Archbishop Henry’s behavior Prince Osvalt cautioned me to keep a cool head. “There’s no point in pursuing this any further.”

Taking His Highness’s advice, I bowed my head. “I apologize for my impudent behavior. It was thoughtless of me to say that.”

I agreed that it was inappropriate to mention Elizabeth. His Highness wasn’t wrong to admonish me.

“No, no, don’t worry about it. It’s all right, *Your Eminence*.”

And so, we left Archbishop Henry’s mansion without solid evidence. But I was certain of one thing—Archbishop Henry had rewritten the will.

This was a major development. Now that we were certain, we could make our move.

Chapter 3:
The Dead Man's Words

AFTER LEAVING Archbishop Henry's mansion, Prince Osvalt and I boarded our carriage and gazed at the scenery outside for a moment. For some reason, watching the peaceful landscape go by made me feel nostalgic, even though this wasn't my homeland. I felt the same way when I was new to Parnacorta.

Ultimately, my homeland was Girtonia, not Parnacorta, but it was Parnacorta that I missed. It wasn't like I had no ties left to Girtonia—Hildegard and Mia were back there, after all. But even so, Parnacorta was the kingdom I wanted to return home to.

"Hey, Lady Philia."

"Ah, yes, what is it, Your Highness?"

Prince Osvalt had startled me a bit, calling out to me while I was lost in thought. That was careless of me. I got too distracted around him.

"Well, it's about what you said earlier. It wasn't like you. You guessed that Archbishop Henry would get angry if you mentioned Lady Elizabeth, didn't you?"

Prince Osvalt asked me about the intent behind my earlier words, perhaps because he'd sensed something off about my behavior. I, too, would rather not have acted that way or said such a thing. If His Highness thought it was uncharacteristic of me, it must have been fully out of line. That had been the first time he had ever admonished me.

"I worded things badly. I've been reflecting on that."

"I see."

"But that exchange convinced me that Archbishop Henry rewrote the will."

"What? Are you sure, Lady Philia?"

I'd intentionally said such an off-putting thing to rile up Archbishop Henry and get him to expose the truth. He slipped up

a few times during his conversation with me. Until tonight, I had entertained the remote possibility that he didn't tamper with the late pope's will, which would leave me with no choice but to give up the role of saint and become pope. Had he been an impeccable actor, I might still be fighting the fear that I was mistaken.

But now that fear was gone. For me, that was a sign that I was making progress toward uncovering the truth. I could now move forward without hesitation.

All that remained was to present Archbishop Henry with irrefutable evidence, which I now had the leeway to focus on.

"Archbishop Henry made a slip of the tongue at dinner."

"You mean those things he said about you? The way he spoke to you made me angry too."

"No, not that. He essentially confessed that he'd rewritten the will."

"He did? I don't remember him saying something like that at all."

I explained to Prince Osvalt how Archbishop Henry revealed himself at dinner. He cunningly provoked me and tried to make me feel uncomfortable in an attempt to end the conversation. But, perhaps because he'd gotten too into his provocation, his responses sounded unprepared when we countered with personal comments of our own.

"The first time was when I accused him of altering the pope's will. He replied that there was no way he'd change the name in the will from his to mine."

"What's strange about that? I don't think that's enough to prove that he did it."

"No, it can. If he really hadn't altered the will, he wouldn't have specified that he changed the name from his. Archbishop Henry knew that his name was written in the real will."

"What? But, I mean, he said that because you...wait, no, you didn't say that. You never said that his name was in the will!"

The notion that Archbishop Henry was the real successor named in the will was mere speculation on my part. After all,

unless the will was circulated and published, the only person who knew its contents was Archbishop Henry.

That was why I began by saying only that he'd rewritten the will. And yet, when Archbishop Henry denied that assertion, he said, "I didn't change the name in the will from mine to yours."

Why would he say such a thing? Because he knew that his own name was in the will. There was no other explanation for it.

"He made another mistake when I mentioned Elizabeth."

"Oh, that! He was really in a rage then. I was too distracted to pay attention to what he said."

"He said that Elizabeth had nothing to do with this."

"Ah! Right, right. But what's strange about that? Archbishop Henry loved Lady Elizabeth. Since she's his sister, surely he wouldn't want to get her involved in things…"

As His Highness said, Archbishop Henry loved his sister. But when you turned his wording around, a certain truth came to light.

"Your Highness, when he said 'Elizabeth has nothing to do with this,' did you pick up the underlying implication? Turn it around, and it implies, 'But Archbishop Henry does.'"

"Huh? Ah, yeah, now that you mention it, you're right! If your claim really were blatantly untrue, he would've replied angrily with, 'This has nothing to do with Elizabeth or myself!'"

In the heat of the moment, Archbishop Henry immediately defended his beloved sister. If the allegation that he altered the will really was baseless, he could simply have denied it. Instead, he emphasized that *Elizabeth* was not involved. That was an overreaction. He was guilty, so he felt the urge to defend Elizabeth.

"Those two things convinced me that it was, unmistakably, Archbishop Henry who altered the will. In other words, I can now confidently assert that the mandate that I become the next pope is invalid."

"I'm surprised you could deduce that much from such a short conversation."

“The mystery novel I borrowed from Lena came in handy.”

To use logic to identify the contradictions in someone else’s words, first let them speak, then let them reveal their emotions. That was from a novel Lena recommended to me back when I mentioned having no hobbies. Recalling that novel and how absorbing Lena found it, I quoted the line to Prince Osvalt.

“Oh, that? Isn’t that from the *The Crying Detective* series? The one with the detective who cries while catching criminals? Lena recommended it to me, too.”

“Yes, that one. Once I started reading it, I couldn’t stop.”

“I see. Well, if you say it’s interesting, maybe I should also give it a read…wait!” When I mentioned the book that Lena recommended, Prince Osvalt smacked his hands together, tilted his head, then stared into my eyes. It had been a while since we faced each other so intently like this. “Could it be you provoked Archbishop Henry on purpose?”

“Er, yes, I did.”

“Ha ha ha! It’s amazing how he played right into your hand! I’m sorry for scolding you when I had no idea what was really going on!”

“Not at all. It’s because you admonished me that Archbishop Henry didn’t catch on to what I was trying to do.”

Because His Highness acted so naturally, Archbishop Henry didn’t find my question about Elizabeth suspicious. He even looked victorious when Prince Osvalt scolded me.

“Anger dulls the mind. I’m glad I was able to draw that emotion out of him.”

“I see, I see. I get emotional pretty easily myself. I’d better be careful.”

“You don’t have to. I think you’re wonderful the way you are. In fact, I’d actually prefer that you stay like this.”

Scratching his head, Prince Osvalt looked askance and laughed. “Huh? That’s kinda embarrassing. Ha ha…I’m glad you like my childish side.”

I didn’t find His Highness childish. Rather, I wanted him to understand that I loved the straightforward way he always guided me forward—no matter what, when, and where.

Before we knew it, we found ourselves holding hands tightly in the swaying carriage. If I were to be honest about how I felt in that moment, I didn’t want anyone to disturb this happiness.

Regardless of Archbishop Henry’s circumstances, there was no backing down now. Somehow, I understood that he had sad reasons for doing what he did. It was likely he felt something like hatred for me, too.

Because Archbishop Henry and I both refused to compromise, this battle wouldn’t be easy.

“This is shaping up to be a battle of wills,” I told His Highness.

“In that case, we won’t lose. You and I, we’re both stubborn. Up until this day, we’ve both lived our lives without bending ourselves to please others.”

I laughed. “That’s true.”

Prince Osvalt, do you have any idea how many times your words have given me courage? Thanks to you, I feel like I can go anywhere.

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The next day, Prince Osvalt and I visited the Dalbert Royal Library. Erza had secured approval for us to pore over books about magic studies, from ancient times to the present.

As expected of the second-largest library on the continent, the books on magic studies here far outnumbered those of the libraries in Parnacorta and Girtonia. Although the collection didn’t come close to that of the continent’s largest library, which belonged to the Magic Research Institute in Gyptia, I expected I would be able to find more than enough information.

“Hmm, I can’t read archaic languages, so I’ll try checking whether any more recent books have the information you’re looking for.”

“I’m sorry that you have to help me like this, Your Highness.”

“Nah, all good. Just sitting around and waiting isn’t in my nature. Besides, since Leonardo and the rest were denied entry, I have to do all I can.”

Apparently, the Dalbert royal family did not approve of giving so many Parnacortans unrestricted access to its collection of rare books and valuable manuscripts. Only Prince Osvalt and I were allowed to enter.

To save time, His Highness helped me with my research. I sorted through ancient manuscripts while he looked at modern literature, taking note of titles and page numbers of books that had the information we wanted. After all, it would be more efficient to read everything at once later.

As we grappled with a pile of manuscripts, a gentle voice piped up. “Miss Philia…and Prince Osvalt, too. It’s been a while.”

“Alice!”

“Oh, Lady Alice, is that you?”

It was Alice Aesfill, the saint of Dalbert, who also served as an exorcist. The Aesfill family claimed descent from the archsaint Fianna, and Alice was Fianna’s direct descendant. I had become friends with this highly exceptional saint-exorcist during the Saints’ Summit, and we continued to exchange letters.

“I-I heard from Erza that you were here,” Alice stammered. “I’m sorry. I would’ve liked to have been the one to show you around the capital instead of Klaus, but I was a little busy.”

“It’s quite all right. I heard that you were busy strengthening the barriers around the Holy Land for His Eminence’s funeral.”

Alice had cast strong barriers at eighty-eight sites throughout the Holy Land. Even though we were under the protection of the Great Purification Circle, we couldn’t rule out the possibility of monsters, weakened as they may be, attacking the funeral.

As a general rule, whenever there was a major event or function in the Holy Land, extra barriers were cast to prevent evil

forces from breaking in. That was the task with which Alice had been busy over the past few days.

“Some believed that the Great Purification Circle would be enough protection, but the sentiment that we shouldn’t break with tradition prevailed. Since I was tasked with casting the barriers, I wanted to do the best job I possibly could. After all, you’d also be at the funeral.”

“Please, there was no need to worry about me…”

“No—I respect you more than anyone else, so it’s impossible for me not to worry.”

It was kind of her to be concerned, and to work so hard for my sake. Perhaps the dense concentration of mana that we felt in the Holy Land yesterday was due to Alice’s barriers folding in around us. The Holy Land undoubtedly had a higher concentration of mana than other places to begin with, but it had been so dense that even Prince Osvalt could feel it.

“Thank you, Alice. I respect you as well. I always learn a lot from you.”

“Not at all. I’m the one who should be saying that about you __”

We chatted happily for a while, as this was our first reunion since the Saints’ Summit. Although demons had crashed that gathering, it had been a meaningful exchange for us saints—no, for the sake of maintaining peace across the continent.

“Lady Alice, thank you for persuading Klaus when we were at odds,” said Prince Osvalt. “I guess I already thanked you last time, but there’s no reason I can’t thank you again.”

When Asmodeus’s magic trapped me in Limbo, Klaus tried until the very end to stop Prince Osvalt from going there to rescue me. I heard from His Highness and Mia that it was Alice who convinced him to relent, even volunteering to take personal responsibility for the decision.

That push from Alice had been the deciding factor that made Klaus give in to His Highness’s pleas. In other words, she saved my life.

“I-it’s nothing. I-it’s just that, um, the strength of His Highness’s feelings for you really touched me… So I was happy to hear that you two had gotten engaged. I think everyone gathered there at the time felt that you should have heard His Highness’s words, not us.”

“Really?” said Prince Osvalt. “I can hardly remember what I said back then. It wasn’t too embarrassing, was it?”

“No, not at all. I thought what you said was lovely.”

Mia had told me that it was practically a proposal. What exactly His Highness said? He seemed to have truly forgotten, so, unfortunately, I would never know.

“Anyway, Miss Philia, Your Highness, congratulations on your engagement.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Well, it’s thanks to you, Lady Alice, that the two of us can be together,” Prince Osvalt added.

More than anything, I felt blessed to have so many people congratulate me on my engagement. In this kingdom alone, I had received greetings not only from Alice, but from Erza, Mammon, and Klaus. I had also heard from Mia and Hildegard from my homeland, and Grace and Emily from Bolmern, not to mention the countless congratulations I’d received in Parnacorta. I wanted to thank everyone who offered their warm words.

“By the way, Lady Alice,” said Prince Osvalt, “I hear you’ve been ordered to go to Parnacorta to take Lady Philia’s place. Are you sure it’s not awkward for you to meet us in person like this?”

As His Highness said, to account for my leaving for Dalbert, the head church of Cremoux ordered Alice to go to Parnacorta to take my place as the kingdom’s saint. I, too, worried that she might have complicated feelings toward me.

“Well, indeed, the Aesfill family has protected Dalbert since Lady Fianna’s time. I love this kingdom more than anyone!”

Alice’s eyes filled with determination. It couldn’t be clearer how much she loved her homeland. Any good saint would consider the kingdom she protected to be her greatest treasure.

When I left Girtonia for Parnacorta, I felt as if my heart were about to break into a million pieces. I was unhappy about having been sold, of course, but it was almost impossible to accept that I could no longer stay on as the saint of Girtonia, the kingdom whose prosperity I had dedicated myself to. If Alice was deeply grieved by having to leave her kingdom against her will, that was only natural.

"In that case, Alice—" I began.

"But, it was the Cremoux faith that saved my ancestor, Lady Fianna, after all. So I must follow the will of the head church. Please don't worry about me, Miss Philia." Another nervous laugh.

Seeing Alice's lovely smile, I realized just how strong she was on the inside. I could tell that her smile wasn't fake—it came from the heart. She had decided to accept her sad fate and all the troubles that might come with it, and to live her life with hope. I, on the other hand, hadn't found my resolve until I reached Parnacorta.

"By the way, I heard from Erza that you suspect the late pope's will of being faked. By Archbishop Henry, I mean."

"Yes. It's now more than a suspicion; I'm convinced of it."

"You're convinced? If true, that's unforgivable... But do you have any proof?"

Alice leaned in, both shocked and curious. More than anything, however, she looked concerned. My strong words might have worried her.

"Don't worry about that. I plan to present solid evidence."

"Really? You seem so sure. You really have proof?"

"Yes. Please take a look at this document."

I showed Alice something Prince Osvalt and I had found in the library. One might say this document spelled out my entire plan. As for the details, all I could say was that if it succeeded, I could prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Archbishop Henry altered His Eminence's will. I was confident this was the trump card that would help us break through the morass we'd found ourselves in.

“I-isn’t this about Hades, the god of the underworld? Wh-why this…?”

That was right. My research focused on Hades, the god of the underworld. As the ruler of the domains of life and death, Hades transcended human understanding. The divine spells he used were all related to mortality.

A will was a letter left behind by the deceased. The one person who was sure to know if it was genuine was the dead person who wrote it.

“I intend to ask the very person who wrote the will: the late pope himself.”

“That…that can’t be. Miss Philia, are you serious about this?”

Alice seemed to have guessed what I was trying to do. Even I knew it was a foolish idea—but the late pope would definitely know the truth.

“One of the spells Hades used allows you to speak to the dead. I plan to use that to communicate with His Eminence’s soul.”

“Any spell of Hades’s is a divine spell! It comes with the risk of death!”

Alice was aware of the dangers of divine spells. She was also a saint, so I wasn’t surprised that she knew these things.

“If it means I can return to Parnacorta with His Highness, then I’m prepared to take a few risks,” I said.

Alice urged Prince Osvalt to stop me. “Y-your Highness, what Miss Philia’s trying to do is beyond reckless!” she stammered. “Are you really not going to stop her? Y-you may not know this, but divine spells are such a dangerous form of magic that there’s hardly ever been a pope in history who’s used them!”

I felt extremely guilty for worrying her, but I’d already made up my mind and spoken to His Highness of the risks.

“I can’t stop Lady Philia,” Prince Osvalt replied. “I suggested that if this spell meant risking death, it’d be better to just live in Dalbert—but she wouldn’t back down. She even said that she’d never compromise on this.”

“B-but—”

“Alice,” I said, “not being able to see the future of my beloved kingdom as its saint, with Prince Osvalt by my side, would be more painful than death.”

I loved Parnacorta. Of course, there were things about it that I’d grown personally attached to. But above all, I think I loved it because it was the kingdom that Prince Osvalt loved.

I loved seeing the look on His Highness’s face whenever he talked about the kingdom’s future and how to make it a better place for its people. I loved tilling the earth with him and watching new life sprout.

It was Parnacorta or nothing. After all, I had already made up my mind to live there with His Highness.

“But I still don’t want to be too reckless. I’ll do more research on divine magic and try to mitigate the risks as much as possible.”

“Since Lady Philia has made up her mind,” said His Highness, “all that’s left to do is believe in her. That’s why I decided to help her with her research and support her.”

It had taken some time to convince Prince Osvalt, since he was just as stubborn as I was. Going back and forth with His Highness had dragged on until the wee hours of the night.

“Besides, what you said motivated me all the more to do this,” I told Alice.

“Huh?”

“You love your kingdom as much as I do mine. Your words made me want to do what it takes so we can both stay in our beloved kingdoms.”

Through no fault of her own, Alice had been caught up in my problems and was being made to leave her homeland. If I couldn’t at least prevent that, I wouldn’t be able to face her friend, Erza.

“You’re both being much too reckless, but I understand the strength of your feelings for each other. If you don’t mind having me on board, I could help with your research.”

“Of course we’d appreciate it.”

And so, the three of us spent the rest of the night going over the books in the royal library and collecting the information we needed.

Thanks to Alice's wealth of knowledge regarding exorcism and other things that I knew little of, we were able to work much more efficiently. I also managed to establish a comparatively safer way to practice divine spells. I had gotten a step closer to mastering divine magic.

"Well, it's getting late. Let's wrap up here."

"I'm sorry for not being very helpful. I should've studied harder, like Miss Philia."

"What are you talking about, Alice?" I replied. "It's thanks to you that I was able to combine the strengths of exorcism techniques and ancient magic to come up with a way to safely master divine magic."

Exorcism techniques involved concentrating magic into a single point and blasting forth purifying power, while ancient magic was based on gathering the magic found in nature within the body.

With Alice's help, we'd discovered that the methods to master both types of magic could also be applied to divine magic, which involved condensing and amplifying magical power at the same time.

We read about many cases of failed attempts at using divine magic, such as the accidental release of magic after failing to concentrate it into a single point, or magic going haywire after one failed to amplify one's power. Apparently, our ancestors trained in multiple types of magic at once, which could be dangerous.

We concluded that one could mitigate the risks connected to divine magic in the following ways. First, one must focus on perfecting one type of magic before moving on to another. Then, when practicing the use of both types of magic simultaneously, one should start with a small amount of magical power and gradually build from there.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me—oops!”

A loud gurgle echoed throughout the quiet library room, and Alice reflexively clutched her stomach. Her face quickly turned red. What should I say?

“Sorry,” I said. “My stomach started rumbling. Leonardo should be making dinner by now. Lady Alice, would you like to join us?”

“Wh-wh-what? Your Highness, um, I…”

“I’m hungry too,” said His Highness. “Alice, please come with us.”

“Er, uh, all right.”

We returned to our mansion with Alice in tow. Come to think of it, this would be the first meal I’d ever shared with her. If the Saints’ Summit had ended without incident, we might have been able to interact with one another more, but it had wrapped up in a rush. Now that the opportunity presented itself, I wanted to spend more time talking to Alice.

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“Wh-what’s this?”

“Er, Leonardo, could this be…?”

“Leonardo, are you going to cook this?”

Upon our return to the mansion, I found a large board laid out in the garden. Displayed on it was an impressive heap of familiar-looking meat. There was no doubt about it. It was the meat I’d seen when I first arrived in Dalbert.

“Welcome back, Lady Philia, Your Highness. And you must be Lady Alice. I’m Lady Philia’s butler, Leonardo.”

