
NOVEL
4
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The
Too-Perfect Saint
Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and
Sold to Another Kingdom

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We walked on, our fingers securely intertwined. Sir Osvalt smiled shyly, clearly self-conscious. When I saw how he was acting, I couldn't help but smile along with him.


HILDEGARD ADENAUER
Philia's mother and teacher.
Currently lives with Mia.
REICHARDT PARNACORTA
Parnacorta's crown prince.
Was engaged to Philia's predecessor.
OSVALT PARNACORTA
The second-eldest prince of the kingdom of Parnacorta. Engaged to Philia, he has a warm personality.
MIA ADENAUER
Philia's younger sister.
Serves as the saint of Girtonia.
PHILIA ADENAUER
Saint of Parnacorta. Her countless accomplishments have earned her the title of "archsaint."


"Please don't die.
I don't think I
could cope with
a world where
I wasn't able
to touch you."
I felt the same way.
If it weren't for
his warmth, I would
have given up by now.

# The Too-Perfect Saint

## Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and Sold to Another Kingdom

NOVEL

4


WRITTEN BY

Fuyutsuki Koki

ILLUSTRATED BY

Masami



Airship

*Seven Seas Entertainment*

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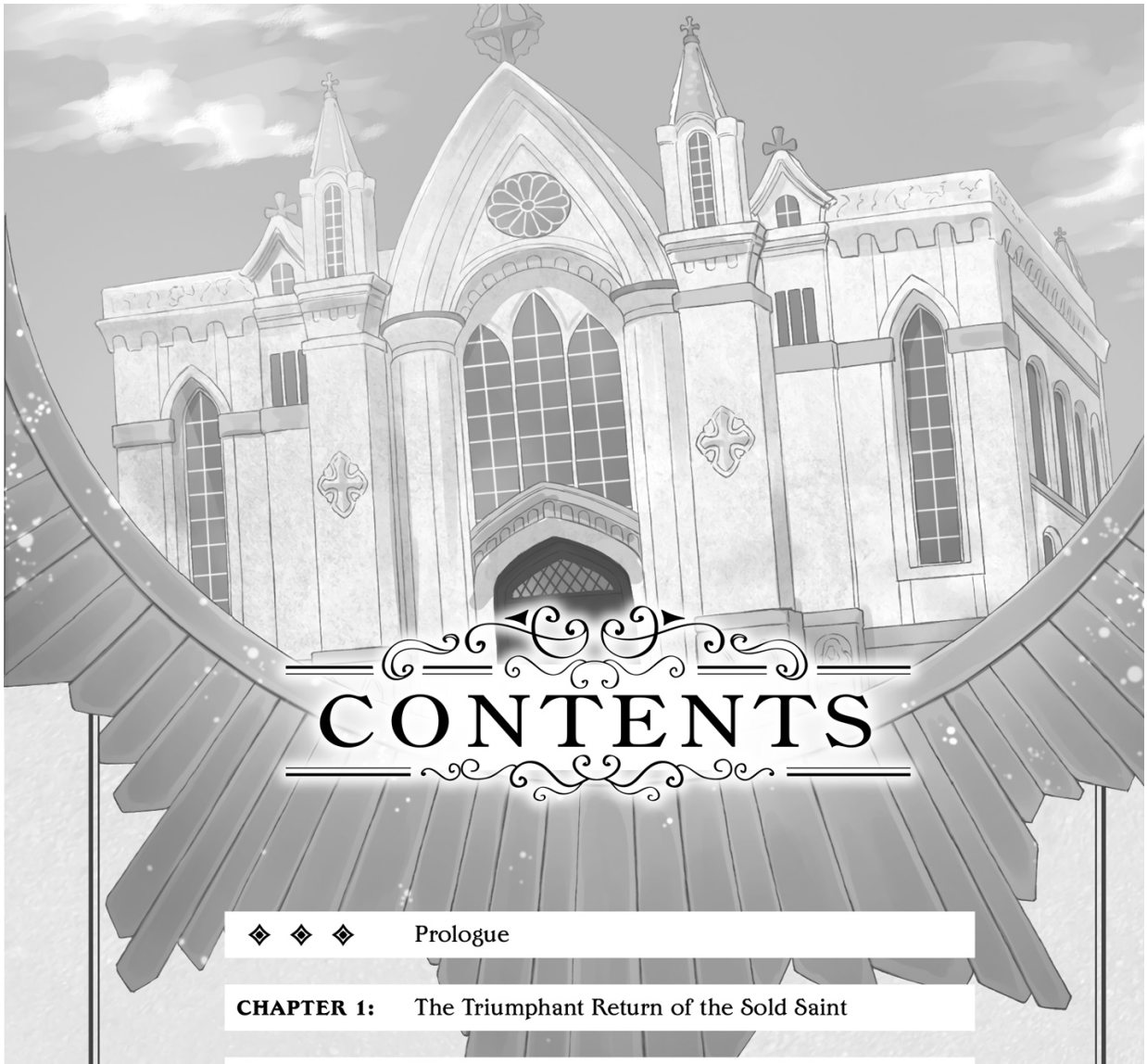
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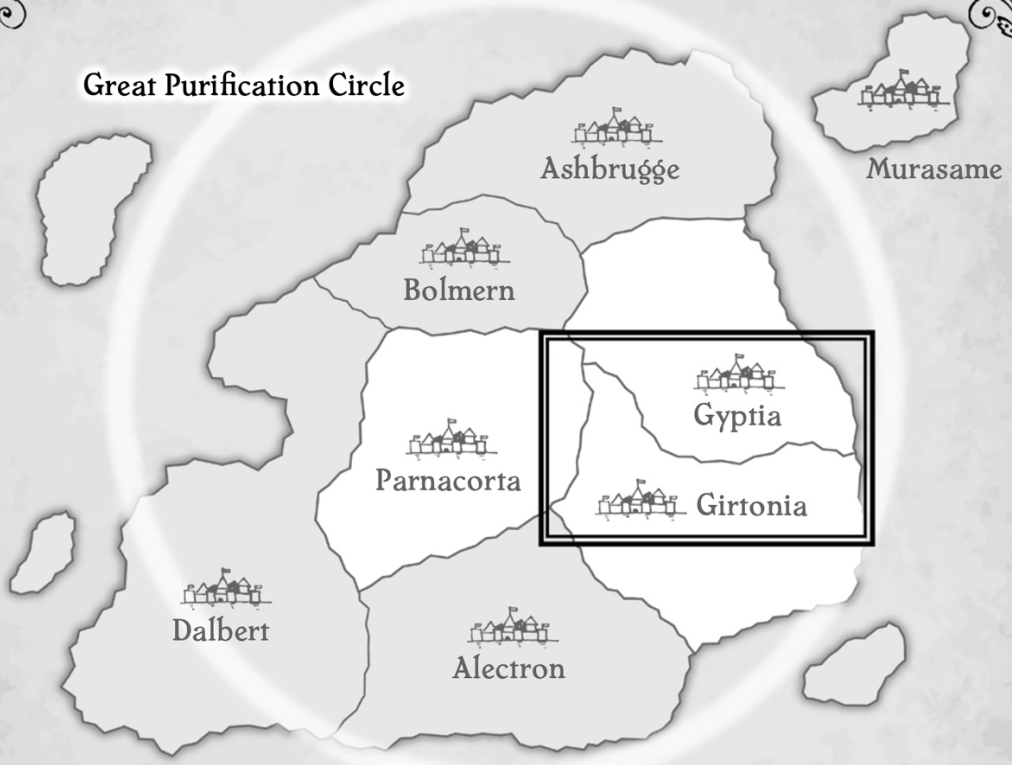
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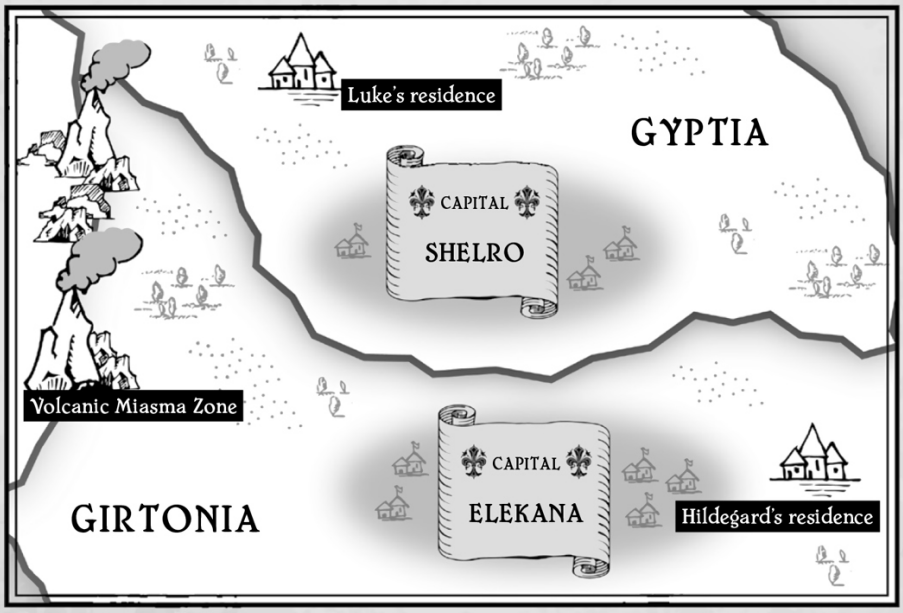
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# THE CONTINENT OF SEDELGARD




GYPTIA AND GIRTONIA

# Prologue

I WAS DULL. I WASN'T FRIENDLY. I took life too seriously and was no fun to be around. Those were things I'd heard all my life.

But in a twist of fate, I met someone who saw those traits as part of my unique charm—and luckily for me, I was marrying him soon.

At the moment, I was helping him with farmwork. We'd ploughed a desolate piece of land earlier that day, and we were getting ready to plant some beans.

"Hey, Philia. Come over here!"

"Understood. I shall be at your side imminently!"

"You're always so formal. Can't you loosen up a little?"

"My sincere apologies. It's just my nature."

My response was less than encouraging, but he smiled anyway. I found myself breaking into a smile, too. "It is what it is."

"Even so, Philia, are you sure you're okay? Lately, you've been spending all your time helping me in the fields. Isn't there anything else you'd rather do? Feel free to tell me."

"No need to worry. There's nothing I enjoy more than spending time with you, Sir Osvalt."

"I-is that so? I'm flattered to hear that."

Sir Osvalt turned away, scratching his cheek. Eager to see his face, I attempted to draw in closer. But then— "Gyah!"

I'd tripped, lost my balance, and tumbled onto the ground. The field came hurtling toward me, but just when my face was about to smash into it, Sir Osvalt scooped me up.

"Oof! Are you all right? It's not often you lose your balance."

"Sir Osvalt… I-I'm sorry. Thank you."

I must have let my guard down without realizing it. Subconsciously, I'd decided I was somewhere safe. How embarrassing.

"No need to thank me. I'm just glad you weren't hurt. Hmph. Maybe it was this rock that tripped you up."

"Oh…"

He picked up a large rock that had lain concealed at my feet. That must have been what caused my tumble.

"Hey, Philia. Look carefully. Beneath that rock, something's been struggling to spread its roots."

"Yes. It's a fine, courageous plant. I never knew that so-called weeds could sprout in places like this."

"They do. That's the kind of determination I aim to have. I'll keep striving to become the man you deserve."

Sir Osvalt meant what he said. He was always working to improve himself. He was already a prince, but he felt he needed to do more to be a loving husband. I respected him for that.

"You're amazing, Sir Osvalt. A man who's second-in-line to the throne, saying he wants to live the rough life of a weed? That's not something one hears every day."

"Maybe not—but the way I see it, *you're* the amazing one. After everything you've been through, enduring the most grueling training, you continue to demonstrate what a great saint should be. You're a remarkably strong woman."

"I'm far from strong. I've come close to giving up on numerous occasions—"

"And you overcame those doubts every single time. To me, you're the perfect weed… No, that's a rude comparison to make. Anyway, I respect you, and it's your strength that drew me to you."

"Sir Osvalt…"

My heart filled with warmth. Simply meeting Sir Osvalt felt like a miracle, let alone having the privilege to marry him.

"I want to feel worthy to stand by your side."

"And I want to be the wife you deserve, Sir Osvalt."

"A relationship where we encourage each other to be better. That's not a bad thing."

"Not at all!"

The two of us clasped hands and laughed.

The future was sure to bring its share of pain and heartache, but I was confident that Sir Osvalt and I could weather any storm. When he said he wanted to be as resilient as a weed, he was surely anticipating challenges ahead. I felt the same way he did.



"Anyway, Philia…let me pick up where I left off."

"Yes?"

"Have you heard who the new pope is going to be? The news hasn't been made public yet."

"No, I haven't heard a thing. I'm sure I'll receive a letter from Erza soon, though."

I'd almost forgotten that the upheaval surrounding my fraudulent appointment as pope had finally settled down, and the head church of the Cremoux faith was selecting a new candidate. From what little information I'd received in the post, I was expecting a formal announcement very soon.

"Hmph. Oh, well. My brother was curious, so I thought I'd ask you. Let him know if you hear any news."

"Understood. I shall inform Prince Reichardt as soon as any information comes in."

"Sure. That'd be great."

Sir Osvalt flashed me a contented smile before rolling up his sleeves.

"All right! It's about time we got back to work!"

"I still have plenty of help to offer."

"Aha ha, I'd appreciate that."

With that, we continued our work in the field.

Having someone who loved me—and knowing that I was to marry that person—made me vastly happy, but also much greedier than ever before. I'd started to dream of seeing new things and exploring distant lands with him.

I was a saint. Naturally, I wanted to devote myself to my country. But from time to time, I hoped I could spend a day just enjoying life with Sir Osvalt.

To my surprise, this longing continued to grow within me.

***

A few days later, I was in the garden of my mansion, enjoying some black tea that Lena had made for me, when Leonardo handed me a letter. "Correspondence has arrived from Miss Erza of Dalbert."

"Thank you." I placed my teacup on the table and took the letter from him.

A letter from Erza. It must be about the next pope.

She'd jokingly addressed the envelope to "Philia Adenauer, Future Wife of His Highness Prince Osvalt of Parnacorta." Classic Erza. I opened the seal.

Inside, I found several sheets of paper. Erza's message was a simple one.

*It's been a long time, Archsaint. Are you doing well?*

*The conclave to decide the new pope has come to a close, so I'm getting in touch as promised.*

*Archbishop Olstra has been voted the next pope.*

*You remember him. He's a former exorcist—somebody with direct authority over me and my fellow exorcists. This is the first time in the history of Cremoux that a former exorcist has become pope.*

*And that's not all. I know it's kind of irrelevant, but loads of people voted for you. We only dismissed your nomination because you'd already turned the job down.*

*Anyway, enough about that.*

*Your wedding's just around the corner, so try to stay healthy. Word has it that your country's last saint died of illness. Make sure you don't push yourself too hard. If you feel worse for wear, speak up right away.*

*See you. Erza.*

"Oh, Erza. You haven't changed."

Reading her letter filled me with joy. I could sense the kindness in her words. I hadn't seen her since coming home from Dalbert, and I missed her.

"Come to think of it…"

I recalled that Sir Osvalt had asked me to inform Prince Reichardt as soon as a new pope was chosen.

"…I should go and tell Prince Reichardt the news."

I rose to my feet.

It was the same day of the month that Elizabeth had died. I knew where Prince Reichardt would be, and it wouldn't be his office.

"I'm going out for a while, Lena. Could you help me get dressed?"

"Going out? Sure. No problem."

"Thank you."

Lena and I headed to my room to choose an outfit.

"Where are you going, Philia?"

"First, I'm going to pay a visit to the florist. I hope they have some yellow freesias…"

"Oh. So that's what you're up to."

When we got to my room, Lena selected some clothes for my outing. I quickly changed out of my loungewear and put on the garments she'd laid out.

Once everything was ready, I climbed into a horse-drawn carriage and hurried to the capital.

***

"Miss Philia. I didn't expect to see you here today."

"Greetings, Prince Reichardt. I haven't seen you for a while."

After buying yellow freesias in the capital, Lena and I paid a visit to the grave of Elizabeth, Parnacorta's previous saint. As anticipated, it wasn't long before Prince Reichardt appeared. He, too, was holding a bouquet of flowers to place on Elizabeth's grave. They were once engaged to be married, after all.

Yellow freesias. I'd heard they were her favorite flower when she was alive. The faint glow of Prince Reichardt's blond hair and the modest yellow hue of the petals both had an ephemeral beauty to them.

We stood side by side and said a prayer.

"Miss Philia," His Highness said at last, "I take it you're here because you need something from me. Please go ahead and say it."

"The truth is, Sir Osvalt asked me to inform you about the new pope."

"I see. That's why you made a special effort to visit Liz's—I mean Elizabeth's—grave. My apologies for the trouble."

"That's not why I'm here. I wanted to pay my respects as well."

Prince Reichardt appeared relieved. "I'm happy to hear that. I'm sure Elizabeth would be pleased, too."

I shifted the focus to the main subject of discussion. "An election has been held at the head church, and Archbishop Olstra has been selected as the new pope. The archbishop is also the head of the exorcists. Erza holds him in high esteem."

"Is that so? Maybe this means the exorcists will be reinstated as an officially recognized branch of the church."

"Oh. You're right. That is a strong possibility."

In her letter, Erza mentioned that the mysterious vanishing incidents orchestrated by Asmodeus were a significant factor behind Archbishop Olstra's selection. While the exorcists had once operated openly within the church, in recent history they had carried out their

work in secret. Perhaps, under the new pope, they would work in alliance with foreign nations as official members of the church.

"Why were you so eager to know who the next pope would be?" I asked. "I'm sure it will be announced to the public sooner or later."

"Well…" Prince Reichardt looked like he wanted to tell me something.

What was the matter? I cocked my head to one side.

"I owe a lot to Henry Orenheim… Well, he was still part of the Elcrantz family when I knew him, so perhaps I should call him Henry Elcrantz. He was the one who introduced me to Elizabeth."

"What?! H-he was?" A cry of astonishment escaped my lips. I never would have guessed that Henry, the disgraced archbishop, had acted as Prince Reichardt and Elizabeth's matchmaker.

On second thought, he *was* Elizabeth's older brother, so it wasn't that implausible. Even so, I couldn't help but feel surprised. Henry bore a deep grudge against His Highness.

"Perhaps that's why he was so reluctant to forgive me. I couldn't save Elizabeth from the devil's seed…the incurable illness that afflicted her."

I said nothing. I didn't know how to respond.

Prince Reichardt had recovered from his sorrow and was attempting to move forward, but deep down, his failure to save Elizabeth had left a lasting scar.

"Thanks to you, Miss Philia, I've been able to get back on my feet. I appreciate that. Now that I've heard her final wishes, I think I can finally move on."

"…Your Highness."

The day after the previous pope's will was chaotically exposed as fake, I used a spirit-communication spell to summon Elizabeth's

soul so she could tell her brother Henry how she felt. At that time, she also mentioned her ex-fiancé, Prince Reichardt.

Elizabeth had prioritized Prince Reichardt's well-being over her own. This being the case, I felt obliged to share her final wishes with him.

"Let's go back to discussing the pope," said His Highness. "It was Henry's grief over losing Elizabeth that drove him to create that chaos, so I felt duty-bound to see it through. That's why I asked my brother if you could let me know how things turned out."

"I see."

Prince Reichardt must have been trying to come to terms with Elizabeth's death for a long time. No doubt his stoic exterior concealed heavy, heart-wrenching emotions.

"In my opinion," I said, "you don't need to force yourself to get over it. That said, if it helps lift the burden from your shoulders…I doubt Elizabeth would want to see you in pain."

"You're right. I'll try to come to terms with it in my own time, without forcing it. I just wish I could hurry up and find a cure for the devil's seed, so that nobody else has to feel the way I do."

The devil's seed was one of those so-called incurable illnesses. Following its onset, patients grew weaker and weaker. Before long, they developed violent coughing fits and heart pain. Ultimately, the terrifying disease ended in death.

This was the sickness that had taken Elizabeth.

"The most effective remedy was that medicine you developed, Miss Philia. But even that only prolonged her life to a modest extent."

"Prince Reichardt, I—"

"Sorry. I didn't mean for that to sound like a complaint. The truth is, I'm very grateful. Thanks to your medicine, she and I were able to spend some extra time with one another." Prince Reichardt

gave a rare smile. Though it was incredibly gentle, I felt his sorrow all the more keenly.

Little was known about the devil's seed. While I'd been researching it myself, I had yet to find an effective remedy. Apothecaries around the world had tried every possible way of reducing the frequency of the coughing fits, but eventually they'd given up hope. I wanted to give Prince Reichardt the cure he sought, but this was a challenge that made Great Purification Circles and divine magic look easy.

"Well, I should get going," said Prince Reichardt. "Prince Osvalt and I need to prepare for the wedding. I know it won't be easy, but please keep persevering."

"I will. Thank you."

Prince Reichardt stroked Elizabeth's gravestone one last time before walking away. I stood there for a while, said a prayer for Elizabeth, then turned back the way I came.

"Prince Reichardt is a strong person," I said to myself. "Still, it must make him lonely."

I'd never known anyone as resilient and kind as Prince Reichardt. He loved Parnacorta, the country that Elizabeth had protected until the end, more than anything else. He tried to serve his country as best as he possibly could, and was hard on himself as a result.

I was so worried about him. And it wasn't just me. Sir Osvalt, his younger brother, was similarly concerned.

"I hope that someday the scars on his heart will heal…"

"Lady Philia! Are you done talking to Prince Reichardt?" As I pondered this, Lena called out my name, interrupting my contemplation.

"Yes, everything's fine. Let's make our way back. I do apologize for making you wait."

"Oh, no worries. Let's get going."

We walked back side by side, then boarded our carriage to return to the mansion.

# Chapter 1:
# The Triumphant Return of the Sold Saint

"THE DEVIL'S SEED. Not only have very few cases been observed, but information regarding the disease is overwhelmingly scarce. It'll be hard to create a wonder drug."

I spent the day after my meeting with Prince Reichardt in the mansion, studying research papers. It appeared that the disease affected both men and women, from teenagers to those in their fifties.

"There doesn't seem to be any new information… And no apothecaries have spent more than a few years studying it. I suppose I have no choice but to take a slow and steady approach."

Amid my contemplation, I heard a knock at the door. Who could it have possibly been?

"Prince Osvalt has arrived," Leonardo informed me.

"He has?"

Upon hearing the news, I hurried out of the room and rushed to the reception hall to greet him. I found him sitting on the sofa, waiting for me. When our eyes met, he flashed me a smile—but I sensed a hint of awkwardness in it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Osvalt. Lena, could you bring us black tea and some sweets?"

"Your wish is my command." Lena bowed her head and left the room.

"No, it was rude of me to swing by without notice. Sorry about that, Philia. I just wanted to get your thoughts on something."

"You did? Is there trouble?"

"No, it's nothing like that… Well, let's wait until Lena comes back with our tea."

Sir Osvalt appeared a little uneasy, but his expression soon returned to normal. I wondered what he could possibly want.

We enjoyed a brief, light-hearted conversation. Then, once Lena had brought our tea, he changed the subject.

"Philia, do you remember our discussion about who would walk you down the aisle?"

"Oh, yes. Since I don't have a father, you suggested I ask one of my other relatives. I thought that Mia could do the honors."

Somebody would have to walk me down the aisle, after all. The bride's father usually took on that role, but my birth father was dead, and the father who raised me—Mia's birth father—was imprisoned in Girtonia. Thus, I'd abided by tradition and asked a relative to fill his shoes.

"Did Mia respond?"

"Yes. She said it'd be a pleasure."

My response elicited an uncomfortable smile from Sir Osvalt. "Oh, okay. Hmph…I'm not sure how to put this." It seemed as though there was something he was struggling to tell me. "Please forgive me. It's really not a big deal. I just wanted to ask if you could have Hildegard do the honors on our wedding day instead of Mia?"

"Master Hildegard? Do you think Mia would be a problem?"

"Not a *problem*, per se—but strictly speaking, the tradition for royal weddings in Parnacorta is that, in a father's absence, priority should be given to the bride's closest relation. This old custom wasn't something I was aware of, but some officials and nobles are meticulous about adhering to formalities."

This was the first I'd heard about the custom myself. I enjoyed learning about ancient magic, but royal weddings were outside my

area of expertise. I had no idea there were rules dictating who should walk the bride down the aisle.

"Does that mean that Master—my biological mother—would be more suitable for the role than Mia?"

"In terms of blood ties, yes. Some people will think it's strange for Lady Hilda not to walk you down the aisle, since she'll be at the wedding."

He had a point. If we were to respect tradition, it'd seem peculiar to get Mia to take on the role while Hildegard was present. In fact, it was odd that it hadn't crossed my mind to ask her when the topic first came up. I hadn't been aware of the custom, but that was beside the point. Could it be that, deep down, I still felt— "I get the impression that asking her for a favor makes you feel uncomfortable, Philia, so I'm not going to force the issue. Still, would you consider asking her at some point?"

"Yes, of course. It's only right to abide by tradition."

"Philia…"

On reflection, learning that Hildegard was my mother hadn't significantly changed my relationship with her. Like me, my mentor was a woman of few words, so I'd been reluctant to bring up personal matters, even during training. Looking back, that might have been to my detriment. If I'd made more of an effort to connect with people, my life might have turned out differently.

"Thanks a lot," said Sir Osvalt. "Sorry for putting you in this position."

"You're blowing this out of proportion, Sir Osvalt. Asking my master for a favor is no trouble at all."

Sir Osvalt sensed how I felt without me needing to explain myself. He was a truly kind individual. That was why I trusted him.

"Don't worry, Lady Philia," a voice interrupted us. "I'm sure Lady Hildegard would be honored to walk you down the aisle."

"Lena…"

In response, Lena grinned encouragingly.

She was right. Master was unlikely to object. But I couldn't imagine her jumping for joy, either. Was she capable of getting excited?

"Very well. I know it's an important matter, but I can't afford to take an extended trip to another country. I'll write her a letter right __"

"Want us to give you a lift to your hometown?"

A familiar voice interrupted me, leaving us all speechless. It was the voice of a friend who had worked tirelessly alongside me to get to the bottom of the mysterious vanishing incidents and solve the case of the pope's forged will.

"It's been a while, Archsaint."

"Hey, Little Miss Philia. Long time no see."

"E-Erza! And Mammon's here, too!"

Standing in the doorway were two of my friends—Erza, the exorcist, and Mammon, her familiar. When I turned around in surprise, they grinned back at me.

Why were they there? And what was that about taking me to my hometown?

"Hey, you two! Can't you come in the proper way? Like, through the front door?"

"Oh, Lena. Your reactions are as adorable as ever. I did suggest we open the door and make a formal entrance, but Erza wanted to see if she could get a reaction out of Little Miss Philia."

"Honestly, Archsaint, I don't know how you stay so calm. You make me feel like a little kid."

"I assure you, I'm definitely shocked. It just doesn't show on my face."

Bantering with the duo filled me with nostalgia, which was strange. It hadn't been that long since we'd seen each other.

"At any rate, Erza, what brings you here today?"

"Oh my. Are you insinuating I can't simply drop by for no reason?"

"Not at all, but…"

"I'm kidding. The head church is sending greetings from the new pope to each country's saint, so I thought I'd be the one to deliver yours."

Erza retrieved a letter from her breast pocket and passed it to me. I glanced at it. It was from Olstra, the new pope.

"I see. Thank you for coming all this way."

"Well, Big Sis Erza found an excuse to visit you and happily made her way here."

"Mammon. You know what happens when you make unnecessary comments, don't you?"

"No, Big Sis! Put the sword away! It's way too early to be chopping off heads!" Mammon's protests were met with a sharp clunk as Erza readied her falchion, priming for an attack. These standoffs seemed to be an everyday occurrence with them.

I stepped in. "I'm so pleased you came to see me, Erza."

"O-oh… In that case, I guess it was worth the effort."

"Yes. Thank you."

As I humbly expressed my gratitude to Erza, she turned her face away, looking a little embarrassed, and put away her weapon.

What a relief. We'd all witnessed our fair share of violence, but I'd rather not see heads rolling in my own living room.

Time to get to the point. "You said you'd take me to Girtonia. Does that mean what I suspect it does?"

"Yes. I was on my way there to deliver the pope's greetings to your sister and mother."

"I see. So, that's what you had up your sleeve."

When I saw the two greeting cards Erza held out, the truth sank in. They'd been planning to take me to Girtonia from the onset. The debate over who was going to walk me down the aisle had nothing to do with it.

"I appreciate the offer, Erza, but I must decline. It's not right for a saint to leave her country so frequently."

"Hold on a moment, Philia." Sir Osvalt put a hand on my shoulder. "Parnacorta couldn't ask for a better saint. No one's going to crucify you for taking a break. Ever since you mastered the ability to sustain the Great Purification Circle even in your absence, you haven't stopped toiling for our country's sake."

To me, it just felt like I was carrying out my regular duties. I didn't consider myself particularly busy. Still, I remembered both Lena and Leonardo urging me to take a break when I first came to Parnacorta. I knew that rest was important, but I still wasn't sure how to find the right balance.

"I really hope you'll take this chance to rest, Lady Philia," Lena chimed in. "I'm sure Mia and Lady Hilda would be so pleased to see you."

"I concur. I, Leonardo, also advise that you rest, Philia—both for your own peace of mind, and to ensure that your wedding is the once-in-a-lifetime celebration you truly deserve."

Even my attendants were trying to convince me. I'm sure the old me would have ignored their advice and continued to push on, but the new me realized that they spoke out of concern.

I decided to give in to everyone's coaxing. "Very well. I'll do as you say and take a short leave of absence." My values seemed to have shifted completely since I came to Parnacorta.

"That's the spirit."

"Lady Philia! You're finally giving yourself a break? Let's get ready for our trip, Leonardo!"

"Certainly. Lena, inform Himari that we require her assistance."

"Consider it done!"

Sir Osvalt said nothing, but a satisfied smile spread across his face.

Lena and Leonardo hurried out of the room, eager to prepare for the journey.

"Still, is it really okay for me to leave this country?"

"Don't even think about it. Considering how much you contribute and the effort you put into your job, you deserve much more than just a short break. Besides, you're engaged to a Parnacortan prince, and you'll be negotiating with someone to see if she'll be your wedding escort. Consider it official business."

"Official business?" I said. "You know me too well, Sir Osvalt."

"So it seems," he chuckled. "At any rate, I would like another chance to say hello to Lady Hildegard."

"What? You're coming with us?"

"Why wouldn't I? I'm going to be your husband," Sir Osvalt said with a smile. "It's about time I had a proper meeting with the in-laws."

I could feel my cheeks burning. Comments like that always made me blush.

"Well, let's get going. Can you give us a hand, Erza?"

"It'd be my pleasure. You're always welcome, Your Highness, along with those friendly bodyguards-slash-servants. Transportation is Mammon's job, though."

"Jeez. Lately I get the distinct impression that you see me as a form of public transportation," retorted Mammon, pouting—but he looked markedly amused.

With that, Sir Osvalt, Lena, and my staff prepared to visit my homeland, Girtonia.

***

The next day, after packing for the trip, we gathered in the garden of my mansion. Lena, Leonardo, and Himari lined up alongside Sir Osvalt and myself.

"I did not foresee this return to Girtonia," Himari reflected.

"Thank you for helping my sister last time," I told her.

In the past, I'd asked Himari to protect Mia for me. She'd stayed in Girtonia during that period, and she seemed to look back on those days with a degree of fondness.

"It was no great matter. I would sacrifice myself for my master without hesitation."

"Thank you so much. It's been quite a while, hasn't it?"

I hadn't returned to Girtonia since I'd gone there to expand the Great Purification Circle. At that time, I'd only recently become Parnacorta's saint, and I was convinced that I'd never set foot in my home country again.

"Now then," I said, "let me infuse Parnacorta's Great Purification Circle with magic energy. In my absence, it should last for a week."

"If you keep employing this method, the mana the circle is made out of will become unstable, won't it?"

"Yes. You need to wait at least two months between uses. But plenty of time has passed since my trip to Dalbert, so there should be no issue with using it on this occasion."

I collected mana from the atmosphere. Then I raised my hand and created a sphere of light.

"That magic energy is so tightly compressed, it looks like a tiny sun."

Erza was right. My sphere of light consisted of densely compacted magic energy. The next step was to pour that energy into the purification circle.

“Here we go! Use my magical power as your fuel, ancient purification circle, and hold your true form!”

The ground trembled as the Great Purification Circle absorbed the power. A flash of golden light rose from the garden. At last the earth stopped shaking.

With this infusion, the purification circle would maintain its effectiveness even when I wasn’t around.

“Whew. That spell really does deplete one’s energy.”

“Are you okay, Philia?”

“Thank you, Sir Osvalt, but I’m fine. I’m sorry to worry you.”

Somehow, Sir Osvalt had caught me from behind and was holding me. When did I start accepting his help so readily?

“Sure you don’t wanna take a breather, Little Miss Philia?” asked Mammon.

“No, I’ll be all right. Everything’s in place, so I’m happy to get going.”

“Okay, gotcha! Destination: Girtonia. We’ll head to the area in front of Saint Hildegard’s mansion, near the eastern mountain range!”

As Mammon gathered magical energy, I gave him a nod of assurance. Without delay, he conjured a teleportation gate, adorned with eerie decorations, for us to travel through. Only demons could use magic to instantly teleport to any given place. It was an extraordinarily useful skill.

“Okay, let’s go.”

At Sir Osvalt’s signal, we stepped through the gate. In an instant, our surroundings changed. An old house with a grand gate appeared before our eyes. I felt a surge of nostalgia.

“Do you think you can rest on your laurels?! Gather some magic and keep running! 100 more laps!”

"Hah, hah, you're killing me… I think this might be my last day…"

"Nobody who was *actually* on the brink of death would natter on like that! If you're strong enough to talk, you're strong enough for an extra 50 laps!"

"Huh?"

I found Hildegard scolding my little sister—dragged down by heavy weights—as she ran laps around the garden. Mia was clearly worn out, but I was relieved to see that they both seemed to be doing well.

"This brings back fond memories," I said. "It reminds me of training as a little girl…"

"*This* is what brings a smile to your face?" Sir Osvalt's own smile looked strained. "Lady Mia doesn't look like she's having much fun."

He wasn't wrong. Mia seemed to be struggling. But I knew from experience that Master Hildegard's intense training would improve her basic strength to the point that she could work all day without getting tired, priming her body for her saintly duties.

"Wait, what? Is my exhaustion making me hallucinate? Hah, hah… I can see Philia… And not just her. Hah, hah. Prince Osvalt and Erza are there, too…"

"Um, Mia… It's really us."

When our eyes met, Mia looked stunned. Our sudden appearance had made her think she was hallucinating, but as soon as she heard us speak, a joyful smile quickly spread across her face.

"Big Sis! What a surprise! Where'd you appear from all of a sudden? I'm so confused."

"Philia…? Plus Prince Osvalt and your attendants."

Mia—who'd run over to me—cocked her head in confusion, unable to grasp what was going on. Master had spotted us, too, and

was strolling toward us.