“Y-yes, Mister Leonardo. I’m Alice Aesfill. It’s nice to meet you.”

Leonardo bowed neatly as Alice nervously introduced herself. As expected of Leonardo, even though they’d only met briefly

before, he seemed to remember her.

Prince Osvalt pointed toward the pile of meat. “Leonardo, what’s that outside?”

“Oh, have you noticed?”

“Well, it’s the first thing anyone would see if they entered the mansion.”

Looking pleased, Leonardo replied, “Actually, I’ve been studying Dalbertian cuisine. While shopping at the capital’s largest grocery store, I happened upon these fine ingredients and ended up buying some.”

“Fine ingredients, huh?” Prince Osvalt remarked.

“This is dragon breast, a Dalbert delicacy! I was tempted to buy the whole thing, but I held back.”

“Of course.”

I knew I’d recognized the meat from the dragon butchering show. Still, I was surprised by Leonardo. He certainly loved to cook, but I didn’t think he’d challenge himself with dragon meat this soon. The breast alone was huge. It was about the size of a cow.

“This will make plenty of servings,” said Leonardo. “We’ll be able to share some with the neighbors.”

“Are you going to cook the entire thing?” Alice gasped. “I’m from Dalbert, but I’ve never seen anyone buy an entire dragon breast before.”

“If need be, Lady Philia will eat the leftovers.”

“Leonardo!”

To store energy within my body, catalyze it, and convert it to magical power, I’d undergone a type of training that involved eating a lot. As a result, I could consume portions meant for several dozen people. I wouldn’t dream of doing such an immodest thing in front of His Highness and Alice, though.

“That’s too much to ask of Lady Philia,” said Prince Osvalt. “I’ll eat as much as I can.”

“You mustn’t, Your Highness. I can’t let you do something like that all on your own. I’ll help finish up the meat,” I said to Prince Osvalt.

“Hey, now, Lady Philia. You don’t have to push yourself. I may not look it, but I’m a pretty big eater, you know.”

For some strange reason, I felt like arguing with Prince Osvalt. “Not *that* big,” I countered. “Please leave this to me.”

Alice watched us with a soft look on her face. “Erza was right,” she said. “You two are a good match.”

“Sir Leonardo!” Lena announced. “The pub up the road said they could take some dragon meat off our hands.”

“A restaurant in the east reports that it would be happy to receive such a fine ingredient for free,” Himari added.

“Lena! Himari!”

It seemed that Lena and Himari, not wanting to let Leonardo go overboard, had gone out to ask nearby establishments whether they’d accept some of our dragon meat. Prince Osvalt and I no longer had to worry about eating the entire pile of food.

“Hmm,” said Leonardo. “It’s a bit of a shame that I’ll have to serve smaller portions, but at least we’ll be able to sample this delicacy tonight. I’ll start cooking right away. I can’t wait to figure out how to make the most of this unique odor.”

“Yes, we’re all looking forward to it, so please go ahead and get started. We’re hungry.”

“Leave it to me. Tonight, you’ll taste the Leonardo Special, a unique blend of dozens of spices that I developed myself. Let this versatile spice transport you to an aromatic paradise!”

Leonardo was in high spirits as he headed to the kitchen with an armload of dragon meat. As a butler, he was unparalleled, but when it came to cooking, he could sometimes get carried away. Lena and I were quite used to his antics, but Alice, who wasn’t, watched him in astonishment until he was out of sight.

While waiting for dinner, we enjoyed herbal tea that Lena prepared for us. Alice immediately warmed up to Lena and Himari, and we spent a pleasant time together.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! The dragon meat—Dalbert’s specialty—is ready!”

Hearing Leonardo call out to us, we gathered around the dinner table.

I’m sorry you ended up waiting for so long, Alice.

Alice smiled. “It smells good. I’ve always loved dragon dishes, so I’m looking forward to tasting this.” She seemed to be having a good time, so I was glad that Leonardo bought the dragon meat after all.

Prince Osvalt said that he’d tried dragon meat only once, on a previous visit to Dalbert. This would be my first taste of dragon, so I was very curious. A bit nervously, I brought a piece to my mouth.

“It’s good. No—it’s delicious, Leonardo.”

“Does it suit your palate, Lady Philia? If so, nothing would make me happier,” Leonardo said.

Dragon meat was said to have a very strong smell. Its flavor was described as wild—gamey, or even bloody. The smell of the untreated meat filled one’s mouth with the taste of rust. That was why Leonardo had kept it outside the mansion on ice before cooking it, although the dragon breast was so enormous it barely fit in the kitchen anyway.

He had pulled off a clever technique to deal with the smell. By adding spices, he transformed the foul smell into a pleasant aroma that gave the meat a full-bodied flavor.

Alice had nothing but praise for the results. “Amazing. I’ve never had dragon meat this good before. Sir Leonardo, are you really a butler?”

“Oh ho ho…cooking is just a hobby of mine. I serve Lady Philia as her butler. Entertaining guests is my duty, so it’s the ultimate honor to hear that you’re pleased with your meal, Lady Alice.”

After enjoying dinner for a while, I called for Himari. Before leaving Parnacorta, I'd asked her to help me collect some information.

"Himari, in addition to the investigation in Parnacorta, I also asked you to look into something in this kingdom. How are things going?"

"I apologize for keeping you waiting for so long. I have finally concluded my investigation to my full satisfaction. But are you sure it is safe to discuss it here?"

She had a point. How should I go about this? I didn't think it was right to keep it a secret from everyone else.

"Himari, since everyone's gathered here, you might as well go ahead and share the information. After all, it's why we came to this kingdom. This matter concerns not only His Highness, but Alice, Lena, and yourself."

"As you wish."

I let the group at the dinner table know that Himari was about to share her findings in full detail. I thought they should be informed, as they were all involved. Everyone looked at us with trepidation.

Prince Osvalt wasted no time in speaking. "So, Himari, what were you investigating?"

The reason I put off leaving Parnacorta until the last minute was to look for clues related to Archbishop Henry's motives. Himari was able to obtain some information, and she continued to search for additional leads even after coming to Dalbert.

"I went searching for the place where the late Saint Elizabeth was buried."

That simple sentence made everyone go still and stare at Himari in shock. This was a very delicate topic. Even I felt like I was sticking my nose where it didn't belong.

Elizabeth, former saint of Parnacorta, fiancée of Prince Reichardt, cousin to Grace and her sisters—and sister of Archbishop Henry. This matter was inextricably linked to her.

"Himari, this isn't something to talk about over dinner."

“My apologies, Lena. In that case, should I save it for after the meal?”

“Nah,” said Prince Osvalt. “What you said got me intrigued. I can’t focus on food anymore. Himari, go on.”

Lena’s very reasonable reaction made me consider saving this talk for later, but when Prince Osvalt urged Himari to continue, Lena nodded in agreement.

“But what do you mean you went searching for Lady Elizabeth’s body?” said Lena. “We’ve visited Lady Elizabeth’s grave. You don’t have to go out of your way to look for it. You know where it is.”

“There’s nothing in that grave. It’s empty.”

“What did you say?! That can’t be!”

As I expected, Prince Osvalt was the person most shocked by this. It was only natural he would be appalled to hear that the grave of his brother’s fiancée was empty. Except for Alice, who didn’t know Elizabeth, everyone else looked horrified, too.

“I never heard anything like that from my brother. Himari, are you sure this isn’t some kind of mistake?”

“It’s not surprising that you aren’t aware of the truth, Your Highness,” Himari responded calmly. “Even His Majesty is unaware. This is something known only to His Highness Prince Reichardt and a select few.” As I’d suspected, this information was top secret. It must have been quite the struggle for Himari to uncover it.

“Wait a moment. Even if that were the case, why would you think to look in her grave in the first place?” Prince Osvalt asked. “She wasn’t even in this country when she passed away. What’s going on, Lady Philia? I don’t understand at all.”

His Highness’s doubts were perfectly natural. It must be difficult to imagine an outsider from Girtonia, like myself, picking up on something that even Parnacortan royalty was unaware of.

In truth, I’d felt that something was off ever since I first visited Lady Elizabeth’s grave. There’d been an ongoing crisis in my

homeland at the time, so I couldn't afford to ponder it. However, this recent matter had reminded me of my suspicions.

"When someone with great magical power is buried, the vegetation in the immediate vicinity of their grave is usually visibly lusher. But when I visited Lady Elizabeth's grave, I saw no traces of this phenomenon. I found it unusual for a saint's grave."

"What? I didn't know that."

"Since people with great magical power are rare to begin with, it's not a common phenomenon. And there are exceptions, so it's understandable that no one caught on."

There were exceptions. That single statement cleared up my discomfort. It would make no sense for Prince Reichardt to visit his late fiancée's grave if her body wasn't there. Who would do such a thing?

"Before I asked Himari to investigate this incident, I looked into Archbishop Henry."

"Hmm..."

"I also asked Bishop Bjorn about the argument between Archbishop Henry and His Highness Prince Reichardt."

"Really? I knew they had some kind of argument, but I have no idea what it was about. So, Lady Philia, what did they argue over?"

"Archbishop Henry demanded that Prince Reichardt let him take Elizabeth's body to Dalbert."

On one side was Archbishop Henry, who wanted to take his precious sister's body back to her homeland. And on the other was Prince Reichardt, who refused to hand over the body of his beloved fiancée. According to Bishop Bjorn, the argument went around in circles, and Archbishop Henry absolutely refused to give in.

"Bishop Bjorn said that Prince Reichardt turned down Archbishop Henry's demand," I explained. "But I was still curious about this matter, so I asked Himari, who was already gathering information on Archbishop Henry, to probe into the surrounding circumstances."

“At Lady Philia’s request,” said Himari, “I looked into the location of Lady Elizabeth’s body. Consequently, I learned that His Highness Prince Reichardt had given Archbishop Henry permission to take it.”

“I can’t believe my brother would do such a thing.”

Himari continued, “I understand that Archbishop Henry appealed to His Highness Prince Reichardt’s guilt, stressing that he was the cause of Elizabeth’s death.”

After all, Archbishop Henry had wanted Prince Reichardt to make Elizabeth stop carrying out her saintly duties. However, Prince Reichardt respected Elizabeth’s decision to dedicate herself to her kingdom.

Elizabeth loved Parnacorta with all her heart, and had wanted to devote her entire life to her kingdom as a saint. She seemed to have gotten into quite a few fights with her older brother, Archbishop Henry, over the matter.

After Himari supplied this additional information, Prince Osvalt folded his arms and nodded. “I knew Lady Elizabeth wanted to show my brother how to live a saintly life until the very end. I always admired her strength.”

“When Lady Elizabeth died, Archbishop Henry directed his anger at Prince Reichardt and Parnacorta,” Himari continued. “He left the kingdom, taking Lady Elizabeth’s body with him.”

Directing all his anger at the man and the kingdom that he believed had stolen his beloved younger sister from him, Archbishop Henry must have been desperate to separate Elizabeth from Parnacorta. That was the way I had come to interpret events. His grief at losing his sister turned him into a demon consumed by rage.

“S-so, don’t tell me that Archbishop Henry’s goal is…”

“I believe that this is his revenge against Parnacorta. All this time, he’s never hidden his hostility toward me, Elizabeth’s successor.”

“I can’t believe Archbishop Henry would be driven by revenge against Parnacorta and Miss Philia to do such a thing…” It wasn’t

just Prince Osvalt. Alice, too, was in disbelief.

An archbishop was second only to the pope. Archbishop Henry had gone through rigorous training and tests of character to achieve this position. Any true believer in the Cremoux faith would find this hard to swallow.

“This is only speculation,” I said, “but perhaps he’s trying to get revenge by stealing me from Parnacorta, since I’m the kingdom’s saint.”

“He’d change the late pope’s will just for that? Impossible!” Prince Osvalt raised his voice, making everyone flinch.

As I’d feared, the confusion was only worsening. Perhaps we should have explained things a bit more slowly.

“Your Highness, please calm down. It’s still only a theory.”

“Sorry. But my brother always worried about Lady Elizabeth—so much so that it was hard to watch. He supported her with all his heart…and still…”

With a wry look on his face, Prince Osvalt cast his eyes downward. His frustration must have been immeasurable. Seeing how vexed he was, I couldn’t think of any words to lift his spirits, but I knew what I had to do.

“I will speak to the late pope to expose the truth.”

Hades, the god of the underworld, had a spell to communicate with the souls of the dead. If I could master that spell, I could clarify everything.

That would be the best way to help His Highness.

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“As I thought, this is quite difficult.”

Wiping away the sweat dripping from my forehead, I felt a strain like nothing I’d experienced before.

The amplification of magical power was an ancient magic technique, and one that I’d already mastered. Now I was practicing

the concentration of magical power into one point, an exorcism technique.

“Alice and Erza gave me some tips, but it really isn’t that simple… Ah!” I cried out as the magic in my fingertips exploded with a loud crackle.

Since I clad myself in a Robe of Light while practicing, I was unhurt. Still, I couldn’t help but think that if this was what happened with magic concentrated in just my fingertips, having divine power flowing through my entire body would require painstaking effort.

“Lady Philia! What was that sound just now? It sure was loud.”

Having heard the explosion, Prince Osvalt rushed over to my side in a panic. Did I startle him? He must have been worried. With a troubled expression on his face, His Highness looked at me as if he wanted to say something.

“It was just a small mistake. As I told you the other day, if I practice while covering myself in a Robe of Light like this, I can avoid being injured by blasts of magical power and mitigate the danger.”

After extensive research, I had discovered that almost all cases of fatal injuries from attempting to master divine magic were due to accidental magic blasts. I figured that by wearing a Robe of Light, I could protect myself by absorbing any accidental explosions while I practiced. Now I was testing that theory. As expected, there were some magical misfires at first, but so far I had avoided serious injury.

“Well, don’t push yourself too hard. If this method doesn’t work, you can try another one.”

“No need to worry. I’m confident that I’ll succeed. I’m going to utilize divine magic to master this divine spell. Just bear with me.”

“I’m just worried. I’ve never heard the word ‘impossible’ come out of your mouth, Lady Philia.”

“Is that so?”

He was right. In my experience, hard work led to success, so I'd likely never voiced doubt in front of His Highness. There were plenty of things I struggled with, however. Cooking and making interesting conversation continued to baffle me.

Naturally, I hoped to tackle those areas of weakness one day. I wanted to show off my progress to Prince Osvalt back in Parnacorta, so putting effort into the areas I *did* excel in was the least I could do.

"Please step away, Your Majesty. I'm going to give it another go. Don't risk getting caught up in the blast."

"Er, okay. I know I'm repeating myself, but try not to push yourself too far."

After Prince Osvalt backed away, I resumed my training. Last time, I'd lost concentration halfway through, so that was the pitfall I needed to be particularly wary of.

"I'll start by amplifying the magic power at my fingertips. Then I'll condense my focus into one spot."

"The light you're emitting is getting stronger and stronger..."

"Now I must concentrate. I shall maintain my focus and convert my power into divine magic."

"Whoa! What's that light? It's so bright! It's as bright as the sun!"

Emitting a dazzling glow, I converted the magic at my fingertips into divine magic.

Ugh. My fingers were as heavy as lead, and it felt like even the smallest twitch might trigger another explosion.

"Hah...hah...I have to concentrate. I have to channel more magic into that one spot..."

"Lady Philia!"

"Failure isn't an option!"

The light slowly faded, shimmering like a prism.

Unsurprisingly, it was hard to maintain control. Still, I held firm. To use the divine spell, I'd have to make the magic power

circulate through my *entire* body…but the first stage had been a success.

“Whew… I’m a little tired now.”

As I staggered, struggling to stay upright, Prince Osvalt caught me in his arms. “Oh dear. You’re more exhausted than you were after our mountain excursion. It’s about time you took a break. Wasting your energy now will create problems later on.”

A break? I could understand what Prince Osvalt was getting at. Deteriorating focus made me less effective. He must be aware of the risks of practicing in a substandard state.

In the past, I would likely have stuck to my guns and pressed on no matter what. Now, however, I thought first about staying alive. It was my ambition to return to the kingdom of Parnacorta with His Highness by my side. I didn’t want to jeopardize my health for no reason.

“I’ll heed your advice and take a break, Your Highness,” I said.

“Good. It’s for the best,” said the prince. “I know you don’t want to waste any time, but staying in the mansion might not give you the peace of mind you require. Why don’t we take a stroll in the park that Klaus showed us the other day? It might help us clear our heads.”

I respectfully accepted His Highness’s advice. There wasn’t a cloud in sight that day, and the breeze was refreshingly cool.

When I first arrived in Parnacorta, the idea of taking a break never crossed my mind. I remember how worried this had made Lena and Leonardo. The rigorous training I’d endured to become a respectable saint had given me confidence in my stamina, but I’d come to realize that having too much faith in my own strength was a danger in itself. Somewhere along the way, I’d sacrificed my capacity for emotion, forgetting how to smile and express my own feelings.

“What a nice idea. I’d be happy to join you,” I replied.

“Great. Let me request a carriage for us.”

Smiling even more broadly than usual, Prince Osvalt helped me up into the carriage.

The kingdom of Dalbert was a truly scenic place. Citizens could enjoy a moment of relaxation in its spacious memorial parks, and most of the townspeople we passed had smiles on their faces.

That was precisely why I wanted Lady Alice to keep serving as the nation's saint. She was the person who'd preserved its citizens' happiness for so long.

"We'll need to head back soon," I said. "Mammon took Alice to Parnacorta with him yesterday. The walls are closing in."

Worried that the Great Purification Circle would lose its effectiveness, I had asked Mammon whether I could go home for a little while, but he wouldn't let me. When she saw what a pickle we were in, Alice offered to assume the role of Parnacorta's saint immediately. With nobody else to turn to, I left the kingdom of Parnacorta in her hands, pledging to return when I was able.

"I've always wanted the opportunity to repay you, Philia. Don't worry. I believe in you."

I watched Alice pass through the doorway opened by a grinning Mammon, then promised that I would meet her expectations. No matter how many times I steeled my resolve, however, it never felt good enough.

"Remember, take your time," said Prince Osvalt. "Lady Alice wouldn't want you to rush things and sacrifice your health in the process."

"Sorry. I'm still struggling to wrap my head around these 'breaks' and 'moments of diversion'..."

"As much as I enjoy your unique turns of phrase, I hope you get used to relaxing soon."

"Was there something unusual about the way I phrased that?"

My way of speaking seemed to strike His Highness as eccentric. How peculiar. His Highness was professing to like an unusual aspect of my character. Nine times out of ten, this would have made me think that *he* was the odd one, but an awkward, bashful feeling overcame me instead. I noticed that my heart had

begun to race. This made no sense—we were merely having an ordinary conversation.

“No, I apologize. I like your uniqueness, so there’s no need to change.”

“Very well, but what’s so unique about me?”

“It’s endearing how extremely seriously you take everything. I must have mentioned that before.”

“What?”

I couldn’t understand. Still, I did feel like he’d said something similar in the past.

Then it came back to me. He’d made a similar comment when he’d proposed to me; it just hadn’t seemed right to question him about it at such a moment. I didn’t think it was possible to be endearing and serious at the same time, but Prince Osvalt *did* seem to have unconventional preferences.

“Well, perhaps I should invite you to take a breather when it seems like you need one. On closer thought, that’ll be great for me. I’ll get the pleasure of inviting you to do something.”

I laughed. “And I’ll have the pleasure of receiving more invitations.”

“Precisely. You’re fine just the way you are, Lady Philia.” His Highness laughed too.

I had somebody in my life who could help me with things I struggled with. Relying on someone I trusted was nothing to be ashamed of. I knew that now. As a result, I’d learned to surrender myself to His Highness’s kindness and find joy in it.

“Look, we’re at the park. Watch your step.”

“Thank you.”