I should have expected nothing less from her. She always kept her cool, even in the most absurd scenarios.

"Mia. Master Hildegard. I haven't seen you in so long. Forgive us all for showing up unannounced."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you wouldn't turn up without good reason. Why don't we go inside and make ourselves more comfortable?"

"Good idea," said Sir Osvalt. "Sorry for imposing, Lady Hildegard."

"Not at all, Your Highness. I'm sorry I haven't gotten around to sending my congratulations on your engagement. Please don't hesitate to come inside."

Hildegard gave Sir Osvalt and me a slight bow before leading us into her home. As the prince and my staff looked around with curiosity, I stepped into the mansion as well, feeling a surge of nervous excitement. After all, it had been a long time since my last visit.

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Master Hildegard's mansion was almost silent. I saw no servants. Most likely she and Mia had been training alone.

We were guided into the reception room, where we sat and waited. Soon, Hildegard returned with tea.

"Are you still running the household all by yourself?" I asked.

"Yes. Well, now that Mia's here, she takes care of the cooking."

My master still radiated the same youthful exuberance. She had striking silver hair, a feature we both shared, and the years had done nothing to dull her sharp gaze, which exuded a powerful glow. She hadn't neglected her training, even after leaving her post. According to Mia, her saintly powers were more impressive than ever

before. Knowing her unwavering self-discipline, I was sure she'd been toiling away to aid Girtonia behind the scenes.



"It's been a long time since you made tea for me, Master."

"This is probably much milder than the tea your maid makes you in Parnacorta."

"It is. I know your tea is infused with herbs that regulate the flow of magical energy."

"Hmm. You know, I borrowed you from the church and brought you here a few times when you were little, even though I knew it wasn't right. Perhaps I still harbored some maternal instincts within me. Eager to help you in some small way, I would make you this tea. I found you endearing, even after you'd become someone else's daughter."

Hildegard's eyes narrowed as a wistful smile spread across her face.

I was taken aback. I'd never known she felt that way. After all —

"What did you and your mom get up to here, Lady Philia?" asked Lena.

"We spent most of the day training. She always found ways to push me further, even while I was asleep. I endured my fair share of sleep deprivation before getting used to that."

"Uhh…"

My admission brought a tense expression to Lena's face. My other companions looked similarly disturbed. Still, what was done was done. It was simply part of everyday life at my master's home.

"It sounds like our archsaint went through training that would make an exorcist's grueling regimen look like child's play," Erza muttered in semi-disbelief. "That must be where all that mental and physical fortitude comes from."

I was six when I started training under Hildegard's supervision. The relentless, demanding regimen persisted until I became a saint

myself. When I recalled those times, the memories weren't unpleasant.

"At the time, I believed that shaping this girl into a powerful saint was the only parental accomplishment I could realize." My master's voice took on a remorseful tone. "In retrospect, there were probably other approaches I could have taken…"

Admittedly, it *had* felt agonizingly painful at the time. My training had worn me to the bone. There was no denying that I'd suffered at my master's hands.

That wasn't the whole story, though. I'd gained much from the experience, too.

"Nonetheless, Master, I'm grateful. When I learned that you were my mother, I knew for sure that you'd loved me all along. You gave me an irreplaceable gift."

"Philia… You…"

For a moment, Hildegard looked taken aback—but then she beamed at me.

Without a doubt, I had her to thank for the life I had today. Besides, my own hardships were trivial compared to the anguish Hildegard had endured, suppressing her true feelings to put me through the strictest regimen.

"Hmph. As a demon, I'm struggling to relate," remarked Mammon.

"Human love comes in many forms," Sir Osvalt replied.

"No offense, Your Highness, but this form of love is beyond me, too—and I'm human."

"You too, Erza? Well, love's not something we can see. Maybe we're not meant to understand it."

"Whew," said Erza. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised, since you're the archsaint's fiancé, but you're quite the oddball yourself."

As he watched me with Hildegard, Sir Osvalt nodded understandingly, but the other people in the room seemed to find our dynamic baffling. True, we didn't have a typical mother-daughter relationship, but she'd still contributed to my upbringing. That was more than enough for me.

"Thanks for waiting, Big Sis. You caught me at an embarrassing time."

Mia rejoined us. Her training had left her covered in dust, so she'd gone to her room to change.

"Prince Osvalt, Erza, Lena, and Mammon—it's so nice to see you again. Thank you for taking such good care of my sister."

After saying hello to Sir Osvalt and my other travel companions, Mia sat down beside Master Hildegard. Her cheerful, sunny smile had the power to soothe any soul. As soon as Mia entered a room, the atmosphere seemed to brighten.

"I'm glad to see you're looking well, Lady Mia."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Luckily for me, I'm healthy enough to endure even the most grueling training."

Sir Osvalt laughed. "Well, that's a relief."

Mia had only met Sir Osvalt twice before, but they'd become comfortable enough to joke with one another. I expected nothing less from my sister. Beloved by all, she was a ray of hope to her nation's people.

"Anyway, what did you need from me today?" said Hildegard. "Is there a problem?"

"Not exactly, Master. It's more of a personal matter…"

"Is that so?"

Once Mia sat down, I cut the idle chatter short and explained the situation.

"I see. You want me to walk you down the aisle, eh?"

"That's right. Oblivious to Parnacorta's traditions, I asked Mia to do the honors—but it sounds as though you, Master, would be the more pertinent choice. As mother and daughter, our blood ties are stronger."

"Blood ties?" Hildegard's eyebrow twitched, and she fell silent.

It had been a shock to learn that the person I'd gone my whole life believing was my aunt was actually my mother. In all honesty, the revelation had yet to sink in fully.

I was the daughter of my master, Hildegard, and a man I'd never known. There was no guessing what impact this would have on my future. Asking Hildegard to walk me down the aisle would be a significant gesture. At least, that was what I hoped.

"Understood. I accept your request."

"Oh? Will you really, Master?"

To tell the truth, I'd expected her to turn me down at least once—that would be just like her—so her willingness came as a surprise. It was a welcome response, of course, but that didn't make it any less unexpected.

"I wouldn't be so tactless as to put a damper on your big day, Philia. Even Prince Osvalt made the effort to come here, so I can't possibly refuse."

"Why the dramatic pause before giving your answer, then?" asked Mia.

"Did you say something, Mia?"

"No, Master."

Having silenced Mia with a simple glare, Hildegard turned back toward me. The faraway look in her eyes carried a hint of sorrow.

"Besides, you're asking me to stand in for the one person who would be looking forward to your wedding more than anyone else. I couldn't possibly say no."

"What do you mean?"

"It's usually the father's job to walk the bride down the aisle, isn't it? If I were to hesitate, Kamil Elraheem, watching us from above, would never forgive me."

Kamil Elraheem. Hildegard had told me before that this was the name of my father. An apothecary by trade, he had developed a terminal disease. By the time I was born, he didn't have much time left.

"My father wouldn't forgive you?"

"No. Right up to his last moments, he wished for your happiness."

Whenever she spoke about my father, Hildegard looked sad. I hadn't been able to ask her many questions about him, but on this day, I couldn't suppress my curiosity.

"What was my father like? I know I've asked that before, but you've never gone into much detail."

As my wedding day drew closer, I'd begun to question my identity more and more. Maybe that was due to my unconventional upbringing, or maybe some deeper issue was at play. Either way, my desire to uncover the truth was growing stronger and stronger.

"Good question. If you're that curious, I'll tell you as much as I possibly can. There's no point in staying quiet anymore."

"Thank you, Master."

"He was born in Gyptia, a country in the northeast. Oh, that reminds me. He had a brother named Luke who may still live there. He would be your uncle, Philia."

"Gyptia?"

She hasn't mentioned before that my father was an immigrant from a distant land. This was the first I'd heard about a brother, too. So, I had an uncle all along…

"You looked surprised when I mentioned Gyptia. Kamil originally came to Girtonia to find land where he could cultivate a

specific medicinal plant. He was trying to develop a cure for his enduring illness, the so-called devil's seed."

My master's words shook me. "The devil's seed? Did my father suffer from it, too?"

The devil's seed—the incurable disease that took the life of Elizabeth, Parnacorta's previous saint. It had never even occurred to me that the same disease might have claimed my father.

"Did my brother tell you about Elizabeth, Philia?" Sir Osvalt must have guessed from the shock on my face that Prince Reichardt had spoken to me.

"You know somebody who suffered from the same disease, Philia?" asked Hildegard.

"I do. That disease killed Elizabeth, the last saint of Parnacorta."

"I see. I didn't know that. Your father—my husband Kamil—dedicated his life to medicine, using himself as a guinea pig." My master kept her eyes fixed on me as she spoke of her husband's battle with the devilish illness. "He wanted to create a cure for that incurable affliction, but his efforts were futile. Eventually, he succumbed to the disease himself."

"You told me you met him while you were serving as a saint."

"Indeed. I was deep in the forest, untroubled by any lurking monsters, when we happened to cross paths. Even while he was working on a remedy for his own sickness, that Gyptian eccentric still found time to create new cures for others. A skilled wielder of magic, he used healing spells to help countless people, never calling attention to himself. It was these qualities that drew me to him. Before I knew it, we were husband and wife."

"I see." If my master's description was accurate, my father had been a remarkable person.

But their marriage had barely begun when she had to say goodbye to him and me, one after the other. She was probably

reluctant to share those memories because of all the sorrow they brought with them.

As I watched Hildegard talk about my father, a slight tremble in her voice, my chest tightened.

Mia must have picked up on the sober atmosphere. "A-anyway," she said, trying her best to act cheerful, "we can't just ignore the fact that Philia might have an uncle in Gyptia, right?"

Sir Osvalt nodded in agreement. "Mia's right. If he's Philia's uncle, we should invite him to the wedding."

I had an uncle on my father's side—and in a foreign country, no less. That was something I couldn't have guessed.

"Inviting Luke won't be easy," said Hildegard. "I have no idea where to find him."

"We can't give up before we try. Besides, Luke must know loads about Philia's dad. You wanted to learn more about your background, right, Big Sis?"

"Mia, are you reading my mind?"

Mia laughed. "Maybe."

The moment I heard that my father was from Gyptia and that he had a younger brother there, my heart began to race a little. A longing to know more surged within me, a burning desire that pushed me forward.

"But if we're going to search for Luke, we'll need to find a way to travel to Gyptia…"

"Goodness me. You really don't know how to ask for help, do you? Obviously, we'll take you there."

"If you're up for it, I could open a teleportation gate right here, right now. Whaddya say, Little Miss Philia?"

As I sat there in silence, Erza and Mammon, both wearing expressions of disbelief, made this generous offer.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. We still haven't repaid you for helping the head church clear up that dispute with the pope."

"Just admit it, Big Sis. You're desperate to make yourself useful to the few friends you actually have."

"Excuse me?"

"Let me remind you, I'm strictly against violence. That attitude won't get you anywhere."

As Mammon joked around, Erza shot him a fierce glare. Her kindness brought me so much joy, I found myself breaking into a smile.

"Thank you, Erza. I'll take you up on your offer."

"Okay. Leave it to me. When would you like to depart?"

"Let me think. If it's all right with you, we could leave right—"

"Hold on a minute!" Mia shrieked, cutting me off.

What was the matter? Was Mia against us travelling to Gyptia?

"M-Mia? What's wrong?"

"Philia, you just got here! Can't you stay a little longer? Just a day or two would be enough. I'm sure there's someone who'd love to see you."

I cocked my head, puzzled. "Is there?"

"Y-yes. My fiancé, Prince Fernand Girtonia. The truth is, I was planning to write to you about it today. Prince Fernand and I are engaged."

"You are? Congratulations! But last time we met, I'm sure you told me you had no romantic feelings toward him."

"Come on, Philia!" Lena said with a grin as I sat there, bewildered. "She probably just said that to hide her embarrassment!"

People lied to hide their embarrassment? That was news to me. Affairs of the heart weren't my strong suit, and I'd been too

clueless to pick up on any hints. I couldn't have felt more humiliated.

"You never change, Philia. Anyhow, Prince Fernand and I are having dinner together tomorrow, so it'd be great if you and Prince Osvalt could join us."

"Dinner? What do you think, Mr—"

"Lady Mia, you're engaged? How wonderful! Of course Philia and I would love the opportunity to congratulate you both!"

"That means a lot, Prince Osvalt. Okay, Philia. It's a date."

I hadn't seen Prince Fernand since Julius and I got engaged and he came to wish us well. I couldn't help but suspect that his impression of me was less than positive. We'd struggled to keep a conversation going, although my unfriendly nature was likely to blame for that.

Mia told me his health had improved greatly; he was so lively we'd think we were meeting a different man. With that in mind, I was pleased by the prospect of seeing him again.

At any rate, I was happy to hear that Mia was engaged. My greatest wish was to see Mia, the sister I'd left behind, happy. Now that my wish was coming true, my concerns for my homeland had entirely vanished.

"Now then, Philia," said Master Hildegard. "You should stay the night. I know my home isn't as roomy as you're used to, Prince Osvalt, but I'll prepare a room for you. Right this way."

"Oh, thank you."

"We appreciate your hospitality."

On that note, my master guided us to our guest rooms. Thanks to her generosity, we could spend the night at her home.

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The next morning, Sir Osvalt and I set off for the royal palace, with Mia leading the way. Master Hildegard's mansion was tucked

away in the mountains, so we had to walk along a mountain path.

"Hey, Philia," said Sir Osvalt. "When you meet your Uncle Luke, what do you plan to talk about?"

"That's a good question. I want to exchange greetings, and then, if possible, ask him about my father's life in Gyptia."

"Right," Mia muttered. "That makes sense. It's natural to be curious about your birth family." She looked strangely forlorn. What was troubling her? She was usually so full of joy.

"What's the matter, Mia?"

"Don't worry. It's nothing." Mia forced a smile and beamed at me, but something about it felt stiff and unnatural.

"There's nobody Philia cares about more than you, Lady Mia," said Sir Osvalt. "When we're together, your name never fails to come up. Few older sisters love their younger sisters as much as she loves you—even when they're related by blood."

Mia's face immediately lit up. "Do you really mean that?"

Sir Osvalt was certainly correct, but I failed to see what that had to do with our current conversation.

"I was the one who urged Philia to get her mother to walk her down the aisle," he continued. "As we said, the ancient rules of Parnacorta's royal family place great weight on blood ties. No matter what, Philia sees you as the person closest to her. You have nothing to worry about."

"O-okay… I'm sorry. Thank you for reassuring me."

Relieved by Sir Osvalt's assertion, Mia gave him a smile.

Was it my fault she'd looked so glum? That hadn't even occurred to me.

"Mia, you aren't upset about not being able to walk me down the aisle, are you?"

"Ugh… It just caught me by surprise when you said your mother should do it because you're more closely related. It made me

worry that we might drift apart someday, since I'm not your real sister…"

"Is that really what you were worried about? Everything will be fine. You are my precious sister. We might have different parents, but no sisters have a bond as strong as ours. At least, that's how *I* see it."

When I was in Girtonia, Mia was the only person who supported me emotionally. She was vitally important to me. I couldn't remember my parents ever showing me love. That was why my feelings toward Mia were so strong.

"Yeah. Sorry, Philia. I just got kinda anxious. That's pretty unusual for me, isn't it? Aha ha…"

"I've told you this before, Mia, but I couldn't be any prouder of you. Have more faith in yourself."

"Thank you… Big Sis," Mia replied softly, her embarrassment palpable.

As Sir Osvalt watched her, a gentle smile appeared on his face.

Perhaps Mia had been struggling with those worries for a long time. Sir and Mrs. Adenauer—her parents and my adoptive parents—were imprisoned for the attempted assassination of Prince Fernand. That must have weighed on her conscience, even after Hildegard adopted her. No wonder she was afraid we might someday drift apart.

"I know how much you love me, Philia. Sorry for coming out with all that weird stuff! Oh, I sincerely apologize, Prince Osvalt. I didn't mean to make things awkward. I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't worry about it. In fact, Mia, I think you should open up to Philia more often. I'm sure it'd make her happy."

Mia laughed again. "I already take advantage of her kindness more than enough. Oh! Here's the carriage Prince Fernand sent for us."

Mia had led us to our destination, where a magnificent horse-drawn carriage was waiting.

"He arranged a ride for us, since my foster mother Hildegard lives so deep in the mountains. Sorry for making you hike all the way out here, Prince Osvalt."

"I don't mind. If I don't get regular exercise, I might get too out-of-shape for Philia's tastes."

"I-I'll still like you, even if you put on some weight."

"Ha ha, you two are so close. I'm jealous," said Mia. "After you, Your Highness. Go ahead and step inside."

The carriage set out for Girtonia's royal palace, where dinner was to be held. It had been some time since I last visited the palace. In fact, I hadn't been there since Julius broke off our engagement.

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After a short ride in the wobbly carriage, we arrived in Girtonia's capital. When we stepped out of the carriage, Prince Fernand was standing on the palace steps to greet us. His long brown hair was tied back, and he stood tall and proud. The aura he exuded was utterly different from what I remembered of him.

"Long time no see, Philia and Mia. It's a pleasure to see you. And Prince Osvalt, the second-eldest heir of Parnacorta—I'm honored to make your acquaintance."

"Pleased to meet you, Prince Fernand. I truly appreciate the invitation."

"No problem. Anyway, since none of you are here on official business, let's skip the formalities. Come on in. I'm sure we have a lot to catch up on. I'll take you straight to the dining hall."

Prince Fernand led us inside, escorting us to the dining hall of the palace.

The palace hadn’t changed much since I’d left Girtonia. As I walked through its glittering hallways, memories came flooding back. It was here that my former fiancé, Prince Julius, told me he’d broken off our engagement and sold me to the neighboring country of Parnacorta.