I took Prince Osvalt by the hand and climbed down from the carriage. The bright sunlight reflected off the fountain, creating a dazzling rainbow bridge. As I stared at it, Prince Osvalt quietly drew closer to me and took in the same view.

“This really is a lovely spot. Perhaps we should build a fountain in Parnacorta.”

“If you like, I’ll draw up a blueprint.”

“Is that one of your saintly duties?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. I just want to relax like this with you, Your Highness.”

His Highness and I chatted as we walked through the park. It was busier than last time. Some of the visitors were dressed in unusual clothing.

“I think those are tourists from outside the continent,” said His Highness. “Dalbert does have ties to distant lands.”

“They actively welcome people from overseas and embrace their technology and culture, don’t they? Countries on the other side of the ocean have developed shipbuilding techniques that allow boats to endure dangerous voyages, so they can traverse the waters with minimal risk. I heard that Dalbert was planning to construct large ships to send students abroad, but it hasn’t been smooth sailing.”

The sea was not devoid of monsters, so one needed a way of maintaining a permanent barrier on board during the journey. There’d even been talk of taking saints out to sea, but the only one who’d ever taken such a journey was Fianna. No country wanted to allow its saint, its most priceless asset, to venture beyond the shore.

It appeared that other lands utilized their own techniques to cross the ocean safely, but these hadn’t been shared with Sedelgard.

“Fianna was amazing. She traveled the world.”

“I’ve seen fragments of Fianna’s memories. They were truly impressive. She spent years traveling from country to country, purging each nation of demons.”

I gazed at the bronze statue of Archsaint Fianna as I reflected on her heroism.

Our continent wasn’t the only one driven to crisis by Asmodeus and his minions. Lady Fianna had embarked on a grand adventure, determined to rescue nations outside of her own continent, too.

“I’m envious that she was able to travel the world. I dreamed of doing that when I was a child,” said Prince Osvalt.

“One of Lady Fianna’s comrades was just like you: honest, straightforward, and driven by a strong sense of justice. I understand that it was his dream to sail the seas, too. Perhaps men tend to romanticize such adventures.”

“Yeah, you may be right. My older brother went through a similar phase.”

“Prince Reichardt?”

This came as a shock. I suddenly began to wonder what kind of relationship Prince Reichardt and Prince Osvalt had when they were boys.

“Before he began his training for the throne, Reichardt was even more of a troublemaker than me. Oops, don’t tell anyone I told you that.”

“I won’t tell a soul.”

“He was still a child when he and Lady Elizabeth became friends. Despite her ailing health, she was drawn to him, and the two of them fell in love. He was a star student by the time they got engaged, however.”

“Really?”

Everybody had their own story, it seemed.

It had been less than a year since I met Prince Osvalt, so our journey together was relatively short. It was much too early for us to reminisce about the past. Whether our time together became a memorable story to reflect on depended on my future decisions.

“As much as Prince Reichardt intrigues me, I’m more interested in your childhood, Your Highness.”

I wanted to know more about Prince Osvalt. I was no longer satisfied with just having His Highness’s future all to myself; I wanted to learn about his past, too. That was a testament to how hard I’d fallen for him. Greedy as it was, I longed for us to share our futures and our pasts with one another. One day, I wanted us to be able to talk about our memories, too.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. But after that, I want to hear what you were like when you were small, Lady Philia.”

The two of us sat on the bench in front of the bronze statue of Lady Fianna and talked about our pasts. I never realized that learning about the person one loved could fill one’s heart with so much joy.

“Nothing makes me happier than being with you, seeing your face, and talking to you.”

I laughed. “You took the words right out of my mouth, Prince Osvalt. I’m a little annoyed.”

“Oops, my bad. If Reichardt discovers that I failed to be chivalrous, he’ll be furious with me again. Ha ha ha.”

I wished we could keep laughing together for a little longer; even an extra minute would suffice.

I wasn’t alone in feeling that way.

If it meant we could keep looking at one another, sharing our feelings, and spending time with one another, I felt like we could get through anything.

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Osvalt

“OSVALT. IT’S NOT TOO LATE. Explain things to Miss Philia. If she matters to you, it’s the right thing to do.”

A few days before I traveled to the kingdom of Dalbert, I was summoned by my older brother.

My brother didn’t like that Lady Philia had stood up to the head church of Cremoux. He was steadfast in his loyalty to the church. While he acknowledged the possibility that Archbishop Henry might have tampered with the will, he was adamant that we should avoid conflict.

“Isn’t it more than enough to be able to spend time with the person you love? It’s your duty to make Saint Philia happy, is it not?”

At that moment, Reichardt sounded less like the crown prince and more like my big brother. He must have been projecting his own experiences with Lady Elizabeth onto me and Lady Philia. He knew the sorrow of losing somebody you loved, and he didn’t want me to experience the same pain.

I knew that. My brother was the kindest person I knew. His compassion was unparalleled and his love deeper than anyone else’s. That was why he’d thrown himself into continuing Lady Elizabeth’s work by protecting his country.

But it didn’t work like that. While I appreciated Reichardt’s concern, I couldn’t follow his advice.

Lady Philia didn’t want to live in the Kingdom of Dalbert. Besides, the compromise felt wrong to me. I, too, wished to live with Lady Philia in Parnacorta, the land of my birth.

I was sure Reichardt could understand that. I loved this country—the nation Lady Philia had dedicated herself to protecting. I’d loved Parnacorta long before she ever set foot in this land, of course, but after her arrival, I began to see it in a different light. She cherished the kingdom with such unparalleled devotion, sincerity, and purity. Before I knew it, I found myself transfixed by her. The fact that she was safeguarding our country made me love my homeland even more, and I began to dream of staying there with her forever.

When I proposed to her, I made a decision. No matter what the future threw at me, I would always support Lady Philia. I wanted her to love my country for the rest of her life.

She insisted that she loved Parnacorta just as much as I did. I doubted she knew how happy that made me.

I wanted her to hold onto that feeling. That was why I promised myself that I’d never give up on my personal dream of living with her in Parnacorta.

“Let’s make sure we return to Parnacorta together, Lady Philia.”

“Of course. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing my homeland again.”

What kind of face did I make at that moment? Did I look surprised? Happy? In reality, I probably just feigned indifference.

“Do you really see Parnacorta as your homeland?”

“Oh, no. You’re right—that was a shameless thing to say. I haven’t even lived there for a year yet.”

When I saw Lady Philia hang her head dejectedly, looking embarrassed, I felt a little flustered. I didn’t ask that question because I thought she was being silly. I knew she’d grown to love Parnacorta.

After all, she’d agreed to marry me. Obviously, she planned on staying in Parnacorta forever. Still, the fact remained that my kingdom had bought her from Girtonia. I assumed that would weigh on her forever.

“I don’t see how it’s shameful at all. I’m happy that you see it as your home. That said, you have a mother and a sister in Girtonia…”

“Of course, Girtonia’s home to me, too. But…when you rescued me from Limbo and we traveled back to Parnacorta together, it felt like a homecoming.”

“So that’s how you define home. I see.”

“Whenever I get homesick, it’s Parnacorta that comes to mind. After all, Girtonia is in safe hands with Mia.”

Lady Philia was immensely proud of her younger sister, Lady Mia. She probably wasn’t aware of it herself, but she seemed to glow with pride whenever she spoke of her.

“Okay, let me rephrase my question. Will you come back home with me? To our homeland?”

“Yes. It’d be a pleasure to accompany you there.”

Her smile was familiar now, and that made me feel like the happiest man in the world. Could anything more beautiful possibly

exist?

I loved Lady Philia. I wasn't going to let anyone take her happiness away from her.

"I'd love to climb that mountain again, Your Highness. I want to see the view from the summit one more time."

"Okay. I'll make sure that happens."

"I'm excited already. It's a promise."

She held out her pinky, and I made that small promise to her. Her finger was tiny and a little cold, but for some reason, it felt warm to me.

We could climb mountains as many times as we liked. There were still plenty of things I wanted to show her in Parnacorta, too.

Keep looking toward our future together. *I'll make sure to take you there.*

***

Mia

"HUH? MY BIG SISTER Philia's going to be the next pope?"

The day after the shocking news of the pope's death reached the kingdom of Girtonia, I was summoned by Prince Fernand. The news he shared was unexpected, to put it mildly.

I mean, my sister was the saint of Parnacorta. To become the pope, she'd need to move to Dalbert. Plus, she was already engaged to Prince Osvalt of Parnacorta. It all sounded so absurd.

"Are you sure, Prince Fernand? No saint has ever become a pope before."

I'd never heard of anything like it. Generally, an archbishop took over the role of pope. The high church wasn't in desperate need of fresh blood; one of the existing archbishops was still in his

twenties. Normally, one of them would have been selected for the job.

It was weird that my sister had been nominated out of the blue, too. She hadn't mentioned anything about becoming the pope the last time we met, so she couldn't have been informed about it in advance.

Philia was the only saint in Parnacorta. Abruptly being asked to assume the role of pope would put her and the kingdom in a tough spot. She should've been told something ahead of time so she could make preparations.

"I thought it was an unusual choice, too," said Prince Fernand, "but Philia *is* an exceptional talent. She's more than worthy of the honor, both in character and in expertise. Oops—once she becomes the pope, I'll have to refer to her as Pope Philia."

"Prince Fernand!"

"Hmm? What are you worked up about? I just wanted you to know that your sister was becoming pope well in advance. Did I do something wrong?"

My sister would never want to become the pope. She was too happy with her life in the kingdom of Parnacorta. When I saw her speaking affectionately about Prince Osvalt, I felt tremendously relieved. Back when she was in Girtonia, I'd never imagined she'd ever talk about how much she loved somebody. She was so unfazed by her engagement to that stupid Prince Julius that I actually started to worry. I was so happy to see that my sister was capable of falling in love with someone. I was certain she loved *me*, of course, but that was a different matter.

Philia would never consider leaving the country that had changed her so profoundly.

"Er, Prince Fernand? I don't think Philia—I mean, my big sister—would want to become the pope."

"She wouldn't? ...Oh, right. She was engaged to a Parnacortan prince, wasn't she? Well, I'm sure her fiancé would be permitted to accompany her to Dalbert if she were to become pope."

“No, that’s not the part I’m worried about.”

If Prince Osvalt accompanied her to the Kingdom of Dalbert, it would help her maintain some peace of mind. Still, I couldn’t envision leaving my country once, let alone twice. I knew it’d be an enormous burden, especially considering how attached she was to her new home.

“My sister loves the kingdom of Parnacorta. She probably loves it even more than our homeland, Girtonia. Being ordered to leave would be incredibly painful for her. It’s not fair for her to be put in such a situation twice.”

“She loves it more than Girtonia, does she? That’s hard to hear. Had I been more responsible, I would have put a stop to my brother’s tyranny. I have to admit I’m partially to blame for Philia’s situation.”

Prince Fernand had had a crisis of self-confidence due to his frail health. Seeing him work tirelessly to restore Girtonia to prosperity made me question how such a capable person had ever feared someone like Julius.

Because of his inaction, Prince Fernand was partly responsible for Girtonia’s woes. But the man standing before me was battling his past weakness and striving to stand tall, regardless of criticism.

“Would you like to visit your sister?”

“What?”

“You’re worried about her, aren’t you? Keep her company for a little while. We can find someone to cover your saintly duties for a week. If Lady Hildegard agrees, that is.”

“Prince Fernand…”

A week with Philia! I couldn’t tell him how grateful I was. He understood how I felt and said exactly what I needed to hear.

“Thank you. I’ll never forget your kindness.”

“Don’t worry about it. You and your sister have done so much for me. I just want to repay the favor. No need to thank me.”

Even so, I had to give him credit. His Highness's benevolence meant a lot to me. He was sensitive, and sometimes timid, but determined to be strong. Recently, I'd begun to find that attractive. Prince Fernand was growing into a truly admirable man.

"Ahem! Mia!"

"Yes? What is it?" I was startled. I'd never heard him raise his voice like that before.

"It's just, er, I have something important to discuss with you when you get back. I'd like to invite you to dinner again. Would that be all right?"

"Uh, sure. That's fine, but..." I laughed. "You said it so loudly, it startled me. You're not planning to propose to me over dinner, are you?"

"Huh? D-Don't be ridiculous! It's just..."

Oh dear! Why did I say that? I'd been trying to make a joke to conceal my surprise, but it just made things even more awkward.

Wait... He wasn't *actually* planning to propose to me, was he? What was I supposed to do?

"Er, Prince Fernand? Forget what I said just then. I'm looking forward to, uh, dinner. We can talk properly then."

"I-i-indeed. Ha hah. I think I'll sleep well until you come back. I'll explain things to Lady Hildegard, but make sure you pass on my regards as well."

Sensing that the atmosphere had grown uncomfortable, I hurriedly thanked Prince Fernand and left the room. Ugh. Why had I said something so stupid? I was so useless. I'd dreamed of receiving a proposal as romantic as Philia's, but I'd blown my chances now.

Actually, never mind. There was no point wallowing in regret. Philia was the person who mattered to me now. My dear older sister, Philia.

With that thought in mind, I headed home. As it turned out, Aunt Hilda was more than happy for me to visit Philia.

“I’m sure your presence will bring Philia a degree of comfort. After all, nobody’s quite as cheery as you.”

“You make it sound like I’m her favorite stuffed toy,” I said. “I’m actually going to try and negotiate some better treatment for her while I’m there.”

“If I know Philia, she’s enacting a plan of her own already. Just help her out and try not to get in her way.”

Oh. Maybe Hilda was right. This was Philia we were talking about. She’d probably thought of a solution far cleverer than anything I could come up with. I was eager to see what she had up her sleeve. I bet she’d jump right in and declare, “The will is fake, and here’s the proof!”

Okay. Time to head to the kingdom of Parnacorta and keep Philia company!

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“What? She’s already left the country?”

“Indeed she has. Philia set off for the kingdom of Dalbert with my younger brother. Why didn’t you send a letter announcing your arrival?”

“Uhm, I just thought I could surprise my sister by showing up out of the blue. Aha ha.”

“You and your sister couldn’t be more different.”

I’d turned up at my sister’s mansion as a surprise, only to find it totally deserted. The shock left me momentarily speechless. I was left with no option but to visit Parnacorta Castle, where Crown Prince Reichardt greeted me with a look of dismay.

Still, wouldn’t she have been moved by my unannounced visit if she’d been there? I thought it’d cheer her up.

“Miss Philia hopes to prove that Archbishop Henry tampered with the will.”

“I knew it.”

“Oh? You foresaw this?”

“Even *I* felt she was an odd choice. I figured she’d have reached the same conclusion.”

I knew I could trust Philia. She was preparing to stand up against this unfair situation. Clearly, I needed to join her in Dalbert and offer my support.

“Well, then,” I said, “I’d better head to Dalbert to help her. Rest assured I’ll do everything I can to make sure she comes home safely.”

“Even if it means making an enemy of the head church of Cremoux? If I had to offer my opinion, I’d advise against that. If Miss Philia refuses to become the pope, she’ll be picking a fight with every other nation in the world.”

Hmm. This was a sound argument—and one I hadn’t expected to hear. I’d assumed Prince Reichardt would be more flexible in his thinking. After all, his brother had talked Klaus into letting him go to Limbo.

“I just want Miss Philia and my brother to live comfortable, peaceful lives,” Prince Reichardt continued. “I was hoping to ask you to convince her for me.”

“Regrettably, I must disappoint you on that front. Even if I did try to persuade her, it wouldn’t get me anywhere. My sister’s stubborn, believe it or not. Once she’s made up her mind about something, there’s no changing it.”

“Is that so? Hmph…”

I was sure my sister would follow the path she believed in, regardless of what anyone told her. That was Philia’s true strength. She might be a perfect saint, but that was just one side of her. Her real power was her unshakeable resolve. Once she decided to do something, she’d always see it through.

“I have to say, my younger brother’s a stubborn one, too,” said Prince Reichardt. “He’s given me his fair share of trouble.”

“The perfect pair, aren’t they?”

“You’re right about that. I want nothing but happiness for them, but they seem determined to pursue a thornier path.”

Prince Reichardt shrugged his shoulders, a sad yet gentle smile on his face. It struck me that he might be the most compassionate person I'd ever come across. Despite being at odds with Philia and Prince Osvalt, he genuinely wanted them to be happy.

"If that's the case, I'll do everything I can to help them reach the end of that thorny path. You can count on me. I'm fairly confident in my abilities."

"Hah. It seems you're just as stubborn as Miss Philia—and a bit like my brother, too. Very well, then. I'm counting on you to keep them safe. Let them know that I'm ready to welcome them home."

"Prince Reichardt... Of course! Leave it to me! And I'll be sure to say hello for you!"

This time, His Highness left me with a warm smile.

What Philia was trying to achieve was no easy feat, but I had faith in her. She'd turned hopeless situations around plenty of times before. She'd be sure to overcome this hurdle, too.

The next day, I packed my things and set off for the western kingdom of Dalbert, confident that Philia was already working toward her goal.

Chapter 4:
A Vow of Love in a Foreign Land

THE PAPAL SUCCESSION CEREMONY was rapidly approaching. If I wanted to utilize the spirit-communication spell that Hades had used, I'd need to be able to fully manipulate divine magic.

"I need to focus…and then amplify the magic throughout my body."

I used the core principles of ancient magic to magnify the magic power inside myself. Beginning with my fingertips, I gradually expanded the area of power. Today, for the first time, I would attempt to convert all of the magic in my body into divine magic.

"I need to absorb as much mana from the air as I can."

Up to this point, it felt like a routine I'd performed countless times. I absorbed some mana to boost my own magic power.

"Next I need to condense all the magic in my body, as if I were performing an exorcism technique."

As long as I stuck to the methods I'd practiced, everything should go smoothly. I focused, determined to maintain my concentration, and slowly began to compress my magic.

A single slipup could send my magic spiraling out of control, triggering a blast. I was shielded by a Robe of Light, but failure still came with a risk of injury.

"I finally did it," I gasped. "If it wasn't for all the rigorous training I endured in the past, I probably wouldn't have mastered this so quickly."

During my practice, I'd made good use of my intensive saint training. My master, Hildegard, had made me spend day after day carrying out intricate tasks so I'd learn to stay focused. Focusing on multiple things at once had become second nature to me, allowing me to truly sink my teeth into this new challenge.

“Astonishing,” said Erza. “Is this what they call divine magic? You’re giving off power on par with when you took on Asmodeus.”

“Miss Philia never disappoints,” said Klaus. “Isn’t it incredible, Miss Erza? We have a saint who can utilize divine magic.”

“Erza…Klaus…”

Once I’d successfully converted my own magic into divine magic, Erza and Klaus—who’d taught me an exorcism technique and assisted me in my training on several occasions—came to speak to me.

“So, do you think you can master the spirit-communication spell in time? Harnessing divine magic is just the foundation. Actually casting a divine spell is far more difficult.”

Erza was right. Learning to use divine magic was just the beginning. The ability to use it was just the fundamental requirement for casting a divine spell. Far greater precision was necessary to harness it into spellcasting.

“Without a doubt. It won’t be easy, but I’m confident I can succeed.”

“Oh? You seem pretty sure of yourself.”

“The spirit-communication spell is considered one of the simpler divine spells,” I explained. “There’s no reason why I can’t learn it in time.”

Divine spells varied greatly in difficulty. Hades had cast spells of resurrection and instant death that went far beyond what human minds could comprehend. One could spend an entire lifetime trying to master them and still not succeed. The spirit-communication spell was child’s play in comparison. Even somebody like me, who’d just learned to use divine magic, had a realistic chance of mastering it.

“To think we’ll be able to communicate with the pope’s spirit using a divine spell,” said Klaus. “I can’t even imagine how that will go.”

“I’ll be summoning the spirit of someone who’s gone to heaven and communicating with it. From what I understand, his

voice will be loud enough for all of you to hear. One account described the voice resonating throughout the area."

There were few confirmed historical instances of divine spells being cast, but the spirit-communication spell was one of the few I could find written records about. According to those accounts, the summoned person's voice resounded through a fairly large area. Fortunately for me, I wouldn't be the only one who would hear my exchange with the pope.

"I see," said Klaus. "But what would happen—hypothetically speaking—if your spell worked and Archbishop Henry's deceit came to light? It'd cause an uproar. His actions would be regarded as a reprehensible offense."

"Well, we know that much. What kind of idiot asks a question as basic as that?"

"Ouch! Miss Erza, don't sock me in the stomach!"

"Then don't waste our time with nonsense. You're not getting cold feet, are you?" Erza looked Klaus up and down with contempt.

I knew why Klaus wanted to broach the topic, no matter how obvious the answer was. Altering the pope's will was a serious crime. In the Cremoux religion, the archbishops were second only to the pope. The faithful had profound trust in them. It was unthinkable for someone with such a title to betray the pope's confidence.

"If the public learns about Archbishop Henry's transgression," I said, "how severely will he be punished?"

"It's strange for you to ask a question like that," said Erza. "I guarantee that people will demand death, if not worse. I'm sure you knew that already."

This scandal could undermine the authority of the Cremoux Church, so the response was bound to be extreme. Perhaps, as Erza said, I'd been avoiding thinking about the consequences. Revealing the truth would effectively condemn Archbishop Henry to death. I hadn't dared to confront that ugly fact.

"I think you're right, Erza. I must have known the implications of what I was doing."

“Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet, too. He’s trying to destroy a stranger’s life for the sake of revenge. The man’s not worthy of the cloth.”

“Is there no way we can settle the matter in private?”

“Of course not. I’m not going to let you chicken out. I don’t care how much of a soft touch you are. In this scenario, mercy isn’t an option.”

“But I…”

Archbishop Henry was Grace’s cousin and the older brother of Prince Reichardt’s fiancée. I hadn’t had much contact with him myself, but he was far from a stranger. Besides, saints were supposed to *save* people from danger. Punishing someone with death was the antithesis of that.

“Didn’t you say you’d prepare yourself for whatever came your way? You’d be letting down the people who want you to be happy. Ifs and buts aren’t going to save anyone.”

“Erza…”

“Your homeland turned into a total disgrace when you left that stupid prince to his own devices. So what’s your excuse? Your younger sister must be far stronger than you. She sent that idiot and your parents to the dungeons.”

Mia was stronger than I was. I knew that much. I didn’t possess the kind of strength that she did. She’d single-handedly taken on Prince Julius and his supporters and set off a revolution.

Could I have done the same? The answer was no. I couldn’t have.

“Archbishop Henry doesn’t deserve your pity or sympathy. He violated a taboo. He betrayed the gods. Wouldn’t granting him the chance to atone for his sins be the merciful thing to do? It’s part of your saintly duty.”

I said nothing.

“You need to pursue your own happiness. That’s all I want for you.”

Pursue my own happiness? I thought I was already doing that. Perhaps I still lacked the determination to follow through.

“Oh? Did I just hear my Big Sis wishing for someone else’s happiness? Now *that* doesn’t happen every day.”

“Mammon? How long have you been here?”

“Mmm… Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Realizing that Mammon had been lurking behind her for quite some time, Erza spun around and glared at him. She was visibly shaking.

“Why don’t you do us all a favor and drop dead sometime?”

“Gyahhhhh!”

Erza’s argument had hit home. If I stopped now, I’d betray everyone who had risked their own well-being for my sake. I wouldn’t have made it this far without Erza, Klaus, and Alice, or the other people who’d been there for me, like Prince Osvalt and Lena.

I couldn’t disregard their feelings. I needed to fight for myself.

Archbishop Henry might have his own reasons, but they were not my concern. I simply wanted to return to the country I loved alongside the people who were precious to me.

I wouldn’t back down. I was going to master the spirit-communication spell and create the future I wanted.

On reflection, I’d probably never been so true to myself.

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“Hmph. First, a dog barked at me and I fell over, and now I have to pay you 10,000 lild. Luck’s not on my side today.”

“Now it’s my turn to roll the dice… Three.”

I was playing a board game with Prince Osvalt and our friends while I recovered from practicing the divine spell. After checking the number on the dice, I moved my piece—a carriage—across the board.

“A career change? I guess I’m a chef now…”

“What’s wrong? You don’t look too happy about that.”

“It’s just that I’m pretty sure the restaurant would go out of business with me as the chef.”

It was just a game, so having occupations one would never pursue in real life was part of the fun. I understood that, but a *chef*? I couldn’t imagine a worse job for me. I’d always told myself I could get by in any profession, as long as it didn’t involve cooking.

“Don’t say that! I’m sure it’d work out somehow. You didn’t burn your cookies last time you made them, did you?”

“No. They were practically raw.”

“That’s still a big step in the right direction!”

Was it really? I wasn’t persevering through trial and error—Lena was passionately coaching me, and yet I hadn’t improved at all. I felt pathetic. I hoped I could repay Lena for her efforts by learning to cook properly someday.

“Lady Philia’s profession aside,” said Lena, “I can kind of imagine Princess Osvalt as a shepherd!”

“Right? I feel like it suits me, too.”

“I can absolutely picture you chewing on a blade of grass.”

Prince Osvalt was advancing through the board as a shepherd. Lena was right. For some reason, that job didn’t seem like a bad fit for him. Maybe that was because of his sturdy build and the long hours he spent outdoors doing farm work.

“All right, next up…”

“Lady Philia, you have a visitor.”

“Oh, right. It must be Erza.”

“Philia!”

“Mia?”

Mia ran out from behind Leonardo, grasped both my hands tightly, and smiled.

I was stunned. I never expected Mia to show up. I had assumed she was still in Girtonia. She hadn't come because she was worried about me, had she?

"You've been keeping me at arm's length, Philia," she said. "Why didn't you ask me for help? When I heard about you becoming the pope, I was so worried!"

"You were worried about me?"

"Of course I was! I knew you wanted to live out the rest of your days in Parnacorta with Prince Osvalt!"

"..."

Uhh, hold on a moment. My sister was totally embarrassing me in front of Prince Osvalt... She was correct, of course, but she didn't need to shout my feelings from the rooftops. "Mortifying" didn't even come close.

"Er...Mia, I'm just happy to see you. You must have gone out of your way to come here."

"Why wouldn't I? You were there for me in my darkest hour. Now it's my turn to help you."

"Thank you. How did you know where to find me, though?"

How did Mia, who lived in Girtonia, know that I was in Dalbert? I'd kept the situation under wraps to avoid causing unnecessary concern, so I couldn't help but wonder.

"Prince Reichardt told me. He wanted me to help you both."

Prince Osvalt rose to his feet in surprise. "You heard the news from my brother? Is that true?"

Like His Highness, I hadn't expected Prince Reichardt to turn to Mia for assistance. He didn't seem to approve of our plan to take on Archbishop Henry. But if he'd sent Mia to offer her support...

"Prince Fernand said he'd support you, even if it means trouble for Girtonia," said Mia. "And Prince Reichardt is on your side, too. You have nothing to worry about, Philia."

"Prince Fernand said that?"

“Yes. He really wants to make amends. If he’d been more dependable before, you wouldn’t have suffered such injustice.”

I’d only met Prince Fernand, the crown prince of Girtonia, once—when I greeted him after getting engaged to Julius. He certainly hadn’t opened up to me during that encounter. Since then, Mia had helped him lower his walls and get back on his feet, allowing him to dedicate himself to rebuilding his country with unmatched determination. She evidently possessed a power that I lacked.

Not only was she a charming girl, adored by all who knew her, but she’d been gutsy enough to send Prince Julius and her own parents to prison. As her older sister, I felt nothing but pride.

“You’re such a strong person, Mia, and it’s heartening to have your support. But even so, I can’t burden Girtonia with this.”

“What are you talking about, Philia?”

“You shouldn’t put your kingdom at risk. This time, I’m the one who has to prove her strength. Your concern means the world to me, but I can handle this.”

This was my battle to fight, not Mia’s. I couldn’t allow her to be dragged into it. If I had just half of Mia’s courage, I could solve this. My only option was to get stronger.

“You’re so dumb, Philia!”

“Huh?”

“I want to help you out! You came to help me, even though you knew I’d get mad! I don’t need to justify being there for my big sister! I want to stand by you, no matter what!”

I was so happy that Mia had come. Seeing her lively face made me feel brave. But at the same time, it didn’t feel right to rely on her help. Was I clinging on to a petty sense of pride, since I was her older sister? Or was there another feeling influencing me?

“Even Hilda is worried about you and asked me to help,” Mia went on. “We’re family, aren’t we? Please let me help!”

“Mia, I…”

Mia's smile had vanished and her cheeks were soaked with tears. The sight of my sister crying made me regret how cold-hearted I'd been. This was the exact thing Emily had scolded me for in the past. She'd taught me that turning to others for help was never something to be ashamed of.

Mia was special to me. She loved me, even though we'd spent years apart. She showed interest in me when nobody else cared to. She meant more to me than anyone else in the world. That was why I was especially afraid of letting her get hurt.

Prince Osvalt placed a hand on my shoulder. "Why don't you respect Lady Mia's resolve, Lady Philia?" he said, urging me to accept her help.

I'd made Mia cry. What kind of older sister did that? I didn't deserve a lofty title like "archsaint." I wanted one more chance—as long as it wasn't too late.

"Mia..."

"Phili— Huh?!"

I hugged Mia tight. I could feel the heat of her body. She was so warm. We might not have been related by blood, but that didn't change the fact that she was my one and only sister.

She'd rushed to my aid as soon as she heard I was in trouble. How could I not love her?

"Please let me start again," I said. "Mia. I want you to help."

"...Sure. Leave it to me. I'd go through fire and water for you. I'd fight any opponent, no matter how fierce! You can count on me, sis—I mean, big sister!"

My younger sister flashed me a playful smile. There was truly no one who shone as beautifully as her.

Prince Osvalt had reminded me of someone when we first met. I'd finally figured out who that person was. The two of them resembled one another. Not only were they boundlessly cheerful, but they were also supremely strong-willed. When I was with them, I felt stronger, too.

With Prince Osvalt and Mia around, there was nothing left to fear.

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“You’re summoning the pope’s soul so you can talk to him?! Using a divine spell is way too dangerous—even for you!”

When I explained to Mia how I was planning to expose Archbishop Henry’s deceit, she raised her voice in horror. Mia was a saint, just like me, and knew how hazardous divine spells could be. She gave me a worried look.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already managed to activate the ritual with considerable accuracy. I’m confident that I won’t fail.”

“You’re not confident that you’ll succeed, but you’re confident you won’t fail. That’s so typical of you.”

“There was no special meaning behind my phrasing…”



“If you’re sure, then I won’t lose any sleep. I trust you.”

Mia accepted my claim without hesitation.

With practice, I’d significantly increased my success rate. I was sure I could cast the spell when I tried for real. I wasn’t about to betray her trust.

“But Miss Philia! What if it does fail? It’ll be a disaster! Isn’t there a safer method?”

“Don’t worry, Lena. I’m working on making this method as safe as possible.”

“If you say it’s safe, then it must be! I trust you!”

I’d only given Lena a very rough explanation of how the divine spell worked. The blasts she’d heard from the garden every day had made her more anxious than Mia.

Prince Osvalt was shocked at how quickly Lena returned to her usual cheerful self. “Hey, Lena. Are you sure you want to take her word for it?”

“Are you telling me you don’t trust Miss Philia, Prince Osvalt?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then I don’t see why I can’t do the same.”

“Well, of course, but… You always take things too lightly.”

Lena’s gentle, airy demeanor always cheered me up. Her attitude was a great comfort to me, and she was an invaluable friend with whom I could discuss anything.

“Please don’t say that, Prince Osvalt,” I interrupted. “I’m pleased Lena has faith in me.”

“Of course, Miss Philia! I always have faith in you!”

“Hmph.” Prince Osvalt crossed his arms and glanced at Lena’s grinning face out of the corner of his eye. “If you insist, Lady Philia, I guess Lena is fine the way she is.”

I wouldn’t want her any other way. It was Lena’s invariably joyful presence that made my mansion such a cheerful place.

“Philia,” said Mia, “I get that you’re going to summon the pope’s soul and talk to him, but how will you get access to his body? You’d never force your way into the Holy Land, would you?”

The entrance to the Holy Land was fenced off by enormous castle walls and gates, and Dalbert’s knights and members of the head church of Cremoux guarded it around the clock. Mia was right. Considering my role, using brute force to break in wasn’t an option.

Still, the problem of approaching the pope’s body hadn’t worried me at all.

“Have you forgotten, Mia? I’m set to become the next pope. The succession ceremony will be held in the Holy Land. That provides me with a tangible opportunity to get close to the pope’s body.”

“Oh yeah. I blanked for a second there.”

Mia knocked herself on the head and stuck out her tongue. She’d had the same reaction when I, as a more experienced saint, had corrected her on things before. While she had an absent-minded side, Mia was a sincere person with a flair for learning. She never made the same mistake twice, which was one of her strong points.

“There’s one more question that’s nagging at me, Philia,” she said.

“There is?”

“Yeah. Was Archbishop Henry’s scheme really just supposed to upset Parnacorta?”

There was a piercing gleam in Mia’s eyes that hadn’t been there moments ago. She appeared to believe Archbishop Henry had another motive.

After concluding that Archbishop Henry had rewritten the pope’s will, I’d theorized his motives were related to Elizabeth’s death. Had I missed something?

“Good question. I did consider whether there were other possibilities, but this was the only one I could come up with.”

I couldn't think of anything else that could have motivated Archbishop Henry to commit such an act, so I'd almost forced the puzzle pieces to fit together. After all, nothing else connected the two of us. Elizabeth was our only tie. I'd never even met Elizabeth, only taken her place when I became the saint of Parnacorta.

"I know. You and Archbishop Henry have never even met, so I don't know why else he'd have it in for you. I guess we just have to accept this as his motive, no matter how weird it sounds."

"His motive doesn't matter!" argued Lena. "Miss Philia is absolutely sure he altered the will."

"But isn't it strange how easily the truth was exposed? Isn't that kind of suspicious?"

"Huh? You can't second-guess everything, Miss Mia!"

Was the truth exposed that easily? Now that she mentioned it, Mia had a point.

Wait a minute. What if Archbishop Henry intentionally dropped clues during our dinner to insinuate that he was the one who altered the will? Could that be true? If it was, then every conclusion we'd reached so far might have been orchestrated by him.

The idea that I might have been significantly misled sent shivers down my spine.

"Archbishop Henry's motive, huh?" said Prince Osvalt. "Lady Philia's theory made sense when I heard it, but now... The increased surveillance around this mansion has been bothering me."

"You noticed that as well, Prince Osvalt?"

"I'm still a soldier at heart. I notice when there are more troops around. Perhaps Archbishop Henry knows about our plans."

I'd noticed the increased surveillance, too. I wasn't convinced that our goal had been exposed, however. If our plan to use a divine spell to converse with the pope's soul had been leaked, one would expect more immediate obstacles to be put in our way.

"I doubt anyone's figured out our—"

No, that wasn't right. What if Archbishop Henry intentionally manipulated me to think he'd altered the pope's will? What if this entire scenario had been orchestrated by him—including my learning the divine spell?

My conclusions might have been shockingly incorrect.

"What if Archbishop Henry's aim is to…?"

"What's wrong Philia? You've gone pale."

Envisioning Archbishop Henry's true goal made me shudder.

If something like that were to happen, this country—no, perhaps even the entirety of Sedelgard—would be…

If my suspicions were correct, then Archbishop Henry had truly thrown caution to the wind.

"Whatever happens, you can leave this in my hands! I'll protect you from anyone, Philia—whether it's Archbishop Henry or someone else entirely!"

Mia puffed out her chest as she made this bold declaration. She truly was dependable. With her by my side, no hurdle felt too high.

"Thank you, Mia. I know I can rely on you. That's why I have a more important job for you to do—and it doesn't involve protecting me."

"A more important job?" Mia looked at me, puzzled.

If Archbishop Henry really had seen through all of our plans, I needed to give Mia another task.

"Yes. I want you to—"

I told Mia what I needed her to do during the papal succession ceremony.

There was no turning back now. With the ceremony looming, I set about ensuring that our groundwork was flawless.

***

“Ready to go?”

“Yes. You seem much calmer now—not that I expected anything less.”

“I’ll do the best I can, Philia,” said Mia. “You can count on me to pull this off.”

It was the day of the papal succession ceremony. Once I drank the divine blood from the Holy Grail, I would become the new pope, forced to stay in the country where the Holy Land lay and serve as God’s representative for the rest of my life. Among other things, the pope of Cremoux was tasked with personally protecting the Holy Land, which meant my movements would be more limited than when I was a saint.

I was going to settle this once and for all to make sure I didn’t meet that fate.

I had no personal grudge against Archbishop Henry. Perhaps he resented me, but I felt no animosity toward him. It would have been easier if I were angry. If I had hate in my heart, perhaps I could have sent Archbishop Henry to his punishment without regrets. At any rate, I had to do the dirty work of exposing him. There was no escaping that duty.

I’d witnessed Mia’s strength with my own eyes. My sister worked tirelessly to save her homeland, even when doing so pained her. If I wanted to call Parnacorta home and serve as its saint, I would have to display the same fortitude as Prince Osvalt and Mia.

Once I’d committed myself to the task at hand, I felt oddly calm. My mental state was precisely as I wanted it.

“Last time we saw each other, you looked like you might chicken out,” said Erza, “but that doesn’t seem likely now.”

“Sorry for making you worry, Erza.”

“Whoa! I didn’t expect to see you here, Mia!” exclaimed Mammon. “I do believe you’re even cuter than the last time I saw you. Forget this papal succession ceremony and let me take you on a date instead!”

“I politely decline.”

“Your smile is so gorgeous, even when you’re rejecting me!”

Erza and Mammon had arrived at the mansion.

The pair of them were accompanying me as bodyguards in case anything unexpected happened during the succession ceremony. I was grateful that they were helping out, even if they were fundamentally allied with the head church.

“I apologize for making you go to all this trouble,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Erza assured me. “This crisis was caused by one of our own. Besides, my exorcist work has been slow lately.”

“And I’m just a poor familiar dragged into helping Big Sis kill some time.”

“No whining. I could work you even harder if I wanted to. In fact, that might be a good idea.”

“Little Miss Philiaaa! Tell Erza that demons deserve rights, too!”

As usual, Erza and Mammon were playfully teasing one another. Having known them since the mysterious vanishing incidents, I knew I could rely on them.

With Erza and Mammon in our corner, we’d be fine. I set out toward the Holy Land without a worry in the world.

“This is the Holy Land, huh? Coming here with you was my dream, Philia. I’m so pleased it’s come true.”

“I didn’t expect it to happen like this, but I’m glad you’re here with me, too, Mia.”

As a saint, Mia was granted permission to enter the Holy Land. Prince Osvalt, being royalty, and Erza and Mammon, being members of the head church, were also given authorization. One needed special permission to enter—especially on such an important day, with the succession ceremony taking place—but we encountered no opposition. Everyone here but Mia had attended the pope’s funeral, so I wasn’t too worried, but there was still a chance that Archbishop Henry might try to interfere. Fortunately, that fear proved unfounded.

Still, there was no guarantee our luck would continue. I couldn't let my guard down. I had to brace myself for every possibility.

"You look pretty tense."

"I always look like this."

"This is an important ceremony, Lady Mia," said Prince Osvalt. "It's natural for Lady Philia to be a little nervous."

Now Prince Osvalt was chiming in.

"But we're both here. Philia, you don't need to be so anxious."

"As I said, this is simply how my face looks! I'm not nervous at all."

My mind was focused. I was doing fine.

"Are you sure? To me, you look even more stressed than when you left the mansion."