And yet, following many twists and turns, I’d ended up back here again. Twists and turns… As simple as the expression was, it stirred up strong emotions.

“Welcome to the dining hall. Dinner will be served shortly, so go ahead and take a seat.”

We did as Prince Fernand said. Sir Osvalt and I sat side by side, while Mia and Prince Fernand took the seats opposite us.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Prince Fernand continued. “I suspected Philia would feel uneasy about coming to the royal palace, but I couldn’t think of any other venue where we could provide a royal welcome.”

“It’s fine. I don’t feel uncomfortable. It just brings back memories. All I feel is nostalgia.”

Of course, I couldn’t call them good memories—but there in the palace, I didn’t feel a trace of sadness or negativity. I just bathed in the atmosphere of my homeland and felt strangely at ease.

Why was that? Could it be because I was happy now?

“Ah. That’s good to hear.”

On a different note, Mia was right. Prince Fernand was a new man. In the past, his words and actions were servile, and he seemed standoffish and hard to approach. I assumed his poor health was a factor. Now, though, he seemed incredibly friendly and open.

According to Mia, he spent his days helping people who’d suffered great losses at the hands of the monsters and working hard to reinvigorate Girtonia’s economy.

And, most importantly of all, he was—

I looked at Mia, sitting next to Prince Fernand. I could see the trust in her eyes as she gazed at him.

"I've changed a lot, haven't I?"

"Sorry?"

"I was just thinking about how cold I was last time we met, Philia."

"Well, you were sick. It was understandable, Your Highness."

"No, I could have done better. I took advantage of your kindness, using my frailty as an excuse. I blamed my weakness on others and lashed out at them… What a pathetic man I used to be."

"Your Highness…"

Prince Fernand regretted his past. So that was why he'd worked so hard to change.

The version of the prince sitting before me was nothing like the one I'd met before. He had a dazzling gleam in his eyes and exuded a strong sense of determination.

"It's thanks to your sister, Mia, that I was able to change. She was the motivation behind my transformation. But at the same time, it feels like it's too late. I feel a deep sense of guilt for letting Julius run riot. I also feel responsible for the cold reception you received in our country. I know this ship may have sailed, but please allow me to apologize. I'm so sorry, Philia."

"Prince Fernand…"

The prince bowed his head to me in a display of remorse. Under normal circumstances, it'd be unthinkable for a prince to apologize in this way to a commoner like myself, yet there he was.

Only one other royal had ever bowed to me…

I looked over at Sir Osvalt. On the day of our first meeting, he'd apologized for his kingdom purchasing me as a saint. His humble gesture had won my trust.

Prince Fernand clearly harbored genuine remorse for the past. When I looked at him, I could sense his sincerity.

"Please raise your head, Prince Fernand."

He said nothing.

"What happened with Julius was partially my fault," I continued. "If I had been stronger and stood my ground, I could have lessened some of the suffering the people of this nation went through. That's how I see things, anyway."

"Don't be ridiculous! It wasn't your fault, dear sister!"

"Mia…"

Mia met my gaze with a firm, uncharacteristically serious expression.

"Hang on, Lady Mia," Sir Osvalt interrupted. "Settle down. I'm sure both Philia and Prince Fernand's arguments were perfectly sound."

"But—"

"You're not wrong for feeling the way you do, either. We're allowed to have different points of view. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel guilty for my country buying Philia, but I can't deny I'm happy with the way things turned out, either."

With that, Sir Osvalt smiled at me. When he turned back to Mia, his tone was bright and cheery.

"We should focus on cherishing the happiness we have today, not worrying about the past. You feel the same way, don't you, Philia?"

"Indeed. There's no denying that I have regrets, and I won't try to hide that. But those regrets aren't my top priority. That would be the life I have now."

"Philia…"

"No need to worry!" said Sir Osvalt. "Tell us the happy news about your engagement instead, Prince Fernand and Lady Mia!"

"Whew, yes. That was another thing I wanted to talk about. Why don't we discuss it over our leisurely meal?"

With a vigorous nod, His Highness encouraged us to dig in, and the peaceful banquet finally began.

"Mia told me you were an amiable person, Prince Osvalt, and she wasn't wrong there. This is our first meeting, and you already feel like an old friend."

Sir Osvalt laughed. "I'm honored to hear that. My older brother often warns me about being too easygoing, but it's just the way I am."

"Is that so? I'm jealous of Prince Reichardt. He's lucky to have such a kind younger broth—ah, never mind. I'm just glad we have the opportunity to meet at last."

Prince Fernand heaped praise on Sir Osvalt as he sipped his wine. Sir Osvalt responded to his compliments with delight. Prince Fernand was far more cheerful than he'd ever been before. Meeting Mia must have helped him confront his weaknesses and grow happier with himself.

Mia once told me that she didn't think much of Prince Fernand—but things had changed. Now she seemed to regard him with respect and admiration.

"Osvalt is just the way I described him, isn't he?" said Mia, slightly flushed from the wine. "My sister wouldn't have fallen for him otherwise."

I was so startled, my voice cracked. "Where did that come from all of a sudden, Mia?"

"You *did* fall for him, though, didn't you, Philia?"

"W-well, of course. I'm very fond of him. I was delighted when he proposed."

"Right," said Prince Fernand. "I'm sure that to you, Prince Osvalt is the most important person in the world."

"Certainly," I replied.

"Wow, Philia," said Mia. "I didn't expect you to come out and say it." She looked simultaneously charmed and flabbergasted by how readily I responded to the question about my fiancé.

Why? She was the one who asked, after all.

"Ahh, you two really are made for each other," Mia continued.

"Do you think so?"

"As long as your partner cherishes you, that's all that matters to me. From the moment I first saw Prince Osvalt, I had this funny feeling that you'd be safe with him. That's why I'm so pleased you're getting married."

"Mia…"

Mia smiled at me. At that moment, I realized I couldn't have asked for a more wonderful sister.

"I didn't realize you thought so highly of me, Mia," said Sir Osvalt. "I'm truly honored to have your trust. I'll have to do everything in my power to ensure Philia's happiness."

"Hee hee… Don't disappoint me, Prince Osvalt."

"You can count on me," he laughed in response. "I'd do anything for Philia."

"Sir Osvalt! S-stop right there! I couldn't ask for anything more…"

Sir Osvalt's impassioned vow left me flustered, but he just responded with an exaggerated shrug.

"Come on, Philia. Our wedding's right around the corner. This is the beginning of our life together."

"It is?"

"Of course! I want to build a happy family with you. It's too early to say I've done enough. I want you to keep expecting more."

I detected a faint trace of shyness in Sir Osvalt's voice. Could we be happier than we already were? It was impossible to imagine, but if anything could make such a miracle happen, it would be staying by his side forever.

I'd never given much thought to starting a family with Osvalt, but the idea that my fiancé was already looking so far ahead moved me.

He deserved a proper response. "Yes. I'm looking forward to our life together."

"Ha ha. So am I."

A satisfied smile spread across his face.

"You two seem so in love. We can't let ourselves fall behind, can we, Prince Fernand?"

"Mia, I'm still struggling to believe you accepted my proposal. Are you sure you're not drunk?"

"How rude! I am most definitely sober. I can stand perfectly fine on my own, see?"

In response to Prince Fernand's remark, Mia staggered to her feet. She looked a bit tipsy, after all.

"Yes, I can see that, but… Oh, dear. You really ought to maintain a modicum of decorum, Mia. Not that I'm one to talk."

"Ha ha! You *can* get mad at me, after all. You're not still upset about the way I lectured you when we first met, are you?"

"Hold it right there, Mia!" Mia really was drunk—and her words came as a shock. Was she really audacious enough to reprimand royalty? "You gave Prince Fernand a talking-to?"

Instead of looking offended, Prince Fernand just laughed, apparently amused. "It's nothing to worry about. Mia *did* yell at me when we first crossed paths, but I wouldn't be the man I am today if it wasn't for her. People say she saved this country from the brink of destruction. No amount of gratitude will ever be enough."

"I-is that so? I'll take your word for it, Your Highness…"

Prince Fernand clearly trusted Mia above all else. Whatever she'd said when she scolded him, it must have made quite an impact.

"Now then," said Prince Fernand. "I heard that you're heading to Gyptia to visit Philia's uncle. Is that true?"

We'd continued our lighthearted conversation. Before we knew it, we'd finished a bottle of wine. That was when Prince Fernand brought up Gyptia. Mia must have shared the news with him.



"That's right. With my wedding on the horizon, I've started to wonder what my father was like. I'd like to meet my uncle, if I'm lucky enough to get the chance. He probably knows a lot about him."

"Your father, eh?"

"Yes. He's no longer with us, but I hope I can learn something about him from his brother."

That was the motivation behind my trip to Gyptia. I hoped to learn more about my father while I was there.

"I see. So that's what you're planning. I do hope you manage to track your uncle down."

"As do I. I appreciate you showing interest."

When I lowered my head in a gesture of thanks, Prince Fernand gave me a slight smile. Then he placed his hand on his chin, looking pensive. What was he thinking about? As I wondered, he slowly began to speak.

"But tell me, Lord Osvalt. Your fiancée seems to think this is a selfish request. Do you see it that way?"

"Huh? Oh, you're right. I didn't phrase that well before. Philia, wanting to know more about your father is by no means selfish. It's only natural to feel the way you do."

"D-do you really think so?"

"Yeah. And, to be honest, I want to know more about him, too. That might be a little selfish on my part, though." Sir Osvalt smiled, making my heart clench inside my chest.

He always had something kind to say to me, regardless of the situation. It was as though he was melting the ice inside my heart.

As the meal came to an end, Prince Fernand broached the topic of our travel arrangements. "Shall we call it a night? I wouldn't want to keep you up too late, especially with your trip to Gyptia

coming up. That said, I did hear that Lady Erza, the exorcist, knows a spell that allows for instant travel over great distances."

"Yes, that's right. Erza and Mammon have offered to take us there."

"Good. Well, take care on your journey. If there are any issues, don't hesitate to reach out. I'll do anything in my power to help you."

"Oh, thank you! We'll definitely turn to you if we need anything."

Upon hearing this, Prince Fernand gave me a gentle smile.

Mia was engaged to a lovely man. I should have cared about her happiness more than anyone else, and yet— "Huh? Are you leaving already, Philia?"

Mia, her face red as a tomato, gave me a shamelessly silly look. At this rate, Prince Fernand was going to run out of patience with her.

"Mia, how are you still drunk? Saint Heal!"

"Huh? I-I've fully sobered up! Um, Philia… How did you know Saint Heal cures drunkenness?"

"My Saint Heal is a spell that remedies all physical abnormalities. That includes intoxication."

"You never fail to impress, Philia! I've never had alcohol before, so I didn't expect to get so tipsy. Mother would have been really mad if I came home drunk, so this is great. Thanks!" Mia stood up to hug me.

My goodness. That girl was a lost cause.

"That's amazing, Philia," said Sir Osvalt. "You've never used that spell on me when we had drinks together. I had no idea you could do that."

"That's because you're not a terrible drunk like Mia, Sir Osvalt."

"Wahhh! Philia and me, sitting down for dinner with our respective fiancés… I never dreamed this day would come. I was so happy, I ended up drinking more than I should have!"

She looked genuinely embarrassed. It was the first time I'd shared a drink with her during a meal. I hadn't expected her to let her hair down like this.

Sir Osvalt shook Prince Fernand's hand and said his goodbyes. "I've really enjoyed myself, Fernand. I look forward to seeing you again at our wedding."

"Oh, I'll make sure to be there—along with Mia, of course."

"Thank you for having us today, Prince Fernand," I added.

"No, it was my pleasure. I hope you track down your uncle."

After wishing Mia and the prince well, we left the palace to meet Erza and Mammon, who were waiting outside.

***

"So, how'd it go? How was the meal?"

Erza was waiting beneath a tree near the royal palace. As soon as we stepped outside, she had questions.

"It was wonderful. We had the pleasure of enjoying delicious food and delightful conversation. Apologies for keeping you waiting."

"Think nothing of it. Besides, we only just got here."

"If you say so…"

I breathed a sigh of relief. Like me, Erza rarely showed her emotions on her face, so I'd been quite concerned.

When she spotted Mia, Erza took out the envelopes she'd shown me earlier. "Oh, I almost forgot. I have a letter for you, Mia. This one's for your foster mother."

"Oh, okay. Thanks for taking the effort to hand them to me in person." Mia took the envelopes carefully. "Um, Erza? I was

wondering if I could ask you a special favor. Can we discuss it over there?”

“Yeah? What might that be?”

Mia pointed toward a quiet alley. “You see, it’s just… This isn’t the best place to discuss it. I’d prefer if we could be alone.”

It sounded like Mia wanted to speak to Erza in private. In other words, there was something she didn’t want me to hear. I cocked my head, intrigued. This had certainly caught me off guard.

“Sure, okay,” said Erza. “This way, Mammon.”

“What’s up, Little Miss Mia? Don’t tell me you’re asking me on a da—”

“No chance.”

“Always so quick to shut me down. They don’t call you the speediest saint for nothing.”

With that, the two women walked off, Mammon trailing behind them.

I was puzzled by the way Mia was acting. What could she possibly want to talk about?

“Sir Osvalt…”

“There must be something she doesn’t want us to hear, but that’s okay. You know Lady Mia.”

“Y-yes, I suppose.”

When I heard Sir Osvalt’s simple conclusion, I forced a smile. What if something was troubling Mia, and I didn’t know? Still, if she preferred to keep it hidden, all I could do was trust her and keep an eye on her from afar.

Mia’s heart was overflowing with natural kindness and a strong sense of right and wrong. No matter what, I was proud to have her as my younger sister.

A few minutes later, Mia, Erza, and Mammon returned.

"Sorry about that, Philia. I didn't mean to hold you up."

"It's quite all right. Is something the matter?" I wanted to trust Mia, but I couldn't resist asking.

"Uhh, well, kind of."

Mia attempted to deflect my question with a vague and muddled reply.

It didn't sound like she wanted to open up. If that was the case, it was best that I left it there.

"Okay then, Archsaint," said Erza. "Let's get going. I'll fetch your staff later."

As soon as Erza made this declaration, Mammon channeled magical energy into his hands and summoned a gate for us.

"That would be so kind of you. Goodbye, Mia. Thank you for today. I really enjoyed the banquet."

"Sure! I had fun, too!"

"Good luck, Lady Mia!"

"Thanks! Take care of yourself, Prince Osvalt!"

After exchanging farewells, Sir Osvalt and I stepped into the teleportation gate Mammon had created.

In the blink of an eye, we had arrived in Gyptia, a country to the northeast of Sedelgard.

***

## Mia

THE ORNATELY DECORATED GATE OPENED, and Philia passed through it to Gyptia, along with Erza, Mammon, and Prince Osvalt. As far as I could figure out, the only clue they had was a name, so it didn't seem like finding Philia's uncle would be easy.

"Well, that's that," I sighed. I couldn't just stand around worrying. I had important work to do.

A voice called to me from behind. "You look so sad."

"Prince Fernand…"

I turned to see my fiancé standing there. He must have come to check on me.

"I bet you wanted to go with her, didn't you?" he said.

I laughed. "Am I that obvious? To be honest, I did."

"Naturally you want to help her. Not just as a saint, but as her sister."

"Yeah. I'm determined to do whatever I can for her. That's my way of repaying all her kindness to me over the years."

It was true. I wanted to make myself useful to Philia. But the best way to do that was by completing the tasks in front of me.

I was the saint of Girtonia. That was why I couldn't join her on her trip. I had my own duties to fulfill.

A saint's first responsibility was to her own country. I couldn't abandon my land and people willy-nilly.

In the past, my foster-mother Hilda had filled in for me when I needed to travel outside Girtonia to help out. As a general rule, however, a saint didn't have time for sightseeing.

None of this logic made it any less painful to watch Philia leave me. I couldn't help feeling frustrated that I couldn't be at my sister's side.

"Do what you believe is right, Mia. I'm willing to support you in any way I can."

"Th-thank you. I might just take you up on that offer."

"Heh… I should have seen that coming. You can count on me."

After returning Prince Fernand's amused smile, I made my way back to the mansion, where Mother was waiting for me.

***

"…And that's why I want to go to Gyptia to help Philia! *Please*, Mother!"

"Enough, enough. Why are you asking *me* for help?"

"I thought you'd be able to figure something out!"

As soon as I got back to the mansion, I told Mother that I wanted to join Philia. Somewhat predictably, she responded with a disapproving sigh.

Sure, it was understandable. I'd already asked her for a big favor not so long ago. Be that as it may, I couldn't just abandon Philia.

"You're a saint yourself. Surely you understand your priorities."

"I do! But I'm a sister first, saint second. This might be a petty issue compared to Philia being chosen as the next pope, but I still have to be honest with myself."

"Are you sure there's not more to it?"

Ugh. I should have known Mother would see right through me. She never failed to identify the crux of a matter. If it were only about wanting to help Philia, I would have kicked up a fuss about it the day before.

There was another reason I was feeling stubborn.

"I'm jealous. I'm jealous of you and Philia's father."

Yep. That was the real reason I wanted to join them. I harbored pointless envy toward Philia's birth family. The thought that I wasn't her real sister made me want to sulk.

And yet, for that same reason…

"Philia has always looked out for me, even after she found out I wasn't her sister by blood. I want to be worthy of her trust. I want to be somebody she needs."

This, at least, was the unadulterated truth. Philia's trust mattered to me more than anything else. Of course, I knew she valued me and didn't expect me to go out of my way to prove myself, but I just couldn't help it. I was desperate to become the sister she deserved.

"You know, Mia, you're far more self-indulgent than Philia."

"Sorry."

"No, there's no need to apologize. You're only human. Your feelings are perfectly natural."