"You saw that too, Prince Osvalt? I knew I wasn't imagining things!"

There was no changing either of their minds. They were both focused on the same thing. Was my face that tense? It didn't feel that way at all.

"Isn't this my usual expression?" I asked.

"You look beautiful no matter what face you're making, Little Miss Philia," said Mammon.

Erza insisted that she couldn't see a difference, but I couldn't help but worry. What if I were unknowingly anxious, and that caused me to mess up the spell?

"You'll be fine. Remember, you're coming home with us. Just focus on that."

"Prince Osvalt…"

The prince squeezed my hand gently. I felt as though a weight had been lifted. I must have had some extra tension inside me all along. I hadn't noticed at all.

"I knew you'd bring a grin to Philia's face," said Mia. "That's our Prince Osvalt for you."

“I’m sure I’m not grinning,” I replied.

“Why are you turning your face away, then?” Mia teased.

She seized any chance she got to make fun of me and Prince Osvalt. She was an absolute lost cause.

As we were chatting, we reached the vicinity of the Holy Land’s altar.

“I take it you’re Miss Philia. We’ve been waiting for you. Please step up onto the platform. And then—”

“We can’t join you on the platform,” said Erza, “so we have to move back. I wish you the best of luck, Archsaint.”

Mammon smirked. “I couldn’t be more sure of you if I tried, Little Miss Philia. Take it easy, okay?”

“See you when it’s all over,” said Mia.

“Good luck, Lady Philia.”

It was time to say goodbye to everyone. Understandably, I was the only person allowed to climb onto the platform.

After receiving warm words from all my friends, I made my way toward the platform, one step at a time.

Archbishop Henry, standing beside the altar, bowed respectfully to me. “Miss Philia—or perhaps I should say, Your Holiness. The moment has almost arrived. I cannot hide my excitement at the birth of the new pope.”

“Really?”

He chuckled. “Of course. I’m sure my late sister would be delighted to see a fellow saint of Parnacorta become the pope.”

Archbishop Henry’s face twisted into a grin. I didn’t know much about Elizabeth as a person, but from what Grace had told me, she didn’t seem like the type who’d get excited by such a thing.

“Begin by paying your respects to the former pope at the altar. Then drink the divine blood so that you may lead us all,” Archbishop Henry continued. “Now then, soon-to-be Pope Philia—it’s time to begin the ceremony.”

“Very well.”

I climbed the steps to the platform, then crossed to the Holy Grail and coffin above the altar. Archbishop Henry didn’t seem about to make a move. I ought to be able to concentrate on the divine spell properly.

“First, let me convert all the magic in my body into divine magic…”

“Huh?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s so bright!”

“I thought she was about to begin the ceremony!”

I filled my body with divine magic, more smoothly than I’d ever done before. Shouts rose up from the church officials observing over the ceremony, but I wasn’t about to stop.

“All right, here we go!” I announced. “Spirit-communication magic!”

“Is that an earthquake?” someone exclaimed.

“Look at the sky!” cried another voice. “Light is pouring down onto Lady Philia!”

“There’s no mistaking it! A divine spell!”

As expected, the task at hand was fairly taxing. I felt as if I would lose consciousness the moment I lost focus. I was forcing myself to practice a type of magic that wasn’t intended for mortals, and it was draining my stamina at an alarming rate.

All of that training was worth it, though. The spirit-communication spell proved a success.

“I can’t believe it. Someone has summoned my soul with spirit-communication magic. Who are you?”

“Oh, it’s a pleasure to meet you—although maybe ‘meet’ might be the wrong word,” I replied. “I am Philia Adenauer, the saint of Parnacorta.”

“I see. Archsaint Philia, hmm? Why have you summoned me back to this world? There must be a matter of great importance.”

“That’s the pope’s voice!”

“She must have used a divine spell to use spirit-communication magic!”

“But for what purpose?!”

The late pope’s soul spoke to me in a low voice. After I introduced myself, he promptly asked why I had called for him. He must have figured I wouldn’t be able to maintain the spell for very long.

The people around me appeared to have recognized that the pope’s soul had made its way down.

“Excuse me for making my questions so brief. It says in your will that you appointed me as your successor. Is that true?”

This was the question I’d come to get the answer to. It was the reason that I, with the help of everyone around me, had worked so hard. Prince Osvalt, Erza, Mammon, Alice, and Mia… If it wasn’t for the courage they’d instilled in me, I could never have cast the spell safely and successfully.

I waited for the answer. Hearing it would make all our hard work worthwhile.



“What? Why would it do that? I appointed Henry as the next pope! Why would he say anything to the contrary?”

“What?”

The soul of the pope—who sounded truly rattled by my revelation—claimed that he’d appointed Archbishop Henry as his successor, not me. Everyone’s gaze turned toward Archbishop Henry at the same time.

“What is he talking about?”

“The pope named Archbishop Henry as his successor?”

“Why? How could something like this happen?”

The onlookers cried out in surprise as they drew closer to Archbishop Henry.

I’d heard what I wanted to hear. It was time to carefully rescind the spirit-communication spell…

“How dare you come near me?”

“Argh!”

Archbishop Henry swept an arm upward, generating a gust of wind that sent the crowd surrounding him flying. He cast his glasses aside and turned to me, his eyes wild.

“You’ve overexerted yourself, haven’t you, Philia? It’s all going according to plan.”

A menacing glint flickered in his eyes as a huge, ominously decorated door materialized over his head.

This was the teleportation spell that demons used…

The door creaked open, and a massive cage made of green metal crashed down on top of me, trapping me inside.

I’d been careless. I sensed something was amiss, but I was too exhausted to move out of the way.

“This is the product of my research into demonic magic. What do you think? I made capturing the archsaint look like child’s play. Quite impressive, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Is this the kind of metal I think it is?”

“Hah. This cage is indeed forged from magic-absorbing metal. Your divine magic is now mine. My plan has played out perfectly. At long last, I have outwitted you, the so-called ‘most powerful saint of all time,’ who erased my sister’s legacy!”

Clutching a black orb in his hand, Archbishop Henry sneered triumphantly. In stark contrast to the gentle smile he’d worn before, his expression was brimming with malice.

My cage bore an uncanny resemblance to the one Asmodeus had used to drain power from his victims. It seemed like Archbishop Henry’s goal was to absorb my divine magic.

The black crystal orb in his hand gleamed with iridescent light as it siphoned my divine magic through the cage—just as planned.

“Now I, too, will be able to use divine magic! Hades will return from the realm of the dead and aid me in my revenge. I shall use the power of Hades to destroy not only Saint Philia, but the entire kingdom of Parnacorta. And as for you, Elizabeth, I’ll bring you back to life! I just need to do away with that foolish saint first! Then we can celebrate the fruits of my vengeance together!”

It sounded like Archbishop Henry’s true aim was to resurrect Hades, take revenge on me, and bring Elizabeth back to life.

I’d played right into Archbishop Henry’s hands by summoning the pope’s soul. He’d been manipulating me all along.

“I heard what an exceptional talent Elizabeth’s successor was! If you were as good as people claimed, there was no doubt in my mind that you would master the divine spell.”

“Even if you revive Hades,” I said, “you can’t make him obey you. All you’ll do is unleash chaos upon this country…no, upon the entire continent of Sedelgard.”

“That’s where the Holy Servant’s Staff comes in! My loyal servants are on their way to fetch it as we speak. I’m sorry to break it to you, but there’s no point running after them. You won’t make it in time!”

The Holy Servant’s Staff, which allowed its wielder to control the gods, was supposedly kept in a secure location—but it

sounded as though Archbishop Henry's demon bodyguards had gone to fetch it already.

This was the worst outcome I could possibly have imagined.

Still, I'd done all I could. From this point, it was up to Mia.

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Mia

"THERE'S A CHANCE that Archbishop Henry's true goal is to awaken Hades and bring Elizabeth back to life. He might try to draw the magic power out of me with the same method that Asmodeus used, and channel my divine magic to perform that spell."

According to Philia, getting her to use the spirit-communication spell to ask the pope the truth was likely Archbishop Henry's goal.

In other words, everything she and Prince Osvalt had done so far was exactly what he'd anticipated. He used my sister's brilliance against her. What a menace.

Of course, Philia might have been overestimating him. Maybe he was just trying to snatch her away from Parnacorta out of spite. Still, when I heard the lengths that he'd gone to, that alone didn't seem like a strong enough motive. Philia felt the same way.

Not many people would gamble on the slim chance that Philia could master a divine spell, something few mortals had achieved. Archbishop Henry, however, seemed to have a high opinion of my sister's abilities.

How infuriating. Not only did he take advantage of my sister, but he relied on our trust to throw us all off guard.

"It's your job to guard the Holy Servant's Staff, Mia. We can't let Archbishop Henry wake Hades."

Prefacing her plea with, “I hope I’m just overthinking this,” Philia entrusted me with the task of protecting the Holy Servant’s Staff. I was proud that she had so much faith in me.

The Holy Servant’s Staff was on the other side of the door behind me. I had cast a barrier to keep demons from teleporting in, but I wasn’t sure what I could do if they smashed in the door. In short, my role was to stop anyone from getting past me.

“In order to prove that the late pope’s will is false, I’ll need to cast a spirit-communication spell. However, that will temporarily leave me immobilized. I might not be able to circumvent having my power absorbed, even if I know what’s coming.”

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. I’ll protect you, Lady Philia.”

“No. I don’t think anyone will be able to approach the altar while my magic is being drained. You’ll have to help out once that process is over.”

“You’re not going to tell me to stay away because it’s too risky?”

“I know you’ll come after me, no matter how risky it is.”

As I listened to Philia and Prince Osvalt trade lovey-dovey promises, it became clear that Philia was already expecting to have her divine magic drained. The important part was what we did next. We simply had to prevent Hades from being awakened.

The Holy Servant’s Staff, a weapon capable of controlling the gods, could not fall into Archbishop Henry’s hands.

At any rate, my heart was light. Philia, my older sister whom I respected so much, had turned to *me* for help.

“You look awfully pleased with yourself.”

“What? Aha hah, did it show on my face?”

Still, I wasn’t the only one whose help Philia had employed. There was also Erza Notice, the exorcist. She’d come from the head church to guard Philia when the vanishing incidents began and had come to earn her trust. In all honesty, Erza’s condescending demeanor got under my skin, but Philia insisted she had a heart of gold. Maybe Philia’s idea of kindness was a little skewed.

That said, Erza didn't seem like a terrible person. She *was* skilled. The extermination of demons was her area of expertise, so she specialized in offense, whereas we saints placed more emphasis on defense.

If nothing else, we could rely on Erza's remarkable skills.

"This is the first time you've entrusted a task to me, Philia. You've told me before that I'm a good saint, but today it feels like you've finally acknowledged my worth."

"Is my acknowledgement really such a big deal?"

"Of course it is. You've always been my idol."

I only worked as hard as I did because I wanted to be like Philia. She was the reason I endured my master's harsh training and woke up early every day to practice by myself.

Maybe my happiness seemed strange to other people, but that didn't matter. Philia had put her faith in me, and I was determined to fulfill my role.

"You're a real gem, Little Miss Mia," said Mammon. "Cute and a hard worker, too. How about we grab dinner in town after this? Just the two of u—"

"I politely decline."

Mammon was a demon. He hit on me constantly, but I guess that's just how demons are. When we visited Philia's mansion, he even flirted with my foster mother. He didn't seem to discriminate when it came to women.

"They don't call you the fastest saint for nothing. You turned me down at record speed. That just makes me fall even harder, though. I'll do whatever it takes to be with—"

"Enough, Mammon," snapped Erza. "Knock it off if you want to keep your head on your shoulders."

Just as Erza was pointing her red falchion at Mammon, I heard two low and muffled voices.

"So, the Holy Servant's Staff is back there!"

"Huh?"

Philia had mentioned that Archbishop Henry had two demons accompanying him, and that their magic power was far greater than mine and Erza's. In fact, she believed they were on par with Mammon, a high-ranking demon.

"Orius and Vapra, huh?" said Mammon. "I see you're wagging your tails for that Henry guy these days. Must be tough, being helpless puppets who can't do anything without their master's say-so."

There was silence for a long moment. Then the two demons pulled back their hoods, revealing their faces. They had manes, just like lions.

In any case, it was two against three. In terms of numbers, we had the advantage.

Mammon must have been hoping to attract their attention by riling them up. If they pounced at us, we could turn the tables on them and—

"We will destroy that door."

Two magic circles appeared out of nowhere and began to shoot out dark discs, destroying the door with a deafening crash. The demons passed through the entrance without even sparing us a glance. Mammon's goading seemed to go completely unnoticed.

Uh, which was Orius and which was Vapra again? "Oh well, whatever. Chain of Holy Light!"

I launched two chains of light from my hands, restraining the demons.

As Mammon had mentioned, my ability to trigger spells in a short amount of time had earned me the moniker "the fastest saint." Thanks to the ancient ritual I'd used to amplify my magic power, the chains weren't easy to break, either—at least, they weren't supposed to be.

"We must take the Holy Servant's Staff to our master!"

"Huh?! Are you serious?"

The demons were insanely powerful. I'd augmented my magic power to make my spell as powerful as I could, but they still ripped through the chains with sheer force.

Drat. I'd heard that demons were more of a challenge than monsters, and I'd even come face to face with a threatening one named Asmodeus before, but it still stung to see them break free so easily.

"Nice job, little sister of the archsaint!"

"You've bought us more than enough time!"

"What?"

As I was silently cursing my luck, Mammon and Erza sent the demons flying across the room, preventing them from getting any further.

I should have known professional demon fighters would know what to do. They'd used the time I bought them to prepare their attack.

"We must take the Holy Servant's Staff to our master!"

Was that the only line these demons could say? If they'd been turned into puppets like Mammon said, I felt kind of bad for them. For Archbishop Henry to do something like that, his obsession with resurrecting his sister must have made him lose his humanity.

"My sister entrusted me with guarding this place. There's no way I'll let you pass! Chain of Holy Light!"

"The same spell again, Mia?"

"No, this one's different. This time, I'm using twenty chains! Twenty chains of light!"

I wasn't just increasing the speed and intensity of my spell, but the number of chains, too. Surely this would restrain even the roughest of demons.

As soon as the pair stood up, I bound them with twenty chains of light.

"Waaagh...we must take the Holy Servant's Staff to our master..."

The demons writhed, but the chains held. I'd successfully captured them, and I wasn't about to let them get away.

Philia! Did I live up to your expectations? I hope you'll shower me with lots of praise!

***

Philia

"HEH HEH HEH... The moment has finally arrived! Time to lift the curtain on my revenge! Your talent will be your undoing, Philia! I've been waiting so long to bury you and that arrogant Reichardt with my own hands!"

Archbishop Henry strode over to me holding up his iridescent crystal. He'd deliberately chosen to exploit me to exact his revenge, in part because of his irrational grudge against me. His hatred for me and Prince Reichardt ran deeper than I thought.

Had anyone ever hated me this much before? Julius was cruel toward me, but I couldn't remember him being this openly hostile. The shift from his previously affable demeanor shocked me. I hadn't known that anger and cruelty could alter someone's appearance so drastically.

"Now let the purge begin! I'll start with you, Philia Adenauer. Once I've erased you from existence, your loved ones will follow. Or shall I do it the other way around? I could inflict more profound sorrow on you that way..."

"May I ask you one question?" I said. "I realize that you hate me, but I just can't understand why. How can you hate a person you've only just met so intensely?"

Archbishop Henry's loathing of me was apparent in every word he uttered. I had no idea it ran this deep. I anticipated him appropriating my divine magic, but I assumed that saving Elizabeth was his primary motivation. Was he really that upset that I'd taken her place in Parnacorta?

"Are you claiming not to understand how you incurred my wrath? How dare you utter such nonsense? As the saint of

Parnacorta, you achieve success after success and are exalted for it every single time. How would Elizabeth have felt about that? You might be very proud of your prowess, but while you hog the world's attention, my sister—who sacrificed her life for her country—has been utterly forgotten! People view her as a useless saint. You may as well have killed her with your own two hands!"

So that was it. Archbishop Henry blamed me for expunging Elizabeth's legacy through my work for Parnacorta.

It was, for all intents and purposes, a false accusation; but from his point of view, I certainly seemed like the villain.

"And to top it all off, the pope—the pope himself—declared he was going to make you archsaint! He was the only person I trusted! He bestowed the title that only Fianna had ever held on the very woman who stole my sister's rightful role! He all but spat on Elizabeth's grave!"

Archbishop Henry shot me a piercing glare. Julius had been just as vicious when he revealed his true feelings about me, but Henry's rage was far deeper.

"I understand that you resent me," I said. "But I've heard that you're a clergyman of great integrity who devotes himself to his fellow believers. There's no way that somebody like you is unaware of the futility of soiling his hands in revenge. Most importantly, do you think your actions would make your beloved Elizabeth happy? Please, open your eyes. There's still time."

From what Grace had told me about her, Elizabeth was overflowing with love. In that respect, she had been an ideal saint. I couldn't believe she'd want to be revived through selfish and reckless means.

"Enough of your condescending comments! What would you know? You have everything anyone could ever wish for! And who cares what Elizabeth would want? I'm the one who hates your guts! I want to obliterate every single person who's made a fool out of my sister—you, Reichardt, and the entire kingdom of Parnacorta!"

As I feared, my words didn't get through to him in his rage. Archbishop Henry had become obsessed with revenge.

It was tragic. According to Bishop Bjorn, Archbishop Henry had once been a deeply pious man, adored by followers of the faith. The kindly face he'd worn at dinner must once have been the real him.

As someone who believed in the same God, it was unbearable to see sorrow and anger change a person to such an extent.

"What's with that pitiful expression? Lamenting your own superficiality?"

"No. I just feel bad that your heart has been broken by your circumstances and your great kindness. I pray that God will forgive you. Please don't commit any more sins."

Archbishop Henry was gripped by a rage he had no way of expressing. He just wanted to lash out. There was no way that someone who'd ascended through the ranks to become archbishop was unable to tell right from wrong—but he seemed to blame himself, more than anything else, for being unable to fight the circumstances that caused him so much pain.

Henry cackled. "How can somebody so arrogant look so composed? I never expected you to claim to pity me. I'm happy! I'm about to acquire the power of the gods and use it to crush the ungrateful citizens of Parnacorta! Reichardt, my sister's killer! You, the woman who erased her legacy! I will expunge this world of every one of you!"

Nothing I could say would get through to him. He was totally consumed with exacting revenge. Overcome by hatred, he craved only the power to make his fantasies of vengeance come true. There wasn't a single part of this world without Elizabeth that he was prepared to forgive.

"The Holy Servant's Staff will soon arrive before me. Then it will be time to awaken Hades, the god of the underworld. His strength is beyond human comprehension. I shall grant you the privilege of witnessing that spectacle before you die! Go ahead and writhe around in agony as you bemoan your helplessness! I've looked forward to watching it!"

“The Holy Servant’s Staff isn’t going to turn up, no matter how long you wait.”

At that, the archbishop fell silent. His smile vanished from his face, and his expression grew stern. He glared at me once again. I could still get him to listen to me, at least.

It was true. Archbishop Henry would never get his hands on the Holy Servant’s Staff. It was being protected by the people I trusted the most.

“Oh dear. I must have overestimated you. You think I don’t have a plan to get my hands on the staff? You’re wasting your time if you think bluffing will rattle me and give you a chance to escape. Could you be any more naïve? Allow me to enlighten you. My minions are high-ranking demons. The staff may well be secured behind a thick, reinforced door, but for them—”

“Philia! We have the Holy Servant’s Staff!”

“What?! How is this possible? How does that woman have the staff?”

Mia had appeared, holding the Holy Servant’s Staff. When Archbishop Henry saw her, he fell flat on the ground in dismay.

I was glad I’d trusted her to carry out that mission. She’d executed it perfectly.

“Lady Philia! That cage! Arghhh!”

“Oh?! O-Osvalt! Wh-when did you get here?!”

Prince Osvalt leapt forward and destroyed the cage with a loaded spear that Erza had prepared. I was unsteady on my feet, having yet to regain my strength, so he held me up in his burly arms. I was completely drained of magic, too, so I needed to take in some mana from my surroundings.

“Your scheming ends here, Archbishop Henry,” I gasped. “I have a sister I love, too, so I’m painfully aware of how you feel.”

There was no response.

“Luckily, you haven’t harmed anyone. I’ll request for your punishment to be mitigated. What do you say we start afresh?”

“Revenge won’t get you anywhere, Lord Henry,” Prince Osvalt added. “You know it’s not what Lady Elizabeth would have wanted, don’t you? It’s time to give up and surrender.”

Prince Osvalt and I urged Archbishop Henry to give up on his failed scheme. It was impossible for him to command Hades without the Holy Servant’s Staff, so he was out of options.

But the archbishop wasn’t backing down. “How dare you claim to understand my feelings? What in the world could you know? You already have it all… I’ve had enough. Allow me to put an end to everything once and for all!”

“Archbishop Henry!”

Archbishop Henry rose to his feet, raised his crystal ball, and began to cast a spell.

He wasn’t attempting to awaken Hades without the Holy Servant’s Staff, was he? I hadn’t foreseen this development. I had to stop him, and quickly.

“As long as I have my revenge, Philia Adenauer, I don’t care what comes next. All I want is to eliminate Parnacorta, that incompetent Prince Reichardt, and the woman who stole Elizabeth’s position! Who cares what becomes of this world? That’s right! At least I won’t be sitting around licking my wounds. Awaken, Hades, god of the underworld!”

None of us could conceal our shock.

An enormous magic circle spread out across the floor, followed by a thud that might have shaken the entire continent.

It was too late. Before I had the chance to move, Mia unleashed a glowing, silver cross-shaped blade, but it wasn’t enough to stop Archbishop Henry. His awakening spell succeeded, and Hades, the god of the underworld, rose from his slumber.

I hadn’t prepared for this. Archbishop Henry knew precisely how fearsome gods could be. His plan so far had been carried out with meticulous precision. I didn’t expect him to turn to wanton destruction.

A long-haired man with black wings emerged from the magic circle. The level of divine magic pouring out of him put mine to

shame. The pressure it created was so intense, it felt as if a tornado had appeared in front of me.

Draped in a faint rainbow-hued light, the figure radiated an air so dignified that it almost brought me to my knees. The stare he gave me was alarmingly vacant, though. I must have looked as insignificant as a pebble lying at the side of the road.

“Oh Hades, god of the underworld! You have awakened from your slumber! I understand that you can send anything to the realm of the dead. Please help me get my revenge!”

In response, Hades yawned. “Who are you? I’d finally drifted off into a pleasant sleep…”

“Huh? Gah!”

Hades glanced at Archbishop Henry, his eyes glowing dully. Henry was hurled backward with tremendous force and crashed into the altar. While he was still alive, he was completely motionless and apparently unconscious.



“Whoops.” Hades yawned again. “That nap must have left me rusty. I forgot to send his soul to the realm of the dead.”

I had read that Hades could use lethal magic to pluck the soul out of any living being in an instant. Archbishop Henry seemed to have escaped death by sheer chance.

An overwhelming sense of dread washed over me—one far greater than I’d felt when facing Asmodeus. Mortals couldn’t defy gods. Their actions simply had to be accepted, no matter how absurd they were. If a human provoked a god’s wrath, the fault lay entirely with the human, regardless of the circumstances.

At the same time, I couldn’t just stand around and watch the situation spiral out of control.

“Guess I should get back into the swing of things. Why don’t I send a few nearby souls to the realm of the dead?”

He was about to kill multiple people, just because he felt like it. Human deaths meant nothing to him.

As I feared, it was dangerous to leave Hades unchecked—and there was only one way to conquer this threat.

“Mia! Give me the Holy Servant’s Staff!”

“Philia… Oh, okay!”

I tried to run to Mia, but my strength was still drained. The best I could do was reach out my arm.

Our only hope was to use the Holy Servant’s Staff to send Hades back to sleep. Mia, grasping the situation, ran over to me.

“Huh? Wait, is that…the Holy Servant’s Staff? Do you mere mortals think you can wield such a weapon? How insulting!”

Hades strode silently to Mia and raised his hand. The light that shone from it could only mean one thing—he was casting a divine spell. Hades was about to extract Mia’s soul.

With a thunderous boom, a seemingly bottomless hole opened up in the ground. At that moment, Mammon caught Mia, dodging Hades’s magic. In the shock, she dropped the staff.

“That was a close one, Little Miss Mia. Are you okay?”

“M-Mammon. Thank you so much.”

“Hey, I’m not the kind of coward who can stand by and watch when a young lady is in danger.”

“But your foot…”

Hades’s magic had blown Mammon’s right foot off.

“This body’s an artificial construct,” he shrugged. “As long as lethal magic doesn’t hit my real form, I’m fine. I’m just glad you’re unharmed.”

Once again, Mammon’s demonic makeup had worked to his advantage. The structure of a demon’s body was considerably different from that of a human. Asmodeus’s soul alone had been enough to wreak havoc. Mammon would be fine—he could simply reattach his foot.

“Demons here, too?” said Hades. “Well, whatever. I just need that staff…”

Erza picked up the staff that Mia had dropped and rushed toward me at breakneck speed. Her agility could put any saint to shame. She’d saved me again. All I needed to do was receive the staff.

“Stop right there. Who gave you permission for you to take that?”

“Exorcism Magic—Purification Cannon!”

As Hades closed in on Erza, she tossed the staff in the air and made a cross sign with her fingers, shooting a massive vortex of light in his direction.

This daring act proved that not even a god could instill fear in her. Her exorcism magic triggered a blast, and the staff she’d thrown into the air came flying through the smoke toward me—but her haste caused her to misjudge her throw, and it veered off course.

Prince Osvalt leaped into the air and caught the staff. “Thank you, Lady Erza!” He ran toward me.

If I’d only been able to move, it’d already be mine. How frustrating.

“I’ll deal with that insolent woman later,” Hades declared. “First, I need that staff—”

“Lady Philia!”

“Prince Osvalt!”

Hades closed in on us in the blink of an eye. Mustering the last of my strength, I stretched out my hand and took the staff from Prince Osvalt.

“You lowly human! I won’t let you use that staff, no matter what…”

“Hades, god of the underworld! I implore you to obey my command!”

I’d been continually absorbing the Holy Land’s uniquely dense mana, so I managed to convert my own power into divine magic as soon as I grabbed the staff. As I decanted my magic into the Holy Servant’s Staff, a raging, violent wind knocked me off balance. I almost dropped the staff.

“It’s okay, Lady Philia. You have me!”

Osvalt held me up, allowing me to raise the staff and unleash its power.

A tornado soared up to the heavens. Then my surroundings fell so silent that I felt like I had lost my hearing.

“Hades, god of the underworld. I’m sorry that you were roused from your peaceful slumber. Could you do us a favor and go back to sleep?”

I ordered Hades to return to his slumber. The Holy Servant’s Staff had rendered him harmless, causing him to flump lifelessly to the ground—but upon hearing my command, he stood back up and gave a firm nod.

Prince Osvalt gasped as a magic circle spread across the ground. “That’s the same circle as before…”

Hades stepped inside the circle, then drifted back into a deep sleep.

I was relieved, but using divine magic twice had left me rather drained.

“Lady Philia! Lady Philia! Are you okay?!”

I heard the prince’s voice echoing in the distance, but I didn’t have the willpower to open my eyes.

Sorry, prince. I just need to rest for a moment…

***

“Ugh… Wait, what? Where am I?”

When I opened my eyes after what felt like a long slumber, I was met by the anxious faces of my friends.

It all came back to me. I’d used the Holy Servant’s Staff to send Hades back to sleep but collapsed under the weight of the task.

Using divine magic took a heavy toll on one’s stamina, and I’d only just cast a spirit-communication spell, so I must have pushed myself too far. It was a stark reminder that I still needed more training.

“Are you all right, Lady Philia?”

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Prince Osvalt. As you can see, there’s no problem. Please don’t make that face.”

“There’s a huge problem, actually. I was completely dependent on you, right until the last moment.” Scowling, Prince Osvalt cursed his own incompetence.

He was wrong. Not only did he rescue me from my cage, but he brought me the Holy Servant’s Staff and kept me standing. I was the one who’d been dependent on him, and for that, I felt nothing but shame.

“Please don’t blame yourself, Your Highness. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. We should just be thankful that everyone is safe.”

After a moment, he nodded. “Yes. You’re right, Philia.”

“Huh? Oh! Prince Osvalt!”

Before I knew it, Prince Osvalt was grasping me in a tight embrace. I hadn't felt his presence so intensely since we rode out together to save Mia.

No—it meant something different back then. Back then, I'd held him tight so I wouldn't fall off the horse. This time, I let myself bask in Prince Osvalt's warmth. I had the strange sensation that all my tension was melting away.

"I'm so glad you're safe! I couldn't bear the thought of losing you, Lady Philia! I'm so relieved!"

"I'm sorry for making you worry."

"I don't mind. You don't have to apologize. I'm just…glad you're alive, Philia."

My plan was to avoid any reckless actions that might put my life in danger, and yet I'd still wound up in this miserable state. His Highness's kind words made me incredibly grateful that I was still here.

"I'm thankful for you, too, Lady Mia. You've been casting healing magic on Philia the entire time."

"Oh, no need to thank me," said Mia. "It's only natural for me to heal my sister."

"You've been casting Saint Heal on me?" My body did feel curiously light. Maybe I had her magic to thank for that.

"Yeah. I knew the exhaustion from using divine magic wouldn't be easy to heal, but I hoped it'd bring you some comfort. Maybe it was pointless, since you spent all day asleep, but I just couldn't stand by and do nothing."

"Thank you, Mia. I couldn't have managed without you. You protected the Holy Servant's Staff, too."

Mia laughed. "I've wanted to repay you for a long time, Philia. I'm glad that wish has finally come true." She gave me a playful smile. "As your little sister, I was happy to lend you a hand. I want us to be sisters who help each other out."

We may not have been siblings by blood, but our bond was even stronger than family. I felt the same way. After all, Mia was…

“You’re the best younger sister in the entire world. I’m so proud to be your big sister.”

“I couldn’t ask for a better sister, either!”

As Mia and I reaffirmed our bond, I realized just how lucky I was to have her. I’d been overwhelmed with gratitude from the moment I woke up.

“Good to see everything work out,” said Erza. “You can head home now. Considering your condition, tomorrow might be wiser, but I can send you back to Parnacorta right now if you like.”

“Erza… Do I…”

“Henry’s been thrown in jail. Archbishop Olstra was voted in as the next pope through a last-minute election within the Cremoux head church. You’re allowed to continue your life as the saint of Parnacorta.”

What a relief. That was the result I had worked so hard for. This meant we could all return to Parnacorta together.

“I’m so happy I get to go home. But an election? That must have caused so much trouble for everyone in the head church.”

“Trouble? Don’t be ridiculous. In fact, they said they’d do anything you wished for, since they were the ones who caused this scandalous affair.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, within reason.”

In order to make amends for their error, the head church was willing to grant me a wish. Usually, I’d avoid taking advantage of a situation like this, but today was something of an exception. There was something I couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Er, would it be okay if I took them up on their offer?”

“Of course. Go ahead and tell me what you want.”

***

Despite feeling the need to hurry back to the kingdom of Parnacorta, I delayed my return until the following night.

When I meditated in the Holy Land, I could feel my magical energy replenishing. It made sense that so many people wanted to train here.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better.”

After obtaining permission, Prince Osvalt and I went up to the Holy Land’s altar. The night breeze was cool and pleasant. The place felt truly mystical, as if the chaos of yesterday had never occurred. Perhaps this was what a god’s resting place was meant to be like.

We were waiting for someone there.

Prince Osvalt and I made small talk as we basked in the moonlight.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’ll keep my promise, but this man is a serious criminal. The shackles can’t come off, and we’ll need to keep a close eye on him.”

After a while, Henry appeared, his head lowered and his hands bound in handcuffs. He was the one we had been waiting for. Stripped of his archbishop title and imprisoned, he looked noticeably thinner, even though it had only been two days.

“Did you summon me just to laugh at my defeat?” he said. “I didn’t expect you to be so twisted, Philia Adenauer.”

“That’s not my intention,” I replied. “You have Elizabeth’s body stored here in stasis, don’t you?”

At the mention of Elizabeth’s body, his previously vacant eyes lit up. His sister must have been uniquely special to him, even in the depths of his despair. “What about it? If you want to take her back to Parnacorta, go ahead. You don’t need my permission.”

“No, that’s not what I was implying,” I said. I began to focus my magic.

“What? That’s divine magic. You’re not casting a spirit-communication spell, are you?”

“Allow me to summon her dormant soul.”

Once again I cast the spirit-communication spell, allowing a soul to find its way back from the world of the dead. But this soul belonged to…

“Henry. I can hear your voice!”

“E-Elizabeth?”

I had managed to summon Elizabeth’s soul.

Henry’s suffering began when he persuaded Prince Reichardt to let him bring her body to Dalbert. He attempted to master divine magic so he could learn a resurrection spell, but he was unsuccessful. At one point, he came close to giving up. But when he received the pope’s will, his desire was reawakened—albeit in a twisted form.

The plan he devised involved using me to carry out his revenge and resurrect Elizabeth. He was driven not just by his animosity toward me, but by his all-consuming desire to bring his sister back to life.

“I’m sorry. My failings caused problems for everyone.” Elizabeth began by apologizing. She must have grasped what was going on.

“You have nothing to apologize for. Parnacorta should never have forced you into doing things just because you were a saint.”

“It’s not Parnacorta’s fault!”

Henry’s eyes widened. “Elizabeth…”

“I’m happy I was able to hold my beloved country close to my heart, right until the very end. Please tell Reichardt I’m sorry. Tell him that the period I spent loving and serving the kingdom of Parnacorta with him and his people was my life’s legacy. Please!”

“How can you say such a thing? You’re dead! What was the point of any of it? Ughh…”

Henry began to sob. I wished I could let them talk for longer, but I had reached my limit.

“I’m beginning to sense the consciousness of the person who summoned my soul. You must be Philia?”

“You’re right. I’m the current saint of Parnacorta.”

“Oh, I see. I hope you’ll take good care of the kingdom…”

In the end, Elizabeth spoke to me as well.

I was at my limit. My legs were starting to falter, just like last time. Prince Osvalt had to hold me up.

“I tried to kill you. Philia Adenauer,” said Henry, his voice trembling slightly. “Why are you showing me such mercy?”

I hadn’t put much thought into my reasoning. If I had to explain myself, what would I tell him?

“I suppose one of the reasons that I took over Elizabeth’s role was to help you, Henry.”

“Was it really? You’re a formidable person,” he replied. “I’d really like to see it, now—a world where someone as resilient and kind as you becomes the pope.”

“I’ll take that as the highest compliment.”

Henry gave me a weak smile as he was taken away.

I could only imagine what ran through his mind while he was speaking to Elizabeth, but I wanted to believe that the endless downpour inside his heart had finally ceased.

“That all seemed to happen in the blink of an eye,” said Prince Osvalt. “I can’t say I was much help this time, but at least everything went the way we hoped.”

“You did help, though, didn’t you? Still, you’re right—now that all the mayhem is over, it feels like we were in Dalbert for a brief vacation.” I stopped myself. “No, I’m sorry, that was inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate? Not at all. I enjoyed living with you, even if it was only for a short time, Lady Philia. I think married life will be a lot of fun.”

Throughout my stay in the kingdom of Dalbert, I was under constant pressure, but getting to spend all my time with Prince

Osvalt was the one silver lining to the experience.

Obviously, I still missed the kingdom of Parnacorta. My longing to return to the place I called home was the sole motivation behind all my work in Dalbert. Even so, the memories I shared with Prince Osvalt in this land had already become cherished, shining treasures.

“Look, Your Highness. It’s a full moon. This place has the clearest air in the world. The moonlight looks so beautiful.”

“Yes, it does. It doesn’t hold a candle to your beauty, though.”

“Oh, Your Highness. You’re as smooth as ever.”

“I’m not being smooth. Flattery is not my forte. I’ve simply decided to be honest about my feelings.”

Before we knew it, we were huddling close to one another, gazing at the moon. The prince’s blond hair shimmered faintly in the moonlight, its glow even more magical than usual.

“Lady Philia, no matter what the future has in store for us, my wish is to stay by your side. I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure that happens.”

“I feel the same way. I was only able to cling to life in those perilous moments because you were supporting me.”

We held hands as we reiterated our feelings for one another.

We’d established that our feelings were mutual numerous times before, but I couldn’t stop myself from doing it again.

“Er, Prince Osvalt?”

“Isn’t it about time you dropped the ‘prince?’ I’m about to become your husband, you know.”

“When we’re married, I’ll call you Osvalt. And you can call me Philia.”

“Very well. Let’s go with that. Philia…”

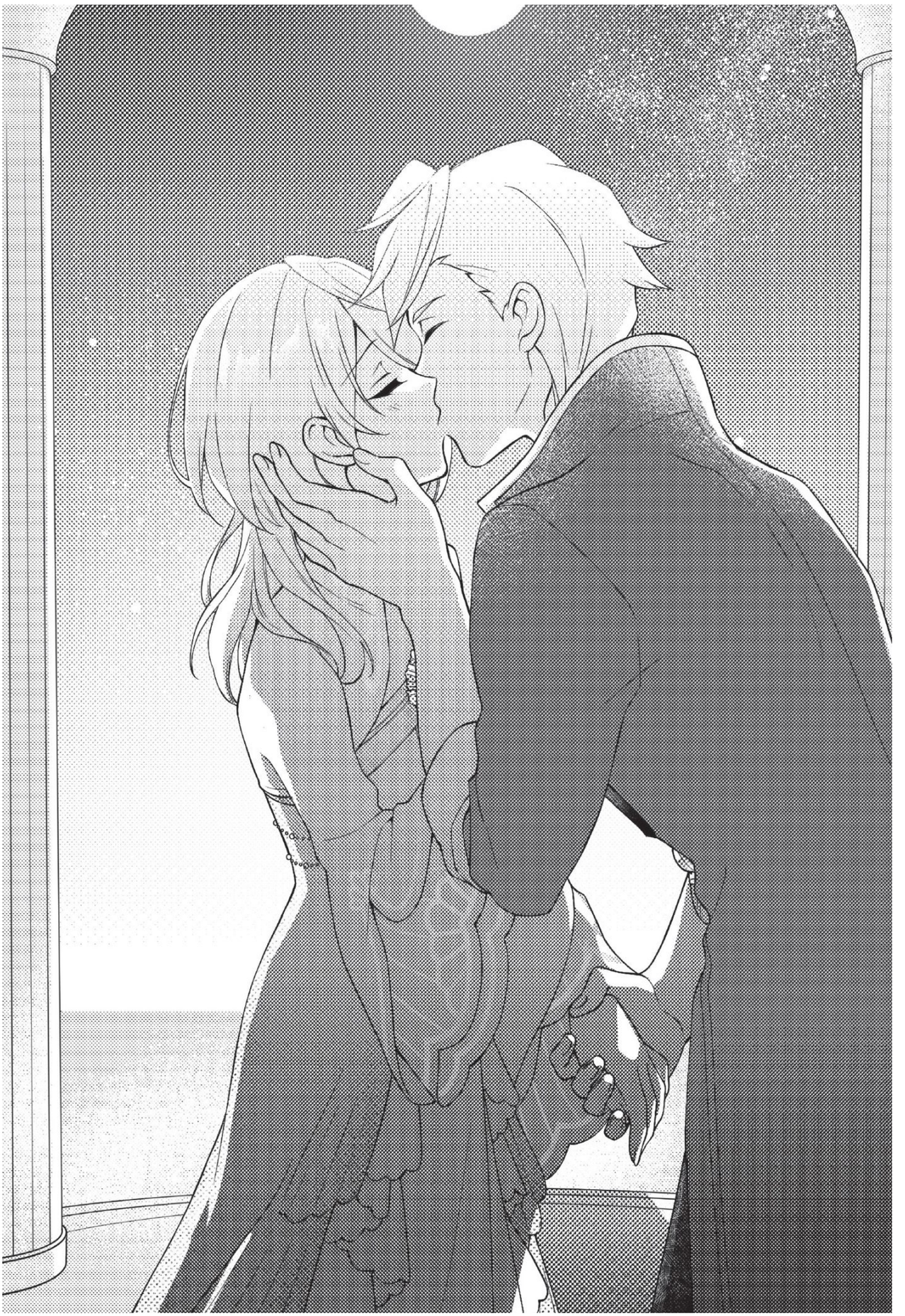
We didn’t need to say anything else. Osvalt gently stroked my hair, and for the first time ever, our lips met.