Mother smiled wistfully as she looked into my eyes. Her expression was so gentle that I could barely picture her usual stern look.

"Hey, Mother. If Philia hadn't found out you were her birth mother, would you have admitted it?"

"That's a tough question. I don't think I would have dared. I lost the right to be her mother when she was snatched away from me."

I went quiet.

"Mia, I love Philia. That hasn't changed. But that's precisely why I've chosen to keep a certain distance from her."

I could sense the resolve in Mother's words. Something between love and sorrow lingered beneath the surface.

"But Mother… Weren't you pleased when Philia learned the truth? You said you were delighted that she asked you for such a big favor."

Mother fell silent on hearing this, and averted her gaze, looking a little embarrassed.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure. I failed to be a proper mother to her during the most important years of her life. I'll always carry that guilt."

"Why?"

"You know why. I knew the Adenauers were treating her poorly, and all I did was put her through harsh training. It felt like the only thing I could do for her. I'm in no position to call myself her mother. She must feel the same way."

Mother's smile was tinged with self-deprecation—but to me, it sounded like she was bluffing. After all, I knew the truth. I'd seen the love in her eyes whenever she looked at Philia. That was why I couldn't stop myself from arguing back.

"I don't think that's true," I said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Philia just told you that your strictness was a gift! She wouldn't lie about that. There's no doubt in my mind that you were strict for her own benefit, and Philia knows it too. Sure, it might be twisted, but Philia made it clear that she felt your love."

Mother said nothing.

I knew it was true. Just the day before, Philia had told us she viewed Mother's harsh training as a form of love. It didn't matter if Hildegard felt unqualified to be her mother. Philia obviously thought of her that way.

"You really don't hold back, do you, Mia?"

"If I don't speak up, I'll regret it," I said with a laugh. "At the end of the day, you'd prefer Philia to call you 'Mother' rather than 'Master,' wouldn't you?"

"W-well, I—"

Mother's cheeks flushed red and she turned away again. It was unexpectedly adorable. I found myself bursting into laughter.

Mother was an ordinary person, after all. She would probably yell at me if I said that out loud, though.

"Ahh, what a terrible daughter I have," said Mother.

She grabbed a bottle of alcohol, filled a glass, and downed it in one go.

After a brief pause, she spoke up again. "Can I trust you with this mission, Mia?"

I responded with a reassuring nod. Of course I'd agree. I wouldn't have asked her for such a big favor if I wasn't determined to follow through.

I poured a drink of my own and gulped it down.

What was this stuff? Where had she bought such strong alcohol? My stomach was burning, but I kept my eyes fixed on Mother, making sure my discomfort didn't show on my face.

"Yes, of course. Leave it to me! I'll look after Philia and make your dream come true, Mother!"

After making this declaration, I helped myself to another drink. Argh. I'd only poured myself a glass because Mother had. I didn't actually want to get drunk. Philia wasn't around to use Saint Heal this time.

"Now, where's the duo that's going to take you? It's about time you showed yourselves."

"Oh my, you don't miss much. I thought we were keeping a low profile."

I looked over my shoulder to find two familiar faces behind me. Needless to say, they were Erza and Mammon.

"Little Miss Mia. We've come to collect you, just like we promised."

"I didn't think it'd take you *that* long to win her over," Erza added. "I was getting sick of waiting."

"I'm sorry," I said, lowering my head apologetically. "Things got a little complicated."

Before seeing Philia off, I'd asked Erza for a favor in private. She and Mammon had agreed to take me to Gyptia if I could persuade Mother to let me go.

"Don't mention it. It's charming how much you care about your big sister, Little Miss Mia."

"So is Lady Hildegard on board with the plan?"

"Yep. Mother, can you take care of my saintly duties while I'm gone?"

I turned to Mother and bowed my head deeply. For a moment, she looked slightly forlorn, but in no time she reassumed her characteristically stern expression.

"Leave it to me," she said, "but expect even more specialized training when you return."

"Huh? U-uh, I'd really prefer to avoid that…"

Mother smiled, though her exasperation was evident.

"My goodness, what a disgraceful attitude. And you call yourself my foster daughter? Please try not to disappoint me."

"All right! I'll trust you to whip me into shape. When you're done with me, I'll be able to pray circles around Philia!"

"Ha ha, fine. Now, before I forget… I want you to take this with you."

My bold declaration elicited a satisfied nod from Mother. She took an envelope out of a cabinet drawer.

"My husband Kamil left this letter behind at the end of his life. He was planning to send it to his brother, Luke. There's no address on it, so I doubt it'll help you locate him, but…"

I nodded. "Got it. If we find him, I'll deliver the letter."

"Thank you. That would be wonderful."

Mother passed me the letter. I couldn’t understand why she hadn’t given it to Philia. Oh, well. She’d probably just forgotten.

“Well, I’d better get going.”

“Take care. And make sure you don’t get in Philia’s way. I know how thoughtless you can be.”

Mother’s advice made me wince, although I refused to let it show. She didn’t need to tell me that. Sure, I could act careless and lose my cool every now and then, but I’d be nothing but helpful this time. I just knew it.

“Ready, Little Miss Mia?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be. Work your magic, Erza and Mammon!”

On my cue, Mammon opened a teleportation gate, and I walked straight through.

# Chapter 2:
# Philia's Roots

GYPTIA WAS LOCATED in the northeast of the continent. Its vast, sandy deserts were home to historic ruins crafted by ancient people. This made Gyptia a hotspot for archaeology and magic research, attracting adventurers eager to explore its ancient ruins. Rare plants thrived in the desert's oases, providing ingredients widely utilized in medicines.

We found ourselves stepping into Gyptia's royal capital, Shelro, the most populous city in the country.

"So this is Gyptia," I murmured as I took in the city sights. "I've never been here before, but something in the atmosphere makes me feel nostalgic."

The place was abuzz with activity. Hordes of people bustled to and fro.

"Is that because your father was born here?"

"It could be. Maybe it's in my blood."

"Oh, it must be."

I gave Sir Osvalt an affirmative nod, then turned back in time to see Erza and Mammon emerge from the gate, accompanied by my mansion staff.

"Philia!" called Lena. "Thanks for waiting for us!"

"So this is Gyptia, the country Philia's father came from," said Leonardo. "It truly is as hot as people say it is."

"If you require any information," added Himari, "allow me to perform reconnaissance. I am always here to assist you."

All three radiated enthusiasm. I knew I could count on them.

"On that note," said Sir Osvalt, "let's begin searching for Luke!"

"Good idea. I'll help as best as I can!" Lena grinned and swung her arms in the air.

I was eager to begin as well. I wanted to start work right away…but there was just one problem.

Erza said it first. "But how are we going to find him?"

"What?"

"I mean, the name Luke Elraheem is the only clue we have. The country's biggest city seems like our best bet, but we still have no idea where to look."

"No way! We're *that* clueless?!"

Erza's description of the situation was grounded and simple, but it left Lena feeling hopeless. Erza was right. Locating someone with just a name would be no easy feat. However, it wasn't our only lead. There was one more important clue that could help us locate my uncle.

"I've heard that my father, Kamil, was able to use healing magic. I doubt that many apothecaries are also magic-users."

"I see. If we start by looking for Kamil, it might help us determine the location of his younger brother, Luke…"

Very few people could use magic, and apothecary medicine was a rare trade, so I reckoned there was a decent chance that someone in the city would remember both my father and my uncle. We didn't have many clues, but it was enough to work from.

Leonardo stroked his chin. "If that's the route we want to follow, Gyptia *is* home to the Magic Research Institute."

He was right. Gyptia wasn't just a hub for studying ancient relics; it was also making significant progress in modern magic research. The Magic Research Institute probably had some clues to offer.

"My father, Kamil, was an apothecary. He might have had ties with the church, so my first thought was to visit the one in the capital."

"Hmm. In that case," Sir Osvalt said, "how about we split up?"

That did sound like the most effective option. "Okay, so—"

"Mammon and I can consult an exorcist who's stationed in this country."

As soon as I opened my mouth, Erza interrupted with her own idea. I had no idea there were any exorcists in Gyptia, but if there were, perhaps they could offer inside information.

"I see where you're going with this," said Sir Osvalt. "All right! Philia and I will stick together, accompanied by our attendant, Himari. We'll check out the church. Leonardo and Lena, you should head to that research institute. Let's split into three groups and begin the hunt for Luke."

Sir Osvalt, having heard out our plans, issued some instructions. In line with his guidance, we each started working in our respective groups.

If I were to find my uncle, what would I say to him? Feeling a little anxious, I set out toward the church.

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"The streets of Gyptia are nothing like those at home," Sir Osvalt remarked, fascinated.

To begin with, Gyptia was much hotter than Parnacorta, likely due to its proximity to the desert. As a consequence, most people in the city wore light, airy clothing and were tanned by the strong sun. The products lining the shelves in the shops were unlike anything we had in our own countries. I noticed a variety of medicines made from materials found in desert oases. There seemed to be no end to formulas incorporating rare ingredients. Some were remedies that not even I had seen before.

Another notable difference was the number of people dressed for travel. They must have been adventurers or peddlers. I could have spent all day people-watching and never grown bored.

"Sorry," said Sir Osvalt. "I know we can't waste any time standing around. We have to search for Luke."

"Oh, don't worry about it. This is my first time in Gyptia, too, so everything's simply fascinating. It's a wonderful place, isn't it?"

"Yeah. That's exactly what I was thinking."

Sir Osvalt smiled gently at the realization that we'd both been thinking the same thing.

"If you'd like, we could add this to our list of possible honeymoon destinations," Sir Osvalt suggested lightly.

Spending time with him felt so easy.

"That would be nice, Sir Osvalt."

"Right? Still, the more options we have, the harder it'll be to choose."

As he spoke, Sir Osvalt discreetly offered me his hand. I took it without thinking. His hand was large, warm, and reassuring. It had a mysterious power to it, a power that made me believe that everything would be okay as long as I had him by my side.

We walked on, our fingers securely intertwined.

"It's getting busier again. We need to make sure we don't get separated in a foreign land."

Sir Osvalt smiled shyly, clearly self-conscious. When I saw how he was acting, I couldn't help but smile along with him.

I could feel his body heat through his hand. It warmed my heart so much that I instinctively tightened my grip. He looked at me in surprise.

"No need to worry, Sir Osvalt. I won't let go of your hand."

"Is that so? Thank you."

"You're quite welcome."

Sir Osvalt's amber eyes narrowed as he smiled. I gazed at him for a moment before turning my attention back ahead.

Why did it all feel so exciting and new? I never would have felt so fulfilled and content if he weren't by my side.

"But we don't need to worry about getting separated," I assured him. "Himari is hanging back and looking out for us."

"Ha ha. You always see right through me," he said. "I just wanted an excuse to hold your hand."

His unexpected admission made my heart leap. On reflection, I'd grabbed his hand in response without a second thought. Thinking about it made my cheeks begin to burn.

"R-really? Well, um, th-thank you."

"Why are you thanking me?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it just…slipped out."

"You're always so cute, Philia." He smiled, squeezing my hand a little tighter.

His words and actions made my heart race and filled me with happiness at the same time. If it weren't for his presence, I never would have felt so at ease walking around a foreign land.

***

After strolling down the main street, we arrived at the church in the center of the capital.

The church in Gyptia wasn't much different from the one in Parnacorta. The one thing that set it apart was the warm color palette, which gave the façade an air of rich extravagance.

"Parnacorta's church is special in its own way, but this one's really beautiful," said Sir Osvalt.

"Yes, it truly is. I just hope we can find some information about my Uncle Luke."

"Prince Osvalt, Lady Philia, I have acquired permission to enter."

"Great. You never waste any time, Himari."

We wanted to see if the church had any information about Kamil, an apothecary and magic healer. Himari took charge of approaching them on our behalf, and somehow, we had secured the church's permission to enter.

We were ushered into the church's reception room and seated. A middle-aged man served tea, then sat down across from us.

"Welcome, welcome! It's an honor to welcome you both all the way from Parnacorta. Archsaint, Prince Osvalt—I am Yaim, the bishop here at this church."

"Thank you for accommodating our unexpected visit, Bishop Yaim. Allow me to jump straight to the point. Have you ever heard of a man named Kamil Elraheem? He worked as an apothecary in this country over twenty years ago, and also practiced healing magic."

Sir Osvalt wasted no time in asking about my father. Upon hearing his question, the bishop's expression grew somber and he looked at the ground.

"Kamil Elraheem… Now, that's a name I haven't heard in a long time. I never expected to hear it from a foreign prince like yourself, Prince Osvalt."

"So, you do know him?"

"Yes. When I was younger, Kamil and I were friends. He had an exceptional talent for healing magic and studied hard to become one of the most renowned apothecaries in the country. As you said, this was more than twenty years ago… Why do you bring him up now?"

"Well, Kamil Elraheem was my father," I told him.

"Is that so? Kamil, the father of the archsaint…" The bishop nodded amicably—but then his eyes widened and he let out a cry of astonishment. "What did you say?"

His reaction was understandable. There was no obvious connection between Kamil and myself.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you."

"Oh, no, it's not that I'm… Well, yes, I was surprised. To think that Kamil, of all people, was the father of the great Saint Philia…"

Bishop Yaim looked somewhat wistful. He and my father must have been quite close.

"Kamil was ill for a long time. He wasn't the healthiest individual to start with, but then he contracted the incurable disease known as the devil's seed and embarked on a journey to find a cure. That was the last I heard from him, so I assumed he passed on."

"Yes, he did. My master—I mean, my mother—says that he died shortly after I was born."

"I should have known," said Bishop Yaim, hanging his head despondently. It seemed as though he'd never stopped caring about my father, even after he left.

"Bishop Yaim," said Sir Osvalt, "we understand that Kamil had a younger brother named Luke. We were hoping Philia could get the chance to meet him. Do you happen to know where he is?"

"Luke Elraheem? Yes, I know the fellow. He lives on the outskirts of the capital. I can draw a map for you."

"Really? You can lead us right there?"

"Of course. Bear with me a moment."

With that, Bishop Yaim grabbed some paper and a pen and sketched a map for us.

"This is great, isn't it, Philia?"

"It really is. I never expected to track him down so quickly."

Thrilled to have found my uncle's whereabouts, Sir Osvalt and I exchanged hopeful glances.

"Thank you," I said. "We'll head straight there."

"Sorry for taking up your precious time, Bishop," Sir Osvalt added. "We really appreciate the help."

"No problem. But as for Luke… He was once our nation's top apothecary, but he recently retired to live a more secluded life. I assume he's suffering from poor health."

"He's ill and in seclusion?" The bishop's parting words troubled me. My uncle was alive, but it didn't sound as if he was doing well.

"What do you want to do, Philia? Should we go and see him right away?"

"No, let's leave it until tomorrow. I want to regroup with Lena and the others and hear what they've learned."

With that, we left the church.

It sounded like Luke was better-known in Gyptia than I'd expected, so there was a good chance Lena and the others had learned something interesting about him, too.

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We arrived at a large guesthouse, the hotel I'd designated as our meeting place. Its exterior, modeled to resemble a castle, was the epitome of luxury. Gyptia clearly had a thriving tourism industry, as this stunning hotel was only one of many.

When we stepped into the lobby, we noticed several sofas where visitors were making themselves comfortable.

Lena spotted us and came rushing over. "Oh! Lady Philia!"

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting."

"No problem at all," she said with a grin. "More importantly, we've gathered some intel on Luke!" It sounded like Luke really *was* famous.

"Erza's group hasn't made it back yet," Lena added. "Do you wanna wait for them?"

"They haven't? Oh well, just go ahead and tell us what you've learned," replied Sir Osvalt. "Is that okay with you, Philia?"

"Yes. That should be fine."

The five of us sat down in some free seats and listened to what Lena had to say.

"First off, Luke Elraheem is a pretty well-respected figure. He's considered the best apothecary in the country. He's better at magic than his older brother, Kamil, so the Magic Research Institute regularly enlisted his help."

My uncle's magical skills were news to me, but the part about him being the nation's best apothecary matched Bishop Yaim's description.

"But recently his declining health has forced him to hang up his boots. Pretty worrying stuff."

If Luke was really suffering, maybe this wasn't the best time to ask him about my father.

"Well, well. Everybody's here ahead of us."

"Of course we were going to be late, with that detour."

Erza and Mammon strolled up. They were the last remaining members of our party…or so I thought. When I saw who was lingering behind them, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Mia, why are you here?"

Mia laughed. "Hi, Philia. Guess I couldn't stay away."

My sister, whom I thought I'd left behind in Girtonia, was standing there in the hotel lobby. We all stared at her, bewildered. She looked a little embarrassed.

"Don't play coy. What about your duties? Did you get permission from your master?"

"Give me a break, Philia. You know I wouldn't have come without Mother's go-ahead. I made sure to get her permission."

"I-I see."

I was surprised. Hildegard was so strict, I couldn't imagine her allowing Mia to go traipsing halfway around the world on a whim. How on earth had Mia managed to win her over?

"Anyway, Philia, we know where to find Luke!"

None of us said a word. We just looked at each other, hesitant. What were we supposed to say? Both our teams had already discovered his whereabouts, but we didn't want to wipe that triumphant look off Mia's face.

Maybe feigning ignorance was the best bet.

"Thank you, Mia," I said. "That's such a big help."

"Heh heh! You're very welcome. Now, allow me to make myself useful and—"

"That means we *all* managed to track Luke down. This guy must be a real celeb."

"L-Lena? W-we…"

"What? You all knew?"

While the rest of us were playing dumb, Lena let the truth slip. When Mia heard it, her face flushed red with embarrassment.

Erza shot Mia a devious grin. "What a shame, Mia. I guess it wasn't the juicy scoop you thought it was."