I was trembling slightly. My pulse quickened, and I didn’t know what to do. My body grew weak, making it hard to muster

any strength.

I quickly realized this wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, though. I felt secure, as though I could trust Osvalt with anything.

Our moonlit kiss in a foreign land only lasted a moment, but that moment felt like an eternity. I’d never kissed anyone before, so the novelty of the experience made my head spin, but it also taught me how precious that fleeting moment truly was.



Epilogue

"Is everyone here? Are you sure you didn't leave anything behind?"

"Yeah, I barely had any luggage to begin with."

"I'm good."

Night gave way to dawn, and morning came. We gathered at Erza and Mammon's place so they could transport us to Parnacorta. Apparently, they had picked up Alice yesterday.

"It's such a shame that my life in Dalbert ends today," Lena lamented.

"Hmm," said Leonardo. "Tempted to stay behind, then, Lena?"

"Jeez, Sir Leonardo, quit being so mean!"

"The doors have all been locked, so you will be unable to return to the mansion."

"Himari, please don't take what I said too seriously!"

Tearfully, Lena shook her head back and forth as Leonardo and Himari teased her.

Luggage in hand, everyone gathered in the garden of the mansion.

"I feel bad that you're giving me a ride, too," Mia said. "Sorry for the trouble."

"It's nothing," said Mammon. "I'll gladly spare no effort for a beauty like yourself."

Mammon would be teleporting Mia directly back to Girtonia, so we were parting ways here. The offer was much appreciated, since Girtonia, at the easternmost tip of the continent, was quite far away.

"Well then," said Mia, "the next time we'll see each other will be at your wedding. Mother says she's looking forward to it."

"Er, do you think Master will attend?"

“Philia, how can you ask that? What mother would miss her own daughter’s wedding?”

I already knew that Aunt Hildegard was keen on attending my wedding, but I wanted to check once again. Of course, I’d love to have her there if she could come. But given her strict devotion to duty, I thought that she might deem it unacceptable to take time off with Mia for a personal matter, leaving Girtonia without a saint.

“Please give her my regards, and tell her that I can’t wait to see her at the wedding.”

“Yes, I’ll definitely tell her. She can’t wait to see you in a wedding dress.”

“Me in a wedding dress?”

“Well, yeah! I bet she’ll cry. After all, we know you’re gonna look lovely.”

Mia had a vivid imagination. She might be able to imagine my master bursting into tears at my wedding, but I couldn’t picture such a stern person shedding tears at all. In my eyes, Hildegard was the ideal saint: always resolute, with a heart of steel far stronger than anyone else’s. I simply couldn’t believe that seeing me in a wedding dress would be enough to make such a strong person break down.

“Just now, you were thinking about how Mother would never cry, weren’t you?”

“Yes. She’s not that type of person.”

“You really don’t think that someone like that could ever be happy enough to cry?”

“Well…er…I don’t know. Master and I spent a lot more time together as mentor and student than as mother and daughter. She’s told me stories of her personal life, but it still hasn’t really sunk in.”

At my mansion in Parnacorta, when I found out that Hildegard Adenauer was my real mother, I got her to open up to me about her past. But even so, in my head, she was still first and

foremost my teacher. That was how much she meant to me as a mentor.

"I see. I guess it can't be helped; you just have to give it time. But, Sis, you should know that it was Mother who named you. 'Philia' means 'love.' She named you hoping that you'd someday find true love."

"What?"

"You know how Mother is. She starts getting chatty after a few drinks. She said that that's the meaning behind your name. And then she told me to keep quiet about it. That's why I know she'll be happy that her wish for you has come true. I'm absolutely sure of it!"

Indeed, my master tended to talk a bit more after having some alcohol. She'd even apologized to me once. Though she didn't confess to being my real mother at the time, she was most likely speaking from the heart.

She was happy about my marriage—not as a mentor, but as a mother. That was the most important blessing I could ever have received. I was grateful to Mia for being kind enough to tell me this.

Mia, you were the first to teach me love.

"Thank you, Mia. This is all thanks to you."

"Huh? Where'd that come from? I didn't even do anything. You mean Mother, right?"

"No. I don't think Master would have come here on her own for the Saints' Summit. If you hadn't been with her, her heart probably would have remained closed off. You have the power to soften people's hearts. You have no idea how many times you've saved me."

I'd always thought, with utter sincerity, that Mia was uniquely lovable. She had the power to charm people and enter their hearts. Like myself, Prince Fernand and my master had given up on forming attachments with others. But after encountering Mia, her influence began to rub off on them, and they gradually changed.

I felt absolutely proud to call her my sister.

Mia protested, “That’s not true. I should’ve picked up on so many things sooner, but I didn’t… Huh? Philia?”

I clasped Mia’s right hand in both of mine.

“You can become a far greater saint than myself. No, wait. You absolutely must,” I commanded Mia, as her older sister, for the first time in my life.

Mia laughed. “There’s no way I could do that. I don’t know a single saint who’s as perfect as you.”

“There are far more important things than perfection. I learned that from you and Sir Osvalt. You don’t need to be perfect. Just remember all the people who care about you.”

As a saint, I always strived to be perfect in every way. I didn’t think that that was a mistake or a waste of time. However, I tried too hard to do everything on my own. I didn’t think relying on others was an option. Perhaps it was because, without realizing it, I’d lost the ability to trust people. In Parnacorta, I realized that with the support of other people, I was capable of great things.

“I’m not so sure about this,” said Mia. “But since this is the first time you’ve ordered me to do something, I’ll do my best.”

“Please do. My hopes are with you.”

With a smile, Mia placed her left hand in both of my hands. “Okay! Well, I should go now, before Erza starts to get annoyed. We’ve kept her waiting for too long.”

Glancing behind Mia, I saw Erza staring at us with her arms folded. We’d gotten so caught up in our conversation that we’d forgotten why we were there.

“Oh, I’d hate to put a damper on your touching sisterly farewell,” said Erza. “I don’t mind waiting a little longer.”

“It’s okay. We’ll save the rest of the talk for another time, when Mother can join us.”

“You sure? Well, good. Mammon, get ready to head for Girtonia.”

“Yeah, yeah. This way, little miss.”

As Mammon focused his magic, a gate adorned with ominous-looking motifs appeared. Beyond that door was Girtonia, my homeland.

“Archsaint, how about a quick peek at your homeland?” Looking in my direction, Erza asked whether I wanted to visit Girtonia.

“No, thank you; I’ll pass this time. I’m the saint of Parnacorta, after all.”

“Really? All right, then. We’ll be back soon. Wait just a minute.”

“Take care, Philia.”

“I will. You take care as well, Mia.”

Promising to meet again, Mia and I exchanged our goodbyes.

Girtonia had Mia. I had faith that she’d work hard for the prosperity of our homeland.

Just a few minutes later, Erza and Mammon emerged from the gate. It seemed that Mia had made it home without incident.

Now it was our turn. We hadn’t brought much luggage, so our group was lightweight.

“Well, now it’s our turn to count on you,” Sir Osvalt said.

“Of course. Mammon, open the gate,” Erza commanded.

“Oh, come on! At least give me a quick break,” Mammon grumbled. But though he laughed bitterly as he said that, he opened the gate once more. This time, beyond this gate was Parnacorta, the kingdom I had a duty to protect.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

Taking Sir Osvalt’s outstretched hand, I passed through the gate. As soon as I stepped through it, an intense light flashed, making me close my eyes. A moment later, a familiar sight

appeared before me. I looked up to see the clear blue skies of Parnacorta, the kingdom closest to the sun on this continent.

“Yay!” Lena cheered. “It’s been a while, but we’re back!”

“Oh, dear,” said Leonardo. “I asked someone to take care of the housekeeping while we were away, but the garden is rather unkempt. I’ll have to neaten it up right away.”

“They failed to keep up with the cleaning as well. Lena, prepare yourself. We cannot let Lady Philia rest in filth.”

“Aw, Himari, wait up!”

We had only just gotten home, but Leonardo, Lena, and Himari were already going about their work. They warned me against overworking myself, and yet I’d never seen them slack off.

“Things are looking hectic here. How about we go to the palace first?” Osvalt suggested. “We have to report to my brother, after all.”

“That sounds good. But before that... Erza! Mammon!” I called out to them as they were about to open the gate to return to Dalbert. They both turned back to me. There was something I had to ask them, no matter what.

“Archsaint, is something wrong? It’s not like you to raise your voice like that. Did you forget something?”

“No, I’m fine. Um, would the two of you please come to our wedding?”

Erza and Mammon looked at each other in silence for a moment. Perhaps it was strange of me to ask such a thing. Still, I definitely wanted both of them, who had looked out for me in so many ways, to be at the wedding.

“Who would’ve thought we’d be invited to Little Miss Philia and Mr. Prince’s wedding? I never would have imagined it back when we were doing nothing but dark work.”

“We did our jobs as bodyguards and caretakers under the head church’s orders, that’s all,” said Erza. “You don’t need to fuss over us.”

“Even so, I owe both of you. I’d be happy to have you two at my wedding.”

Even if they were just doing their jobs, Erza and Mammon had saved us time and again.

They both looked at each other again before speaking.

“I guess we might as well,” said Erza. “I don’t do well at fancy shindigs, but I owe you, after all, so it’s the least I can do.”

“Maybe I should go so I can find a bride of my own over there.”

“Thank you so much!” I said.

Having promised to attend the wedding, they passed through the gate and returned to Dalbert.

We’ll meet again—and this time, it won’t be for work. I can’t wait.

“They’re good people,” Osvalt said.

“Yes, they’re a pleasure to be around.”

After seeing Erza and Mammon off, we headed to the palace. Prince Reichardt was surely worried, so we needed to report to him right away.

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“If you’ve returned, you must have been successful.” Though Prince Reichardt was busy as ever catching up with his work, he stood up as we entered his office. “Thank you for all you’ve done.”

“Your Highness, we apologize for the delayed report,” I said.

“Oh, and thanks for sending Lady Mia to Dalbert,” Osvalt added.

At Prince Reichardt’s suggestion, we sat on the couch. Come to think of it, this was the same couch we sat on when His Highness pushed us to go to Dalbert. He must have spoken from his own wealth of experience and consideration for us.

His Highness had granted Henry permission to take Elizabeth's body to Dalbert, likely out of a sense of guilt over her death. Grappling with his profound grief ever since, he'd been working tirelessly to make the kingdom prosperous in Elizabeth's place.

"It was essential to get through this crisis, but above that, I didn't want to lose the two of you," His Highness explained. "Working together was the most logical course of action."

"Your Highness, about Elizabeth…"

"Is this about Elizabeth's body?"

"…Huh?! Y-yes. But how did you…"

His Highness knew that I was aware of what had happened to Elizabeth's body. But how did he know, when Himari had conducted her investigation in secret?

"I'm sorry. I leaked that information to Himari. I could have told her directly, but I was reluctant to discuss it up front."

"That's all right. I'm the one who should be apologizing for my impudence. I had to uncover Henry's motives no matter what, so I had no choice."

"There's no need to feel bad about it. Henry hated me terribly, then expanded his hatred to all of Parnacorta, the kingdom Elizabeth sacrificed her life to protect. If he hated you as well, that was my fault."

Prince Reichardt seemed to know that I had been caught up in Henry's quest for revenge. I didn't know for certain, but most likely His Highness had suspected that Henry had forged the will, knowing his motives, before anyone else.

As we sat on the couch, His Highness explained why he had sent Mia to Dalbert. "At first, I thought perhaps you could live happily in Dalbert. But I became concerned when I learned that you were investigating the links between Henry and me. So, when Mia showed up, I decided to leave everything to her."

Again it was clear that Prince Reichardt was always concerned with our happiness. I couldn't help but feel thankful to him for his boundless kindness and courageous heart.

We confirmed to His Highness that Henry's goal was revenge on Parnacorta, and that toward this end he tried to revive Hades, the god of the underworld. We described how we acted as one to stop Henry in his tracks.

"By the way, brother, Lady Elizabeth wanted to apologize. She said she loved Parnacorta alongside you, and that she considers the time she spent here to be her legacy."

"Did you speak to her through Miss Philia's spirit-communication magic?"

"Yeah. I think Lady Elizabeth wants you to face the future."

"Is that so? But I *am* facing the future. Otherwise, how could I face Elizabeth? She lives in me, and she's the reason I'm able to keep loving this kingdom."

From the moment we first met, I could feel Prince Reichardt's extraordinary love for his kingdom. It felt far stronger than the love that anyone else I'd ever met felt for their homeland. But maybe that wasn't so unusual. After all, His Highness had two people's worth of love within him: Elizabeth and himself. The source of strength in His Highness's earnest heart must be none other than Elizabeth.

He neither dwelled on the past nor forgot about it, which I thought was a most difficult balance to strike. And it was precisely because Prince Reichardt was like that that I was confident he'd lead Parnacorta in a positive direction.

"At any rate, your wedding preparations have been held up by all of this, so I compiled some lists for you. Please decide on the music, the decor, the food, and the vows yourselves, at the very least. Other people can handle the arrangements. You must be prepared to entertain your guests."

A thud sounded as His Highness dropped a stack of documents in front of Osvalt and me. We exchanged glances. Prince Reichardt had done all this work on the wedding?

Smiling as he looked at our dumbfounded faces, His Highness seemed even more affectionate and gentle than usual.

“Phew…at least Reichardt had faith we’d be back,” Osvalt said as we left Prince Reichardt’s office.

“What makes you say that?”

“I mean, he went ahead and prepared for the wedding. If he thought we weren’t coming back, he wouldn’t have bothered, would he?”

Smiling as he carried the thick stack of documents piled up so high that you could almost feel just how heavy it was, Osvalt looked positively ecstatic. Perhaps he could feel just how much his brother cared about him from the weight of that pile.

“But, Lady Philia—I mean, Philia—just going through these will take a lot of time, and you still have your saintly duties…” Osvalt began.

“Please don’t worry. I’m good at this sort of thing.”

“I figured as much. In that case, I’ll leave it to you.”

As I walked next to Osvalt, my heart was bursting with anticipation. I couldn’t contain my happiness. I was about to start planning my future with him.

I came to this kingdom having given up on my future, but now everything I could wish for lay ahead of me.

We went over Prince Reichardt’s lists until dusk. Just as we decided to talk the rest over in the morning, Osvalt said, “Hey, there’s one thing I’d like to ask you. Do you mind?”

“Er, not at all. What is it?”

“All sorts of ridiculous things might happen again in the future. Lady Philia—I mean, Philia—you try to take on everything yourself. But, uh… I’d like you to be as selfish as you like around me—just me. Tell me your selfish desires. Anything. Please!”

I hadn’t prepared for a question this outlandish. My mouth hung open. Asking me to tell him my selfish desires was rather…

“Huh? Did I say something wrong?” Seeing me go silent, a panicked look crossed Osvalt’s face.

This man always had fresh new surprises up his sleeve for me. In that moment, I found myself completely drawn to him.

“No, it’s just that I’ve already been selfish around you so many times, I didn’t think you’d ask me to do it again.”

“Really?” He chuckled. “In that case, it’s all good.”

“Osvalt, I’d like to return the favor. Please don’t hesitate to tell me your selfish desires as well. That’s the most selfish request of mine that I can think of right now.”

His voice clear and deep, Osvalt let out a cheerful laugh. “Is wanting to hear my selfish desires really a selfish desire? Oh well… that’s so like you. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard a selfish desire that was so selfless and kind.”

At that moment, I still didn’t know what it meant to become husband and wife, but I could say this much for sure: I liked being with Osvalt. I couldn’t help but enjoy having pleasant conversations like this, sometimes acting silly around each other, and walking together.

Tomorrow, I’d probably see him again, and I would keep seeing and spending time with him well into the future. When today was filled with hopes and dreams for tomorrow, was this not what people considered to be happiness?

“Sir Osvalt, right now, I’m…happy.”

“We really are on the same wavelength. I was just about to say the same thing.”

As our fingers intertwined and we looked into each other’s eyes, our thoughts began to drift toward our future.

I had faith that tomorrow we’d be able to bask in the same happiness once more.

Side Story:
The Saint and the Prince of Girtonia

ALL MANNER OF HARM had befallen Girtonia ever since it made the foolish mistake of selling the greatest saint of all time to the neighboring kingdom of Parnacorta.

The greatness of Saint Philia Adenauer became strikingly clear during the approach of the Demon Realm. And when she saved everyone from that dire predicament, the entire kingdom realized all the more just how extraordinary she was.

She earned the incredible honor of being the second person in history to receive the title of archsaint, and she presided over the Saints' Summit. Then she once again saved the continent by defeating the demon Asmodeus, who had been abducting magically gifted women. Accomplishing one incredible feat after another, Philia continued to remind Girtonia of what it had lost.

With a troubled look on his face, Prince Fernand, crown prince of Girtonia, swirled his glass of wine to get a whiff of its aroma. "People have been nagging me to somehow get your sister to come back on a near-daily basis. You're her sister—surely you can convince her?"

At first, His Highness and I had started meeting more often to discuss reconstruction measures, among other topics. But before we knew it, we were having lunch together almost every week.

Today's meal was a bit different, though. Apparently, His Highness had something important to tell me before he went to settle things with the former Archbishop Henry. My heart was racing as I waited for him to bring it up in conversation.

"You want me to get Philia to come back *now*? When it's already much too late? I won't stand for that kind of talk. It's shameless that you even mentioned this."

There's a saying that the biggest fish is always the one that got away. But Philia wasn't just a big fish; she was more like a

whale or a dragon. No wonder the Girtonian officials who had come to recognize her greatness still couldn't let her go.

Though most of the officials who colluded with Julius had already been punished, even the innocent officials who remained were initially optimistic about running the kingdom without Philia. They reasoned that even if Philia just happened to be able to cast specialized magic like the Great Purification Circle, that there were still two saints left in the kingdom: Mother and myself. They said that since we were benefiting from the protection of the Great Purification Circle, Girtonia would be fine as long as reconstruction measures continued. However, it didn't take long for them to change their tune, as soon as they realized how many accomplishments Philia took with her to Parnacorta.

"You're right," said Prince Fernand. "We have to try to make this kingdom prosperous on our own. The blame for foolishly selling Philia to Parnacorta lies not only on Julius alone, but on everyone who failed to stop him."

"Your Highness..."

Emptying his glass of wine in one gulp, Prince Fernand laughed self-deprecatingly. "And among them, I'm the one who's most at fault. I feared my brother. If you hadn't kindled a fire within me, I wouldn't have roused myself to action. There are no excuses for my weakness."

The harder Prince Fernand worked, the guiltier he felt for not getting back on his feet sooner. At his core, he hadn't changed much; he really was a pessimist at heart.

"You don't have to feel regretful."

"Oh?"

"Your Highness, you've reflected on your past actions and moved forward. You've been working hard to lead Girtonia toward a positive direction."

"No, but..." Prince Fernand began to protest.

"Don't you think regrets are a waste of time? Think of all the progress you've made."

I'd always believed that there's not much point in regretful thoughts like, "I shouldn't have done that." After all, it's much more practical to think about what to do next.

His Highness had reflected on his past mistakes, and it showed through his actions. He could afford to be proud of himself—at least, I'd like him to be.

"You're amazing," said His Highness with a wry smile. "Do you know that? No, seriously, you really are amazing."

"Er, was that aimed at me just now?"

I couldn't wrap my head around the sudden compliment. First of all, what was he complimenting me for? Plus, if he wanted to praise me, it would be nice if he could add more variety to his choice of words.

"Of course it was," he replied. "Mia, your words give me strength. I'd do anything for you."

"Is that so? If you like the things I say that much, I could give you encouraging words every day."

"Really? That would be nice. Do you have any idea how happy that would make me?"

"What?" Both of us exclaimed at the same time. Up to this point, we'd been chatting as we ate, but now we were frozen, knives and forks still in our hands.

Wait a minute. What kind of conversation were we having just now?

Had I said something unexpectedly embarrassing to Prince Fernand? I hadn't meant to make anything but a friendly offer. But after His Highness replied that he'd like me to encourage him daily, the atmosphere turned strangely awkward.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. I definitely didn't mean it that way."

"I'm sorry too... But when you said you didn't mean it that way, what did you mean by 'that way'? No, wait, it's foolish of me to ask."

Once again, silence fell between us. This was so awkward. I was just trying to enjoy lunch. Why did things turn out like this?

Ugh, how frustrating! My patience was running out.

Come on, Prince Fernand, do something about this tense atmosphere!

"So, Mia. About what we were discussing earlier…"

"Huh? You want to bring that up again?!"

"S-sorry. No, it's not that. Could you please listen carefully to what I'm about to say?"

I wasn't counting on His Highness dredging up old issues. Did he want to make things even more awkward than they already were? I no longer had any idea what he was thinking.

In any case, I answered, "All right, I will."

"Thank you. That would really help. So here goes—"

Prince Fernand took a deep breath as his gaze met mine. His nervousness was palpable. I, too, was so on edge that I could hear my own heartbeat.

"Mia Adenauer, I want to draw strength from you every day. For the prosperity of our kingdom, and for the people to want for nothing, I want you by my side."

"Huh? Was…was that a proposal?"

"Er… Ah, yes, it was. Was that strange of me?"

"Not at all. I wasn't expecting it, so I was surprised, but it was lovely."

Prince Fernand proposed so suddenly that my mind was still racing to catch up. So he'd asked to marry me. That was all there was to it, and yet I had to remind myself of it over and over again as I tried to process what had just happened.

It felt like my face was on fire. I was prepared to hear something important from His Highness, but the sudden proposal caught me off guard. As reality sank in and I began to lose my composure, Prince Fernand took a small box from his pocket, knelt down, and presented me with a ring.

"I'd like you to have this."

“A ring? So this was the important thing you wanted to talk about…”

From the looks of it, His Highness had been preparing for this moment. After all, he’d given me a heads up that he had something important to say. But the proposal felt off-the-cuff, which made me wonder.

“Actually, I bought the ring a month ago, but I didn’t have the courage to give it to you until now. I was excited to propose to you today. But as we talked, I started losing my nerve, so I completely forgot the speech I prepared.”

“Your Highness…”

“But I felt that if I didn’t propose to you now, I’d slip back to the way I was before. So, ultimately, I decided to just play it by ear.”

“Well, that explains it.”

How should I put it? The proposal was completely typical of His Highness. This man would be in all sorts of danger without me around.

I was the one who dragged His Highness out of the shadows to apprehend Julius on my sister’s behalf. Though Prince Fernand could be cowardly, he tried his best to be strong. Before I knew it, I’d begun to find that endearing.

“So, Mia, if it’s no trouble, could I get an answer from you…?”

“A-answer? R-right. Um…please don’t go around complaining about how I nag you every day, okay?”

“Of course I won’t. Your words make me happy, after all. And in return, I swear to make you happy.”

His Highness smiled at me as I unhesitatingly accepted the ring.

Philia, I now have a reason to get you to visit home.

Soon I’d be off to my sister’s wedding, during which I planned to invite her to our wedding. How would she react to the news? I couldn’t wait to see the look on her face.

Side Story:
The Wedding Dress

"LADY PHILIA, LOOK! It's piling up!"

With excitement in her voice, Lena showed me a view that was all silver. It had been snowing considerably since yesterday, so this scenery wasn't entirely unexpected, but it was the first time I'd seen knee-deep fields of snow.

Since Parnacorta was a mountain valley, it saw a lot of snow in winter, except when there was a drought. Could this heavy snow be a side effect of my adjustments to the rainfall? All that rain must have turned into snow.

I should have done more research. If I controlled the weather exactly as I'd done in Girtonia, the resulting amount of snowfall could be harmful. That was something to consider from now on when carrying out my saintly duties.

"I wonder if it'll be sunny at your wedding next week," Lena said.

"I'll try my best to make that happen."

"What? You can even stop the snow?"

I was planning to start fine-tuning the weather soon. Many guests from other kingdoms would be visiting, so I'd feel bad about holding our ceremony in terrible weather and slippery conditions.

"That's great! You're guaranteed to have good weather on your wedding day."

"Indeed. Ah! I have one last meeting with Osvalt at noon, so could you please make some tea for us?"

"Leave it to me. I'll serve you with utmost hospitality."

Today would be the last of our long meetings over wedding arrangements. Osvalt and I had decided on many things together: the music, food, table seating, and more.

According to Prince Reichardt, Parnacorta royal custom held that the wedding ceremony was a royal couple's first task as husband and wife, so it was important for them to entertain guests to the best of their abilities. From planning festivities to knowing the appropriate etiquette for a royal wedding, all of this was new to us, so we'd both had quite a hard time.

We tried to learn as much as we could about wedding planning, but as we did, we realized how much we still didn't know.

"Osvalt has been busy lately," I told Lena. "It's been a week since we last met."

"Huh. Why has he been busy?"

"He's been learning to dance. He's struggling at it, so he doesn't really enjoy it, though."

Osvalt had been taking a crash course in dance for about a month now. "I want to look good for our first dance, after all," he'd admitted shyly.

It made me happy that he was taking dance lessons not so much to be able to dance well with me, but rather to challenge himself at something he wasn't good at for my sake.

"His Highness is going to dance? That's one more thing to look forward to at the wedding."

"Yes. I'm sure he'll be able to overcome his lack of skill."

As soft, feather-like snow continued to fall, Lena and I gazed out at the silver-blanketed garden. I tried to imagine our wedding dance. It was now just a few days away.

What kind of expression would Osvalt have on his face? Would I be able to follow his lead properly? I had to be careful not to make mistakes out of nervousness.

Just then, Lena asked, "That reminds me. Lady Philia, can you dance? I can't really imagine you dancing."

"I'm more or less familiar with dance, thanks to my education in the arts. I learned most steps, from ancient to modern dance."

"Of course you did."

From a young age, I received a rigorous education from my foster mother and mentor to become the perfect saint. To this day, I continued to encounter situations that made me grateful for my education.

For example, so far I'd managed to avoid committing any major faux pas as the fiancée in relation to marrying someone as important as the second-eldest prince.

"Lady Philia, it's getting cold. Shall we head back inside?"

"You're right. Let's head back, then."

The snow was certainly beautiful, but Lena looked chilly, so we went back inside the manor.

"Phew, that's better." Lena grinned as she held her hands over the fireplace.

Thankful for the warmth of the room, I picked up a pen and stared intently at my notes.

Lena looked at me curiously. "What's that you've been working on, Lady Philia? You've been at it since yesterday."

Actually, I was facing a difficult challenge that could rival Osvalt's dance lessons.

I explained, "I've been trying to write my vows—but I haven't managed to write a single word."

"Vows?"

A wedding is a ceremony in which a couple pledges eternal love to one another in front of God and witnesses. In other words, my vows were among the most important gifts I could offer not only to Osvalt, but also to the gods and all our guests.

And yet, I still couldn't write a single vow.

"I haven't made any progress at all. It feels like no matter how hard I try to put it into writing, no words are enough to express my pledge of eternal love to Osvalt."

"That's great! You should write that down!"

Lena’s unexpected reaction caught me by surprise. All I could say was, “Huh?”

Since vows were supposed to be offered to the gods, I couldn’t simply write down what I thought. At least, that’s what I assumed.

“Lady Philia, we want to hear your thoughts as they are. I’m sure the gods feel the same way, too.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. That’s really all there is to it!”

Seeing how confident Lena was as she said that, I supposed that I could trust her reassurance. It felt as if the fog surrounding me had cleared. At last, I could write something.

Thank you, Lena.

“...Lady Philia, may I request an audience?”

“Yes, Himari? What is it?”

“Your wedding raiment is complete, and now you must don it.”

“Ah, it’s time for the fitting. Very well.”

Several months had passed since the order for my wedding dress was placed with the royal family’s trusted dressmaker. Now, at last, it was done.

A true artisan, the dressmaker took the time to visit my mansion for the fitting, saying, “This is my finest creation to date in all my forty years in this business. Please try it on.”

I took Lena and Himari with me to my room to help me get changed.

“Wow, Lady Philia. It’s absolutely gorgeous!”

“I, Himari, am proud to have served my lady long enough to witness such a moving sight.”

“Oh, stop exaggerating, you two.”

As I checked my reflection in the mirror, Lena and Himari commented on my dress from behind me. It was so beautiful that it almost seemed otherworldly. I found myself gazing at the mirror in enchantment.

The lace shimmered as if it were made of crystal, and the floral-patterned embroidery was beautifully applied. Though the dress looked heavy, it felt light and comfortable enough to fall asleep in.

“You say that, Lady Philia, but it looks like you’ve fallen in love with that dress.”

“Lena, do not mock my lady like that. There’s no dress like this in the world. Of course, it’s beautiful precisely because it was made for her to wear.”

For the first time in my life, I stood for so long in front of a mirror that I lost track of time—not to mention my composure. That was how incredible the dress was. But in my daze, I felt as if I’d forgotten something…

“Hey! Philia! It’s me, Osvalt!”

Of course. It was just about time for Osvalt to arrive. Leonardo had just left to go shopping, and of course I couldn’t have the dressmaker answer the door, so I ran down to do it myself.

“Coming!”

I rushed to the front door, where Osvalt was waiting. I had to be careful not to fall over in the dress. But as I put my hand on the doorknob and tried to open the door…

“You mustn’t!”

“Lady Philia, please wait!”

“Huh?”

From behind and from my side, Lena and Himari, respectively, held me back. Surprised by the way they sprang to action so quickly, I froze in place, my hand still on the doorknob.

From the other side of the door, Osvalt called, “What’s wrong? Did something happen to Philia?”

“No, Osvalt. It’s nothing,” I quickly reassured him.

What was going on? Why did Lena and Himari stop me? Though questions were forming in my head, I could tell from the frantic looks on their faces that I shouldn’t open the door.

“In Parnacorta,” Lena explained, “we believe it’s bad luck for a man to see his bride-to-be in her wedding dress before the ceremony.”

“Please forgive us for not informing you earlier,” Himari added. “We thought it best to find a way to bring it up naturally in the course of our conversation.”

I had no idea about that superstition. That was careless of me. Though I was said to be a perfect saint, it seemed that I still had a long way to go before I became a perfect bride.

“Wh-what?! Philia’s in her wedding dress right now?!”

“Yes. It just came in, and I’m having it fitted.”

“I see. I bet you’re gorgeous in that dress.”

I was talking to my future husband through the door while dressed in my wedding gown. What would he say when he saw me like this in person?

“Hey, Philia. We’re getting married.”

“Yes, we are.”

“I’ve never cursed my impatience so much!”

Suddenly, he groaned in frustration. What on earth was the matter? “Osvalt?”

“I was thinking about how, if I stepped through this door, I’d see you in all your splendor, and nothing else I’d seen before—no matter how beautiful—would compare to you. Self-control isn’t really working all that well for me right now!”

Earnest and direct as ever, Osvalt’s words pierced my heart more sharply than any blade ever could. My heart pulsated like a ringing bell, and blood rushed to my head. I was certain my temperature had gone up.

I felt that if I stepped outside, I'd feel hot even in the piles of snow. I still couldn't get used to this feeling…

"Let it be something to look forward to, Osvalt."

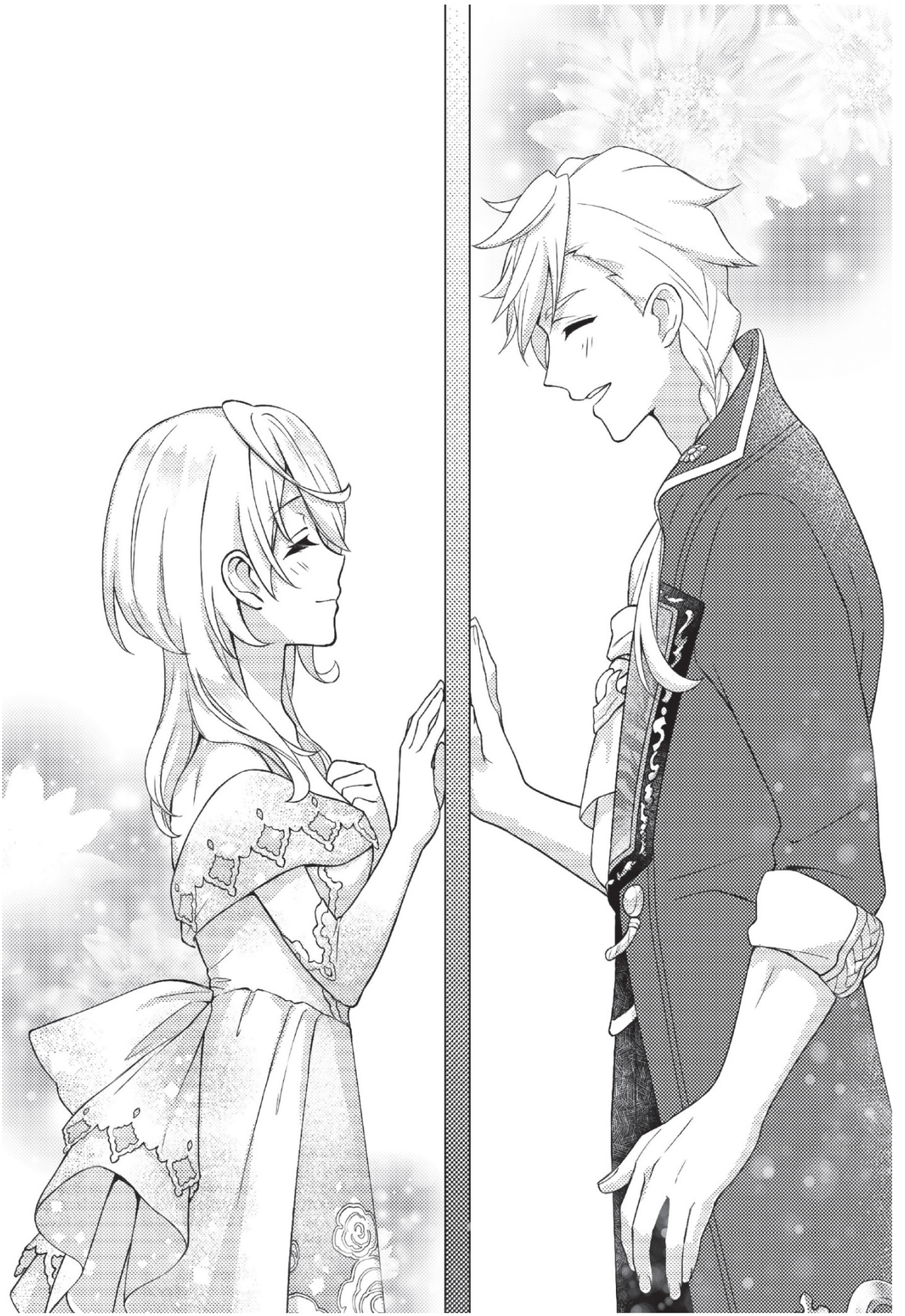
"Huh?"

"I want to be happy with you forever. Could you please hang on a little longer?"

"Ah, right! I want to be happy with you, too! Weighing that wish against everything else, I guess it's less trouble to wait."

Since we were separated by a door, I couldn't see the look on Osvalt's face, but I could easily picture it.

Surely he had a hopeful smile on his face—just as I did.



Afterword

THANK YOU for purchasing Volume 3 of *The Too-Perfect Saint: Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and Sold to Another Kingdom*.

This time around, given the length of this volume, I have about four pages for the afterword, so allow me to share my thoughts to my heart's content.

First of all, I'm happy to have reached the vague goal I set for myself, which was to release at least three volumes in this series.

I owe so much to Masami, whose too-perfect illustrations are nothing short of amazing, and my editor, who kindly gave me advice to help me improve my shoddy writing skills.

I would also like to use this space to express my sincerest thanks to the many other people who helped make this series possible, such as the designer who came up with the beautifully colored title logo. I'm grateful to these people not only for the tasks they worked on, but also for their role in my personal growth.

What I mean is that as I worked with more people, my responsibilities became a heavier weight on my shoulders. Feeling indebted to everyone who was helping me and wanting to repay them, I let the pen flow, so to speak. I resolved to seek out interesting angles when writing—a much bigger endeavor than I initially thought.

Writing with my responsibilities in mind was an extremely valuable experience. Though it made me realize just how small I was in the grand scheme of things, thinking of how much I still needed to improve filled me with a sense of optimism for the future.

And, of course, I'm most grateful of all to you readers. I'm a very negative person who often gets stuck in a rut of unproductive thoughts like, "Meanwhile, why is my writing still like this?" after seeing how wonderful and compelling other people's writing is.

For someone like me, warm words from readers have always been an uplifting source of support.

"Interesting." That single word can save and reward me completely. Thanks to it, I'm able to keep going.

Maybe it's the same for most other writers, but I can confidently declare for myself that kind words have been such a great help to me.

This afterword is getting too long, and I'm starting to ramble incomprehensibly. How about we take a break and talk about something else, like behind-the-scenes trivia?

All of you reading this, what do you call the series for short?

Earlier, off the top of my head, I just used *Too-Perfect*, but that isn't really a proper abridged title, is it? It's just a random abbreviation I came up with.

Actually, I forgot when this happened, but my editor suggested *The Perfect Saint* as the abridged title for this series. Isn't that great? *The Perfect Saint*—it's easy to remember.

But you might be surprised at what happened next. In our next email exchange, we kept using *Too-Perfect* to refer to the series. We figured that if not even we could stick to *The Perfect Saint*, it wouldn't catch on with readers, either. The next thing we knew, time had passed, Volume 3 of the series was out, and the manga adaptation had already started.

Seriously, though, the fact that I'm so bad at coming up with a short title for my own series makes me sad.

I want a cute and catchy abridged title, like other series have!

Break time's over—let's get back to the afterword. It's shaping up to be just the right length.

Personally, I wanted to write the wedding scene. But for now, being able to write the side story about the wedding dress was good enough for me. As for whether the wedding scene will make it into a future volume, that's under wraps. For various reasons, I

can’t reveal anything more about that, but I think Philia’s story has reached a satisfying development.

By the way, the manga version of *The Too-Perfect Saint* by Mago Ayakita is being serialized in *Comic Gardo*! Ayakita does a fantastic job of adapting the series, so I hope that you’ll also enjoy the manga. Even I, as the author of the source material, am envious of how absorbing it is! I’m sure you won’t have any complaints about it.

And that wraps up my thoughts on this volume. I hope that there will come another day when I can once again greet all my dear readers like this!

—FUYUTSUKI KOKI



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