"Ugh. Stop rubbing salt in the wound, Erza."

Mia's flustered reaction was so endearing that the atmosphere in the room warmed at once.

"Erza. Your team went to see an exorcist who's stationed in this country, right? Have you learned anything else about Luke? About his social ties, for example?"

Attempting to rein in the now laid-back atmosphere, Sir Osvalt asked Erza if her team had uncovered any extra details. After all, people from different walks of life probably had different information to share.

"Yes," said Erza. "This exorcist has been in Gyptia for a long time, so he even knew Luke's brother, Kamil. In other words, your dad, Archsaint."

From the information I'd gathered so far, I knew that my father left his homeland after being afflicted with the devil's seed. He embarked on a long journey, hoping to find a cure for his own illness… According to Master and Bishop Yaim, it was that journey that took him to Girtonia.

What was he like when he lived in Gyptia?

"Word has it that Kamil struggled with his health from an early age," Erza said. "But he more than made up for that with his intellect. He made a name for himself as an excellent apothecary. Luke looked up to his older brother and followed in his footsteps, later joining him in the profession."

Erza spoke nonchalantly, but I was moved to learn that my father had made such an impact on his brother's life.

"I know how Luke felt."

"Mia?"

"I mean, I dedicated myself to becoming a saint because I saw my older sister throwing herself into the job."

Mia blushed shyly. I kept my eyes fixed straight ahead. Come to think of it, she'd said something similar in the past. She told me she wanted to become a saint so she could follow in my footsteps. I remember feeling rather happy when she said that. I'd even stroked her hair.

"Sorry to get off track," said Mia "Okay, so Luke admired his brother so deeply that he continued researching a cure for the devil's seed, even after Kamil left the country. But—"

"But now he's retired due to his ailing health," Erza added. "I'm sure you heard that, didn't you?"

I gave her a small nod. When I thought about how serious Luke's condition must be, it made my heart hurt.

"And that's not all, Philia. Mother asked me to give you this. It's a letter addressed to Luke that Kamil left behind… So, it's also a keepsake from your late father…"

"Master Hildegard gave you this?"

A letter my father left behind? Why did my master send Mia to deliver it? She could have done it herself while I was at her mansion. Had something deterred her from giving it to me?

No. There was no point in speculating over things like that.

"Thank you, Mia. If I see Luke tomorrow, I'll give this to him."

"Good. I bet he'll be happy to hear from his brother after all these years."

I found myself nodding. I was sure the letter would be deeply meaningful to Luke.

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"Sorry. Would you have preferred to be in the same room as Prince Osvalt, Philia?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Mia. You can't say things like that. We're not married yet."

We were on the top floor of the most luxurious hotel in Gyptia. The rooms were spacious and the furnishings all looked expensive. It was a lovely place.

Mia sat on the sofa, swinging her legs about, with a mischievous smile on her face. "That's true," she laughed. "Still, I feel so much calmer now that we're together, Philia. I guess I get lonely when you're gone."

"Mia…"

Thinking about the first time Mia and I were separated still made my chest tighten. She was an important part of my family. No—at this stage, she was even more than that. Without Mia, I would have given up long ago. I wouldn't have even made it out of Girtonia. I'd been convinced that no one would ever love me. It was Mia who rescued me from those doubts.

"Er, Mia?"

"Yeah? What's up, Philia?"

"I'm grateful that you came. But never in my wildest dreams would I have expected it."

"Ha ha! I can't believe I bragged about tracking down Luke in front of everyone, though. That was so humiliating." With a shy smile, she placed a hand on my cheek.

This sweet gesture brought back memories of a time when she was there to comfort me every day. More than anything, I thought, it made me happy to have her by my side. She must have come out of concern for me.

"But tell me the truth. Why are you here? You didn't come just to look for Luke, did you?"

"Um… No. I guess I do have another goal."

Mia fumbled over her words a little before shooting me a determined look. Her amethyst-like eyes were the epitome of sincerity. I couldn't help but feel nervous.

"Philia, you think of Kamil as your father, right?"

"Yes. I've never met him, so it doesn't quite feel real, but I've accepted it for what it is."

I still didn't know much about Kamil Elraheem. He was dead, so we would never have the opportunity to meet. And yet, I felt he was my father without question. Maybe it was because I felt no warmth for my adoptive parents, the Adenauers. Or maybe there was something else to it. Still, why was Mia asking that question?

"Then what about Mother? Why do you keep calling her Master instead of Mother?"

"W-well…"

Mia's question made me hesitate. I still hadn't managed to call Hildegard "Mother" or "Mom."

"She's been my mentor since I was young. I know in my mind that she's my mother, but it's so hard to say out loud…"

I was still calling her Master because that was how I'd addressed her since I was a child. I didn't have that kind of history with Kamil. Changing the way I addressed her felt like a challenge. Moreover, I was scared that changing the way I spoke to her would change our relationship as well.

To me, Hildegard Adenauer was my mentor and hero. She had taught me invaluable lessons. Deep down, I was hesitant to alter the way I saw her.

"Hmph, fine. But I have a sneaking suspicion that she *wants* you to call her Mom."

"She does?"

No. It couldn't be. This was the woman who'd spent years hurling ruthless orders at me. I couldn't imagine her feeling that way, no matter how hard I tried.

I thought Mia was joking, but the earnest expression on her face said otherwise. Had Mother undergone some strange change of heart? I couldn't imagine it.

"I just thought that calling her my mother would stir up memories she'd prefer to forget."

"That's not true!" Mia sprang to her feet and stood in front of me. "Mother wants to be closer to you! She loves you, Philia. I'm sure she'd love for you two to be mother and daughter again. Don't you dare give up on this. If you don't try to make things right with her, I won't be able to help you."

After saying her piece, Mia stared me square in the face. I felt like a child being scolded by her mother.

Mia was my little sister. As her older sister and a more experienced saint, I had resolved to be the best role model I possibly could. At this moment, however, she was acting more mature than I was. I knew I had to listen to her. After she'd been so honest with me, I couldn't stay silent myself.

"I understand. If you're that insistent, I'm happy to meet Master Hildegard halfway."

Mia beamed and grabbed me by the hand. "Great. Thank you. I'll help as much as I can. We've got this."

"You're always helping me, Mia," I said, stroking her hair. She squirmed with delight, a smile spreading across her face.

"You're the one who helps me, Philia. I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for you. I hope you know how grateful I am."

Mia turned to me and smiled before letting go of my hand and sitting back down on the sofa. The discussion seemed to have come to an end.

"Why don't I make us some tea?" I said, rising to my feet. "Lena's taught me how to make a delicious brew." I opened the tea cupboard in our room. Inside, I found a neatly organized assortment of teas. As one might expect from a first-class hotel, they'd supplied us with a wide range of tea leaves, including black and herbal variants.

"Which type of tea would you like, Mia?"

"Um, I'm fine with anything."

"All right. Let's go with these." I chose some tea leaves, placed them in a pot, and poured hot water over them.

I recalled Lena's surprise the first time she saw me using magic to boil water. After that, she occasionally asked me to do it when she made tea. As my maid, she usually preferred to handle the preparation, though.

"Here you go. It's ready. Make sure to drink it while it's hot."

"Thank you, Philia." Mia picked up the teacup. As soon as she took a sip, her face lit up. "Oh, this is delicious." Lena's advice was spot on, as usual.

"This brings back fond memories," I said.

"What? Did I do something funny, Philia?"

"Not at all. I just remember reacting the same way the first time I tasted Lena's black tea."

I would never forget the first cup Lena brewed for me the morning after I arrived in Parnacorta. At the time, its warm, gentle flavor had filled my heart.

"Really? You know, when I heard you'd gone off to another country, I was terrified. I was worried that you were being mistreated, having a horrible time. Some nights, I was too anxious to sleep."

"Mia…"

"But then, Himari brought me your letter, and I discovered that Lena and Leonardo were on your side. I hadn't met them yet, but I was still so grateful. I couldn't wait to thank them."

I never would have guessed that Mia was so worried. Well, no. When I was sold to Parnacorta, she was the person I was most concerned about, so of course she felt similarly about me. Our reactions were to be expected—we were sisters who loved one other, and we'd been torn apart.

"Perhaps I'm making things too complicated."

"Philia?"

"I'm aware that we have different parents, and yet I'm still proud to call you my sister. If I look at my relationship with our master in the same way, calling her 'Mother' doesn't feel so daunting."

Surely the answer was that simple. I'd been overthinking this.

Our biological relationship was irrelevant. Mia and I were family, and we loved each other. By that logic, there was no need to worry that my relationship with Hildegard would change.

"That's right. I know you have it in you, Philia."

Mia's encouragement filled me with courage. I still had a long way to go in truly understanding my birth mother, but if I showed her my feelings in my own way, perhaps we could become mother and daughter again. Hadn't she done just that?

"Perhaps Hildegard entrusted me with my father's research papers as her way of supporting me."

"I bet she did. See, I'm sure things between you two will turn out okay."

"Yes. As long as I have your approval, I feel I'm on the right track."

After discussing things with Mia, I could finally see myself moving forward.

*Bear with me, Hildegard. Now I see that the saintly knowledge you imparted to me was a token of your motherly love. My first step will be to make sure you know that.*

*And one of these days, in the not-so-distant future, I'll proudly call you my mother.*

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## Hildegard

"What do you mean, you're leaving Philia in the hands of the church? Have you forgotten how you stole my daughter from me, claiming you'd raise her to be the rightful saint of the Adenauer family?"

"That's exactly why I'm doing this. If the church trains her to be a saint, she won't tarnish the Adenauer family name."

That day, my brother decided to send young Philia away to the church.

He was taking her from me. His dispassionate words were impossible for me to comprehend.

"You already agreed to give her up to me and my wife, so you have no right to gripe now. Besides, she has no real talent. She takes after you that way. It won't hurt for her to start her training early."

"What?" My brother's words made me shake with rage. Not only had he taken my precious daughter from me, but he insulted both of us to my face. As if that wasn't enough, he continued his relentless tirade.

"It's about time you came to terms with reality. I am the next head of the Adenauer family, and you have been exiled. You have no power to oppose me."

"This is because of Mia, isn't it? As soon as she was born, Philia became expendable in your eyes."

"Hmph. She's not *expendable*, exactly. She could still be useful as a backup—at least, until Mia becomes a saint."

"Wh-what did you just say?!"

My daughter was a *backup*? This declaration left me at a loss for words. I couldn't believe it. How could the man who'd taken my daughter say something so shameless? He had to understand how cruel it was.

The arrogant man in front of me filled me with indescribable rage.

"You should be thanking me. I'm letting you into her life as her mentor. I trust you won't make the foolish mistake of calling yourself her mother. If that were to happen…you know what the consequences would be."

Leaving me with this ominous parting remark, my brother went on his way. Alone, I stood frozen, astonished by what I'd heard.

I was frustrated by my helplessness, and sad, too. I'd been so weak. I'd failed to protect my beloved daughter. Most reprehensible of all, however, was my own incompetence. How could I have let them snatch my precious baby from me?

"I expect Mia will grow up to treat her sister with disdain, too," I said to myself.

All I could do was ensure, through rigorous training, that Philia would grow up tough enough to withstand any adversity that came her way. Such guidance was the one thing I could offer her, even if she resented me for it. I couldn't allow myself to weaken.

When I was finally reunited with my daughter, whom I hadn't seen since she was a baby, the sight of her face felt like a stake through my heart.

"From today, I will shape you into a saint."

"I understand, Aunt Hildegard."

Though she was still so young, her face was already devoid of expression. Life had turned her into a child who couldn't even muster a smile. That alone made it easy to envision what kind of treatment she'd received at the hands of the Adenauer family.

"Don't call me 'aunt.' When I'm teaching you, I have no intention of treating you as my niece. You shall call me Master."

"Understood, Master."

No matter what, I remained firm in my approach. It was the only way I had to protect her.

Philia was a star student. She wasn't exceptionally quick at learning, but she possessed single-minded dedication and an unbreakable spirit. In my eyes, however, her strength was a cause for concern. She hid her vulnerability beneath a strong façade, and one day, it was sure to collapse.

That was why I subjected her to the harshest of trials. I had to use my influence to mold her into an unstoppable saint.

In time, Philia grew up and attained her saintly title from the church. In that moment, it felt like the training I'd put her through had paid off.

"Your hard work has made me so proud."

"Excuse me?"

I would never forget the look of shock on Philia's face.

In the heat of the moment, an expression of maternal praise had escaped my lips. Philia's startled reaction left a lasting impression.

I was startled, too. I hadn't known those maternal instincts still lingered within me.

When Philia began her work as a saint, her accomplishments were awe-inspiring. She developed one new spell after another, alleviating the suffering of her people. The Adenauer family provided its members with special education in every subject, which yielded remarkable results. She demonstrated exceptional talent in all areas, not just her saintly duties.

Before we knew it, news of her accomplishments had reached neighboring countries. Soon it spread across the entire continent. People began to call her the greatest saint of all time.

I was proud that my precious student and beloved daughter had reached such heights. But it wasn't long before the one thing I'd dreaded became a reality. Philia's younger sister, Mia, became a saint in her own right. Would the Adenauers decide they had no more use for Philia?

Mia was, without a doubt, a prodigy. After completing her saint training in just a year, she was officially granted her saintly title. Although she still fell short of Philia in terms of power, her radiance captivated those around her. With a smile as dazzling as the sun, she charmed her citizens, capturing their hearts in the wink of an eye.

Mia was a gifted saint. There was no doubt about it. The way I saw things, it was only a matter of time before my fears were

realized.

To my surprise, Philia had a soft spot for her little sister.

"Mia?" she said when I asked about her. "She's adorable."

"Adorable?"

"Oh! You were asking about her abilities as a saint, weren't you? My apologies. She's incredibly talented. I'm proud to call her my younger sister."

"Philia," called Mia, "let's go shopping on our next day off! Wearing the same clothes all the time is getting so boring."

Mia, too, seemed to admire Philia, and eagerly sought opportunities to connect with her. Despite my concerns, the two sisters had developed a close bond.

It must have been the first time Philia had not only expressed love for someone, but received it back in its purest form. Seeing the two sisters care for each other put my worries to rest. There was no doubt in my mind that Mia had become an irreplaceable presence in Philia's life. As long as she had Mia, Philia would be fine.

Fortunately, His Majesty the King took a liking to Philia, thanks to the reputation she'd earned. He even arranged for her to marry his younger son, Julius. Once she was engaged to a prince, the Adenauer family would have no reason to snub her anymore. Or at least, that was my naïve assumption…

"She's been sold to a neighboring country?"

The news came to me through the pro-crown prince faction, a group that pushed for Prince Fernand to inherit the throne. Philia had been handed over to the neighboring kingdom of Parnacorta in exchange for wealth and goods—a plot orchestrated by none other than my brother and his wife, in collusion with Prince Julius himself.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Philia had done nothing wrong. Once again, I cursed my own incompetence. I'd always feared that people would shun my daughter because they envied her brilliance, but this possibility had never even crossed my mind.

My frustration left me trembling with rage.

I was going to make my brother, his wife, and Prince Julius pay for what they'd done. Determined to exact revenge, I chose to fight alongside the pro-crown prince faction.

What surprised me most, however, was Mia's reaction. Like me, losing Philia left her burning with rage.

The next time I saw Mia, I made her a proposal.

"Mia, after all this is over, I'd like to adopt you."

"Adopt me?"

"That's right. Whether their plan succeeds or fails, Marquess Adenauer and his wife are bound for prison. Without your parents, things will be tough. My husband is long gone, but if you become my daughter, I can take care of you."

Mia seemed to think I was speaking from the goodness of my heart, but that wasn't the case. This was my way of getting revenge.

I would never forgive the Adenauer family for snatching Philia from me, so I decided to give them a taste of their own medicine. I was going to take away the one person my younger brother and his wife loved and cherished above all else—their daughter, Mia.

Once it was all over, Mia became my adoptive daughter.

"Philia seems happy in Parnacorta," Mia said, showing me a letter from Philia. Philia had just expanded the Great Purification Circle, saving the continent and earning herself the title of archsaint in the process.

Mia was such a sweet girl. It was hard to believe she was the child of my younger brother and his wife. She was training under me, a decision she had made of her own accord.

She must have reread Philia's letter a hundred times, because it looked quite tattered.

"Um, Mother. Are you *sure* you don't want to tell Philia that you're her mother?"

"You're not going to let that go, are you? We've already drawn a line under that conversation. I have no right to call myself her mother."

The fact that Philia was my biological daughter was a secret. However things had panned out, I had renounced my role as her mother. There was no way I could reclaim it. As long as Philia had found happiness, I couldn't wish for anything more.

That was my view, at least—but by chance, Philia ended up learning the truth.

Even after she discovered that I was her mother, however, our relationship remained unchanged. I was proud to call myself her mentor, but perhaps that was just my guilt speaking.

I loved Philia. I put her through rigorous training to help her grow as a saint. I was strict with her because I saw her as my daughter, not just a student. I was strict because I loved her.

But I had suppressed those feelings, and even after the truth came to light, I was tormented by the contradictory desire to remain her mentor. Then Mia made an astute observation…

"But Mother… Weren't you pleased when Philia learned the truth? You said you were delighted that she asked you for such a big favor."

I couldn't answer.

Mia had gotten down to the nuts and bolts of our relationship. It felt as though she could read me like a book. We'd been talking about her following Philia to Gyptia, but suddenly the conversation had turned toward me.

Like her sister, Mia was an unusual child. She had a knack for getting close to people, making them feel like they could open up about anything. I understood why Philia was so fond of her.

"To tell you the truth," I said at last, "I'm not sure. I failed to be a proper mother to her during the most important years of her life. I'll always carry that guilt."

Courage. That was something I lacked.

I was afraid of being rejected by Philia. She already knew the truth, but that fear still hadn't left me.

"Why?"

"You know why. I knew the Adenauers were treating her poorly, and all I did was put her through harsh training. It felt like the only thing I could do for her. I'm in no position to call myself her mother. She must feel the same way."

That was my worry. As lovely as she was, Philia must have resented me deep down.

Mia, however, unreservedly rejected the guilt I carried. "I don't think that's true," she said, staring intently at me as if she knew the inside of Philia's heart.

"What makes you say that?"

"Philia just told you that your strictness was a gift! She wouldn't lie about that. There's no doubt in my mind that you were strict for her own benefit, and Philia knows it too. Sure, it might be twisted, but Philia made it clear that she felt your love."

I couldn't find a response. It was true that I'd subjected Philia to a harsh training regimen. As a result, she'd acquired unrivaled strength. She dubbed this harsh regimen a "gift," but that was an assertion I hesitated to accept.

How could she feel that way? How could she insist she was grateful for her harsh treatment, born of my desperation?

Mia, however, was adamant that Philia had been telling the truth.

"You really don't hold back, do you, Mia?"

She laughed. "If I don't speak up, I'll regret it. At the end of the day, you'd prefer Philia to call you 'Mother' rather than 'Master,' wouldn't you?"

"W-well, I—"

I couldn’t bring myself to utter the words, but on the inside, I couldn’t lie to myself any longer. I wanted to be Philia’s mom. I wanted her to call me her mother.

My pent-up desires had broken free of their shackles.

“Ahh, what a terrible daughter I have,” I groaned.

I opened a bottle of the strongest alcohol I had, poured some out, and downed it in one go. It felt like the liquid was boiling inside my chest and my stomach, but for the time being, I was happy to surrender myself to the burning sensation.

“Can I trust you with this mission, Mia?”

Philia’s fiancé, Prince Osvalt, was a tolerant and accepting man. He was like a ray of sunshine. Philia needed somebody like him to melt her icy heart. The young woman in front of me was radiant enough to brighten her spirit, too.

“Yes, of course. Leave it to me! I’ll look after Philia and make your dream come true, Mother!”

After pouring some alcohol into a glass and downing it in one gulp, Mia made a bold declaration. Her face flushed—the drink was probably stronger than she was used to—but the sparkle in her eyes was unmistakable. The daughter I’d adopted really was a force of nature.

I’d adopted Mia out of revenge, but now I was glad to have her as my daughter.

Before she left, I entrusted Mia with a letter my husband wrote near the end of his life. I hadn’t planned to part with it, but I felt compelled to do something as her mother.

Afterward, I felt a hint of regret. When Philia realized what the letter revealed, it was bound to upset her…

Well, when the time came, I’d have to hold her back. As her mother, that was my job.

# Chapter 3:
# My Father's Wishes

"I'M STUCK IN THE HABIT of waking up too early."

I stood up, glanced at Mia, whose sleeping face was turned away from me, and got dressed. It was too early to start the day's work, but I was eager to go up onto the roof. From what I'd heard, one could get a breathtaking view of the morning sun from there.

Hoping to catch it for myself, I left the room and climbed a staircase. The rooftop was open to all guests, so I could come and go as I pleased.

As soon as I opened the door, a cool breeze swept over me. I looked up at the sky. The sun was yet to rise, so it was still fairly dark. Only in the far east was a faint glow beginning to emerge.

"Oh. I didn't expect to find you here, Philia."

I turned. "Sir Osvalt…" He must have awakened early, just as I had.

"Sorry for disturbing you," he said.

"What?"

"I just thought you might have come up here to spend some time alone."

Why was he so good at reading my mind? He was right. I'd been looking forward to some private time.

"Until a moment ago, that was my intention. It's strange, though…"

"Oh?"

"As soon as I saw your face, I changed my mind. I started to want to spend time with you instead."

"I see. Philia?"

I slowly walked over to him, then wrapped him in a tight embrace. He was so warm. The heat of his body made me feel safe.

He'd changed my destiny. If I'd never met him, I doubt I'd be here today. The desire to give him everything I had was blossoming within me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That must sound odd. I only wanted to be alone so I could do some reflection, but as soon as I came here, I suddenly started feeling lonely."

"I see."

He accepted my embrace, no questions asked. Come to think of it, I hadn't felt isolated for some time. In the past, I'd seen my sacred duties as the sole purpose of my existence, so I didn't need anyone but Mia. But truthfully, I'd probably longed to be loved all along.

I disguised that desire by fulfilling my duties in emotionless solitude, convinced that I was unworthy of love.



I couldn’t make that claim anymore, however. Now that Sir Osvalt was around, I was happy to admit that I wanted to be loved. I was eager to embrace every part of him.

Since meeting the prince, I’d become greedy for love.

“I’m sorry, Sir Osvalt. I’ve gotten so weak. I don’t think I can tolerate the loneliness of being alone anymore.”

“That’s not how it works. Being able to tolerate loneliness doesn’t mean that you’re strong. These days, you’re able to connect with me on an emotional level. Opening yourself up like that takes real strength. At least, that’s what I believe.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel so much better.”

After we’d spent a few minutes nestling close to one another, the sun started to rise. It was so bright, it made me squint.

It was strange. The sun was shining so brightly that it made me want to shield my eyes, yet I couldn’t help but stare, captivated by the spectacle.

My heart overflowed with emotion. I knew I would never forget that sight for as long as I lived.

Maybe this was what I wanted my world to be like. Watching the sun come up with the person I loved: was there anything more beautiful?

“I feel genuinely happy that I was born, Sir Osvalt.”

“Philia…”

“That’s why I want to learn about the father I never met. And my mother, too.”

Once again, I gazed down at the royal capital, glistening in the morning light. This was the country where my father was born and raised. I knew so little about him that it was as if he’d never existed at all. But perhaps that was all about to change. If I succeeded in finding my father’s younger brother, Luke, he would surely be able to

tell me about my family. I had a feeling it would fill a void inside of me.

What was my father like as a person? What motivated him to leave his country? What ignited his mission to create a cure for the very illness that was eating away at him?

Actually, I didn't mind if I didn't get the answers to those questions. I just wanted to learn whatever I could.

My mother and father lived, found each other, and fell in love. If not for them, I wouldn't be here, savoring this joy. I was so thankful that they'd given me this life. It was gratitude that motivated me to learn more about them both.

"Do you think Luke will understand how I feel?"

"It's hard to say. You need to do your best to show him."

"Yes, you're right."

"I'll help you. Let's keep our eyes on the prize, Philia."

His words alone were enough to make all my anxiety go away. Sir Osvalt's encouragement always filled me with courage.

"Sir Osvalt, thank you for staying by my side and helping me."

"Hey, don't even think about it. I love you. It's only natural for me to want to support you."

His blond hair shone even brighter in the sunlight, rustling in the cool morning breeze. In that moment, he was all I could see.

I drew closer, feeling as though his supportive gaze was drawing me in. I found myself closing my eyes, and…

"Oh! Philia! There you are!"

"Huh?"

Taken by surprise, I spun around. It was Mia.

"Wait, what? Prince Osvalt is here, too? I-I'm not interrupting something, am I?"

"M-Mia! What brings you here?"

"Isn't it obvious? When I woke up, you were missing. I was worried sick, so I came to look for you."

Of course, when Mia realized that I wasn't in our room, she'd come to find me. If she'd arrived a moment later, she might have caught us in a delicate situation.

"I-I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to ruin the moment…"

"D-don't worry. There was nothing to ruin."

"No need to hide it from me. I'll head back to the room. You two take your time."

On that note, Mia hastily left the rooftop. As I watched her hurry away, I let out a sigh of relief.

With Mia gone, it was just the two of us again, but the atmosphere had grown awkward. Sir Osvalt couldn't bring himself to look at me.

"I-I'm sorry about that," I said.

"Hmm? Oh, it didn't bother me."

"B-but…"

As I began to speak, Sir Osvalt planted a gentle kiss on my head. This unexpected gesture left me speechless. Smiling, he whispered in my ear.

"We can pick up where we left off another time."

"O-okay."

I wasn't used to physical touch, and his whispered words caught me off guard, too. It took all my strength to muster such a calm response.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. When I first came up to the rooftop, it was dark, but now the sun beamed down on us. The light of day only magnified my embarrassment further.

"That said, we'd better leave before Lena or Leonardo show up."

“Very funny, Sir Osvalt,” I said, laughing. His genuine smile was infectious.

Without either of us taking the initiative, our fingers naturally intertwined, and we walked off together.

***

“Philia! You’re wearing your saint outfit today!”

After I’d finished my breakfast, Lena pointed out that I was dressed differently than the day before.

I didn’t want Luke to feel unnecessarily wary when we met, so I decided I should make my status clear from the start. After all, he wasn’t well. I needed to make sure our encounter was as stress-free as possible.

“Should I dress up, too?” asked Mia.

“There’ll be no need for that. Only one of us has to wear the robes. Besides, he might get a shock if he finds two saints at his door.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense.”

I slipped my father’s letter into my bag. “Ready?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

“Then let’s get going.”

With that, Mia and I set off to find the others.

Sir Osvalt, already primed for departure, was waiting for us in Erza’s room, with Mammon standing beside him.

“Oh! Are you ready to leave?”

“Thank you for waiting, Sir Osvalt. You too, Erza and Mammon.”

I bowed, then joined the prince.

“Are you nervous, Archsaint?” asked Erza.

"I'm somewhat nervous, but more than anything, I'm excited," I said, honestly revealing my true feelings in response to Erza's concern. Until recently, I hadn't even known I had an uncle, but now we were about to meet. I still hadn't worked out what I was going to say or how I was supposed to act.

Nonetheless, I was eager to meet him. I wanted to see him, talk to him, and introduce Sir Osvalt and Mia to him. That desire outweighed everything else.

"You're mentally prepared, then. Mammon! It sounds like we're ready to leave."

"I'm already on it," Mammon responded eagerly. He summoned a teleportation gate adorned with ominous decorations, and we stepped through. "So this is the place, huh?"

What greeted us was a sight to behold.

A vast, picturesque field of flowers stretched out before our eyes. A cottage stood at the center.

This had to be Luke's home. It certainly looked like a place where the country's most renowned apothecary would live. As I walked through the field, I realized it was actually an herb garden, blooming with all kinds of medicinal plants.

Still, I couldn't let the beauty of the view distract me. As soon as we arrived, the door of the house swung open and a lone figure emerged: a middle-aged man with brown skin, white hair, and emerald-green eyes trudged through his garden at a leisurely place, watering the flowers. He could only be Luke. We'd never met before, but I was sure of it.

I approached, preparing to greet him.

"Is that you, dear saint? No, your face doesn't look familiar. Are you a new saint of Gyptia?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Am I right to assume that you are Luke Elraheem? My name is Philia Adenauer, and I serve as the Saint of Parnacorta."

"I-indeed, I am Luke. But never mind me. Are you really Saint Philia? Wh-why would the archsaint come to my quiet corner of the countryside?"

Luke stared at me in confusion, unblinking. It was clear that he had no idea we were related.

"I was told that my late father's brother, my uncle, lives at this address. I came here in the hope of meeting him."

"Your uncle, you say? Hmm… Only my wife and I live here."

"Yes. I am the daughter of your brother, Kamil Elraheem. I am your niece."

"What?!" Luke froze with shock, his mouth hanging open. "Y-you're my brother's daughter?!"

I couldn't blame him for being surprised. My father had died more than a decade ago, and while he may have mentioned his marriage in a letter, Luke could never have imagined that his brother's daughter would show up at his doorstep, let alone that she had become a saint. Discovering that your niece was the saint of a foreign country would be a shock in itself.

"I apologize for startling you, Luke. Excuse me for showing up unannounced, but would you mind giving me a moment of your time?"

"All right. I can tell by your eyes that this isn't some cruel prank. Come on in—I shall make us some tea."

Opening the front door, Luke ushered us into his home, where our conversation would take place.

***

"Archsaint Philia is my older brother's daughter, and she's engaged to the second prince of Parnacorta. And now, she's come all the way here to learn about my brother…" muttered Luke.

When I briefly explained our reasons for visiting him, Luke grimaced. I couldn't blame Luke for looking skeptical. It *was* an outrageous story.

"I know you're sick, so I won't press you if it's hard to talk about. But, if possible, could you tell me a little about what kind of person my father Kamil was?"

"I appreciate your consideration. I've calmed down now, and I'm sure sharing a few stories won't do me any harm."

"I'd really appreciate that."

Bishop Yaim had told us that Luke was in poor health, so I'd been worried, but he didn't seem to have trouble conversing. That said, I needed to make sure he didn't ramble on for too long.

"Now then, would you like to hear about my brother?"

"Yes. Until recently, I didn't even know my birth father's name, but I've been eager to find out more."

"I see."

Luke closed his eyes, entering a state of deep and unhurried contemplation. A few moments later, he opened them again and began to speak.

"Your father was born frail, but his intellect more than made up for that. What's more, he was the kindest person you'd ever meet."

"He was?"

"Yes. He initially studied to become an apothecary to ease his own ongoing health struggles, but soon he began to develop medicines for other suffering people. To me, that seemed like his true calling, and it was a noble one indeed. I remember it inspiring me to enter the profession and devote myself to my country's people."

So it was true that my father had inspired Luke to become an apothecary. As I listened attentively, I felt sentimental about my father, even though I'd never seen his face.

"But then your father was afflicted by the devil's seed, an incurable disease."

"That's what I heard."

"He set out on a solitary journey, hoping to find a miracle cure for the illness. That was the last I ever saw of him."

Luke must have had lingering regrets. I could tell from his bitter expression that he never expected that to be their last farewell. This was the only explanation for the distraught look on his face.

"I did receive several letters from him, but they stopped coming over twenty years ago. I never knew he'd gotten married in Girtonia and had a child."

Luke rose to his feet and disappeared into the back of the cottage. After a short interval, he returned with several letters.

"These are the letters my brother sent me. He'd gathered most of the ingredients he believed were necessary for the cure, but something was still missing. I want you to have these, Saint Philia."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Without question. I've read them so many times, I've consigned them to memory. Your father would want you to have them."

I looked at the letters Luke handed me. Although the handwriting was faint, as if the writer couldn't press his pen down very hard, he must have poured everything he had into composing them.

In each letter, my father wrote that he was struggling to find the core ingredients for his remedy, though he expressed this frustration in a new way every time.

"My master… I mean, my *mother* gave me a letter that my father, Kamil, wrote for you in his final days. Would you like to see it?"

"A letter penned by my brother in his final days? Now, that's something I never thought I'd see…"

Luke took the letter from me and read through it.

"Saint Philia…"

When he'd finished, he said my name, looking at me with tears in his eyes. What could possibly be in that letter?

"I'm sorry for getting emotional in front of you," said Luke. "Would you like to read this, too?"

"W-would that be all right?"

"Of course."

I took the letter from Luke.

*To my beloved younger brother,*

*By the time you read this, I will already have departed this life. But please let me tell you this one thing. I'm proud of you for becoming our homeland's leading apothecary. I hope that you will keep up the good work, even after I am gone.*

*A few days ago, my wife and I welcomed a daughter into the world. She doesn't have a name yet, but she's already incredibly cute. I'm so excited for her future.*

*To me, this child represents hope.*

*Wait, what was that? You want to know what's so cute about her? Good question. There are plenty of things I could mention, but I suppose what I love the most is how much she resembles my beloved wife.*

*I told you this in a previous letter, but my wife is not just beautiful on the outside, but on the inside as well. It makes perfect sense for our daughter to be just as lovely.*

*At the moment, my wife's holding her head in her hands, racking her brains for name ideas. She's usually so calm and*

*collected. It's endearing to see her like this.*

*I'm sure she'll come up with a good name. One that'll ensure she grows up to be a kid who stays strong in the face of trouble, no matter what.*

*I wish you could see her, too.*

*In the end, I never managed to create that remedy. Frustrating as it is, I can't afford to keep pushing myself, so I must let those ambitions go. I have lived a happy life. I can make that claim with full confidence.*

*Luke. I'm sorry for all the worry I caused you.*

*I'll be watching over you from someplace up above.*

*With love,*

*Kamil Elraheem*

"What?!"

When I finished reading the letter, I couldn't stop the emotions welling up within me. I'd never met my father, but I could distinctly feel his kindness and warmth through his words. He'd loved my mother and me. I never imagined that learning this would make me so happy.

"It sounds like you had a wonderful father," said Sir Osvalt.

I took the handkerchief he offered me and wiped my tears away. "Yes. Thank you."

My chest felt hot as a mixture of joy and sorrow surged within me. The sensation was difficult to describe.

"Mother has never shared any lovey-dovey stories about him, but she and Kamil must have been pretty close," Mia said, grinning.

I'd never taken the time to envision what kind of marriage Master Hildegard and my father had. But my father's letter offered a glimpse into their close bond, making me wish I knew more. The next time I saw her, I'd have a plethora of questions.

"You say you didn't even know my brother was your father until recently, Saint Philia," said Luke. "What happened?"

"Y-you see…"

I looked over at Mia, struggling to find the right words. With a gentle nod, she answered for me.

"Shortly after Philia… I mean, my big sister was born, she was taken by my parents, who didn't have a child of their own. They brought her up as their own daughter. Until a short while ago, she had no idea that she had another mother, or that Kamil even existed. It's all my parents' fault."

"Excuse me for asking this, but what is your relationship with Philia?"

"Oh, my bad. I should have explained. We're not sisters by blood. Technically speaking, she's my cousin."

"I-I see." Luke bowed his head deeply. "I didn't know any of this. I'm sorry for making you talk about such a difficult topic."

From an outsider's perspective, our experience must have sounded painful. I knew that her parents' wrongdoings weighed heavily on Mia, but that didn't mean she was responsible in any way.

"Raise your head, Luke. Maybe my life wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, but right now, I'm happy. I'm surrounded by Mia, Sir Osvalt, and many other people I cherish." I spoke from the heart, without a trace of dishonesty.

Luke slowly looked up, staring directly at me. "That look of determination in your eyes… It's like I'm looking at Kamil. You are, without a doubt, my brother's daughter. I'm sure my brother is watching you from heaven now, delighted that you have such wonderful people on your side."

"Luke…"

"I don't feel qualified to call myself the uncle of the archsaint. But discovering that I have a niece—that my brother left a daughter behind—is the most wonderful surprise I could have ever imagined."

I could sense the earnestness and sincerity in Luke's gaze. More than anything else, I felt comfortable with him, even though we'd never met before.

I expressed my gratitude with a deep bow. "Thank you for telling me about my father." Just as he was happy to have a niece, I was delighted to discover that I had an uncle.

"This was a successful visit, wasn't it?" said Mia.

"Indeed. I couldn't have done it without you, Mia."

"Heh… I don't think I've been any use at all. But it does feel like a weight has been lifted. I'm not sure why, but I must have been feeling a little apprehensive," Mia admitted, smiling.

Had she followed me to Gyptia because she was worried?

Sir Osvalt stood up and bowed his head. "Luke, I appreciate you telling us about Kamil. As Philia's fiancé, allow me to express my thanks."

Luke rose from his seat, flustered, and tried to kneel. He appeared quite rattled by Sir Osvalt's gesture. "Y-your highness! L-look up, I beg of you! No country's prince should bow down to a commoner!"

"You've got it wrong, Luke. I'm not lowering my head as a prince, but as the man who's engaged to marry your niece. Please don't worry about it."

"Yes, but still. It's a preposterous thing to do."

"Sir Osvalt, I think you're making Luke uncomfortable."

"All right, fine. Sorry… I was just so happy."

Sir Osvalt apologized to Luke with a bright smile. He must have noticed the look of concern on my uncle's face. No longer the reluctant recipient of the prince's humble bow, Luke relaxed and his expression softened.

I'd heard that Luke was no longer well enough to continue his apothecary work, but our conversation hadn't seemed to trouble him. Maybe he wasn't as sick as I'd assumed…

"*Cough! Cough! Hff…hff…* Ughhh!"

"Huh?"

Luke clutched his chest in pain. He wasn't having a seizure caused by *that* illness, was he? Whatever the case, I couldn't just sit around and do nothing.

"Luke!" I ran over to my pain-stricken uncle. When I saw he was taking medicine out of his pocket, I passed him a nearby water jug. He gulped it down and gasped with relief.

"*Hngh, glug, glug*… Phew…"

As soon as he took the medicine, Luke's condition seemed to stabilize. I watched him wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like that," he said.

"Oh, you don't need to worry. But that attack… It's not what I think it is, is it?"

"Unfortunately, your assumption is correct. I, too, am suffering from the devil's seed."

"So it's true."

Seizures, accompanied by chest pain and a terrible cough… While those symptoms alone weren't enough to make a definitive judgment, I'd heard that close relatives of people who suffered from the devil's seed, such as parents and siblings, were more likely to be afflicted by the disease themselves. That was why the possibility crossed my mind.

"I developed this medicine while searching for a cure for the devil's seed," Luke explained. "It can suppress the symptoms for a certain length of time, but this is what happens when its effects wear off."

How interesting. Luke had been researching a cure himself. Judging by how healthy he'd seemed during our encounter, his remedy could successfully curb the disease's symptoms for a time.

"It must be an incredible medicine," said Mia. "Right, Philia? The minute you took it, you were able to speak again."

"Yes. It proves what a marvelous apothecary Luke is. However __"

"Have you grasped the problem with my medicine already, Saint Philia? I should have known. Medicine is one of the many fields in which you've distinguished yourself, is it not?"

After hearing my reaction to Mia's praise, Luke smiled self-deprecatingly and explained where his remedy fell short.

"This medicine is designed to suppress the symptoms," he continued, "but that's all it does. It doesn't stop the disease from eating away at my body. And as the illness progresses, I have to take the medicine more often to see results. It's only been three hours since my last dose."

"That means…"

"Yes. Before long, it will stop working entirely."

There was a serene glow in Luke's eyes, as though he had already made peace with the tragic fate that was waiting for him. I, however, was not prepared to accept it. I couldn't bear the thought of losing the uncle I'd only just met.

I'd only left Parnacorta to convince my mother to walk me down the aisle. But now, after meeting Luke and watching him suffer from the same disease as my father, I couldn't turn my back to him and walk away.

Before I realized it, the words had already slipped from my mouth. "Would you allow me to continue your research, Luke?"

"You want to take over my research?"

"That's what I said."

At that stage, I couldn't help but feel like fate had led me here. This was the very sickness my father had studied and battled to his final moments. The devil's seed had snatched my father's life away—and Elizabeth's, too. I couldn't let all those sacrifices go to waste.

"I do have *some* medicinal knowledge. Please allow me to help."

When Luke heard my plea, he was overcome with emotion. His eyes began to well up with tears. "Saint Philia, would you really go that far for someone you've only just met?"

"Of course I would. I couldn't wish for more than to cure the disease that took my father."

"Oh, you don't know how grateful I am to hear that…"

Luke took my hand and pressed it against his forehead in what could only be a gesture of gratitude. As I gazed back at him, I silently vowed to create a cure for the devil's seed.

"You're a first-rate apothecary," said Mia brightly. "I'm sure you'll be able to finish Luke's research."

Yes, that was my wish. I was eager to complete what my father and uncle had started.

"Luke," I said, "I'm sorry to ask you for a favor when you're so unwell, but could you show me any research documents you may have?"

"Of course. No problem at all. I would love for you to see them. Could you bear with me for a moment?"

Luke disappeared into his study. Before long, he reappeared with an armful of papers.

There were quite a lot. It was going to take me a long time to read them all.

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"It looks like the main focus of your research was a remedy that could suppress the disease's symptoms after its onset, rather than one that could cure the disease. Is that correct, Luke?"

After reading all of his papers, I checked whether I'd come to the right conclusion.

The medicine Luke had developed was extraordinarily effective. It almost entirely suppressed the symptoms of the disease. However, there was no chance of it curing the illness, at any dosage.

"Yes, that's right. I needed to be hale enough to work, so that was my starting point. The trouble is, developing that treatment took too long. But by the time I completed it, I lacked the stamina or willpower to work on a true cure."

"But the cure is complete, theoretically speaking. You just don't have the right ingredients."

"How incredible. I can't believe you've gathered so much insight after reading through my papers just once. Indeed, if I had medicinal plants that could destroy the fundamental cause of the disease, rather than just quell its symptoms, I could create a wonder drug. However, all the plants that would have the necessary effect are essentially poisonous. The patient's body would break down before they took effect."

As I suspected, Luke had already theorized a cure. The symptom-quelling remedy had given him time to develop his ideas.

"I think my brother reached the same conclusion," Luke continued. "He said in his letters that he was struggling to find a final ingredient for his cure."

"I interpreted his letters the same way. Not even he managed to find it, though."

In his letters, my father often wrote about his struggle to locate a certain core ingredient. He poured everything he had into trying to find it, but passed away before achieving that goal. The thought made my heart hurt.

"Does that mean that if we found the right ingredient, we could make the medicine?" asked Mia.

"I believe so," I said. "But it's quite the challenge. Luke has tried every ingredient he could think of, but none of his attempts have succeeded."

"So that's why Kamil left Gyptia to search other lands."

I nodded. Luke had tested almost every conceivable plant in Gyptia, and my father had traveled the world to find other possible ingredients, but neither had come upon what they needed. Clearly, creating a cure would be no simple task.

"Hey, Philia," said Sir Osvalt. "This is just a layperson's opinion, but do you think we could find what we're looking for in Girtonia?"

"What makes you say that?"

My father was in Girtonia when he passed away. It certainly seemed likely that he had traveled there to search for the ingredient, but apparently, he hadn't found it there.

"It's right here in his letter. *In the end, I never managed to create that remedy*. *Frustrating as it is, I can't afford to keep pushing myself, so I must let those ambitions go*. That's what he wrote, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"When he says he can't *keep* pushing himself, maybe that doesn't mean he couldn't find the ingredient. Maybe he knew where to find it, but he didn't have the strength left to get there."

"Oh?! Now that you mention it," I said, "you may be right."

All I'd taken away from the letter were my father's feelings of resignation and his love toward me. My heart was too full for me to pay attention to anything else.

"There's a strong possibility that the ingredient necessary to cure the devil's seed is somewhere in Girtonia."

"In that case, should we head back?"

"Good idea. I think that will maximize our chances of finding the ingredient." I turned to Luke. "I'm sorry, Luke, but could we hold onto these papers for a while?"

Luke's expression turned solemn. He looked at me, then gave me a slow nod. "Think nothing of it. Still, Girtonia is a vast and distant land. The journey alone will be difficult."

"No need to worry. With the help of my friends, we can reach Girtonia in the blink of an eye."

"Say what? I should have known you'd have a trick up your sleeve, Saint Philia. They don't call you the greatest saint in history for nothing."

"Besides, my master—my father's widow—is sure to have some clues to offer."

It was true. If my father *had* found the key ingredient for the cure, Hildegard would definitely know something about it.

"On that note, I hope I can count on you."

I shifted my gaze to Mia and Sir Osvalt, gauging their reactions. Sure enough, they both nodded.

"Of course. And I'd be happy to ask Prince Fernand for any help you might need."

"No problem. Let's not waste any time."

With that, we made an urgent return to Girtonia, hoping to ask Master Hildegard for the truth.

***

"We're going back to Girtonia?" Erza looked bewildered. "Not that I mind, but it's awfully sudden."

Her reaction was perfectly reasonable. We'd only arrived in Gyptia a day earlier. But having met Luke and asked him about my father, my goal there was complete. Now I had a new goal: to find the cure for the devil's seed. Perhaps it was selfish of me, as my primary motivation was to save my uncle. But I also wanted to finish my father's work and bring Prince Reichardt some peace.

It was all within reach. I couldn't hold back.

"Maybe I shouldn't have sprung this on you so suddenly," I admitted.

"Oh, it's fine. You're welcome to take Mammon off my hands whenever you like."

"Hey, watch your mouth. Not that I could turn Philia down, if she's the one asking. I can't say no to a pretty girl."

"Mammon! You either behave yourself, or your head goes bye-bye. Your choice."

"Hey! Big Sis! I'm sorry! I got carried away! Please forgive me!"

As Mammon begged for mercy, Erza stood over him, glowering.

"I do need to ask you for a favor, Mammon," I said. "I need to return to Girtonia."

"Little Miss Philia! Your wish is my command. I'm always ready to help a beautiful damsel in distress."

Mammon gave a thumbs-up and flashed me a gleaming smile. It seemed I didn't have to worry about getting to Girtonia.

"I hope you can get some useful info out of Lady Hildegard."

"Thanks. I'll confront her as best I can. As mother and daughter, surely we can reach an understanding."

It would doubtless be a challenge, but I wasn't prepared to give up. My master was sure to know something. Maybe that was why she gave me that letter.

"All right, I'll go ahead and open that door for ya."

Mammon gathered his magic power and conjured an ornate teleportation gate. With that, we stepped inside.

"This magic is really something. It only took a second for us to get back to Mother's mansion."

Mammon, unable to resist the urge to flirt, grinned smugly. "Impressed, Little Miss Mia?" he chuckled.

Mia wasn't wrong. It was an extremely useful spell. I'd hoped to learn it myself at some point, but to my disappointment, it seemed to require the physical tenacity of a demon. No matter how hard I tried, my human body couldn't handle it.

As I was thinking about this, the front door of the mansion opened and Master Hildegard emerged. "I didn't expect to see you back so soon. Did you manage to find Luke?"

"Yes. I came back because I have something important to ask you." I knew I didn't need to beat around the bush with her.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. The thing is—"

"Are you really going to tell the whole story on my doorstep? I can't let His Highness stand there. Come inside to talk."

Just as I was about to explain the situation, Master interrupted me.

Hildegard was right. This wasn't the right place to discuss the situation. We followed her inside.

***

"All right. We'll go and collect your attendants."

Erza and Mammon left, and Master Hildegard guided the rest of us into her reception room. We sat on the sofa.

Once she made sure we were all seated, she got straight to the point. "So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I have reason to believe that my father found the final necessary ingredient for a cure for the devil's seed here in Girtonia. Do you know anything about that?"

I asked about my father in a straightforward manner. My master's eyebrow twitched as she looked at me. "He did indeed come to this country in search of that ingredient, but in the end, he was never able to find it. Unfortunately, I have no clues to offer you."

"I-I see… I thought you might know something."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you. He kept looking until the bitter end, but when all was said and done, he failed to uncover a single lead."

My assumption was utterly wrong. I'd been convinced that my father must have found something, just as Sir Osvalt said, but

apparently I was mistaken.

"What happened?" my master asked. "I thought you went there to learn about your father ahead of your wedding. Now you're trying to cure the devil's seed?"

"Well, the thing is—"

It was a perfectly reasonable question. I began to explain that Luke was afflicted by the devil's seed and that I'd returned to Girtonia, believing I'd find the key ingredient for a cure here.

"…and that's why we came back."

"To think that Luke was hit by the same illness…" Master Hildegard took a sip from her teacup. "I understand now. Of course you couldn't leave him to die."

She seemed genuinely shaken to learn that Luke was suffering from the same illness that had taken my father.

"As unfortunate as it is," she continued, "my husband died without finding a cure. That's the irrefutable truth. I'm not sure the ingredient you want can be found in Girtonia."

"If you're unsure, that means there's still hope," Mia interrupted. "Right, Mother?"

"You could say that. He kept searching until his body gave out, sure he'd find what he was looking for. We can't entirely rule out the possibility of it being here."

Master looked glum as she answered Mia's question. I sensed that the odds were not in our favor. That was only logical. My father had spent his entire life searching for that key ingredient, to no avail.

"What now, Philia?" Sir Osvalt asked. "Should we have faith in that minute possibility and see what we can find? I'm sorry—I was convinced we'd find something here."

"Don't worry, Sir Osvalt. You have nothing to apologize for. I felt the same way."

"Let's get started right away, then! I'll help too!"

Sir Osvalt and I rose to our feet, eager to begin the search.

"Oh my, leaving already? Talk about impatient."

"Slow down, Lady Philia! I can barely keep up!"

"You're trying to locate the last ingredient to cure the devil's seed, correct?"

"Amassing information is my field of expertise. Whatever your request, I stand ready to serve."

Erza had come back with my staff. I needed to make the most of their help.

My first task was to look through the research papers I'd borrowed from Luke and cross-reference them with the records of medicinal plants known to grow in this country.

With this goal in mind, I set out for the library I used to frequent when I lived in Girtonia.

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"Philia. Isn't this an impossible task?"

"You give up far too easily, Mia."

"Seriously, though. You can't just dump a mountain of books on me and expect me to find a breakthrough."

I'd selected books that ought to provide a solid introduction to the apothecary arts, but Mia just stared at the pile in horror. Unfortunately, she had a point. We had no idea what had led my father to Girtonia in the first place, so our investigation would be painstakingly slow.

"Philia," said Sir Osvalt, "for the time being, I'm going to make a list of all the medicinal plants that are unique to this country. Does that sound sensible?"

"Thank you. I would appreciate that."

"Isn't it a little early to dive right in, Prince Osvalt?"

"Well, I'm used to this kind of research."

Sir Osvalt had assisted me numerous times before, including when we were researching divine spells. I knew he could handle the task.

"Don't panic, Mia. Why don't you just dive right in and do the best you can?"

"Lena… F-fine. I'll get reading, then."

With that, we all immersed ourselves in reading at Girtonia's library. There was a lot to get through, but we were a team of six. It wouldn't take forever.

Hopefully, we would find some clue among the pages.

***

"I've got it."

"You never disappoint us, Philia! After reading all those books, you've finally worked out which ingredient we need! Phew, what a relief. I've read enough books to last me a lifetime!"

"Have you found something, Philia?" asked Sir Osvalt.

"I believe so. Luke's research papers gave me a rough idea of the ingredient we need, but this book confirms it."

"Whoa. And if we find it, we can make a miracle cure?"

"We should be able to—but I've also come to an unfortunate realization. I don't think any of these books will tell me the plant's whereabouts."

"What? That's no good!" Mia puffed out her cheeks, making a show of her indignation.

My needlessly dramatic wording must have confused her. Unfortunately, the books had no clues to offer me—but that realization was still a step forward.

"I see. You know what ingredient you need, but you don't know where to find it."

"Exactly. I kept checking my theories against Luke's research papers. If we assume that my father made a similar degree of progress, he was just one step away from finalizing the cure. He must have been looking for an ingredient that could neutralize the harmful components of a medicine he'd already created, rather than treating the illness itself."

If what was written in his letter was true, then my father—like Luke—must have already had an idea of what the completed formula would look like. There was only one thing missing from their formula. Unfortunately, they hadn't found it.

"That's the ingredient we're looking for now, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm sure my father searched for it here, but I doubt it can be found within Girtonia's borders."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm proud to have travelled all around this country as part of my saintly duties. I gathered every medicinal plant I came across during my travels for my own research."

"Come to think of it, we climbed that mountain together so you could gather medicinal plants. Did you do the same in Girtonia?"

"I did," I said to Sir Osvalt's query.

Our research at the library had brought me to two conclusions: we were one ingredient away from a cure, and we weren't going to find that ingredient in Girtonia.

"But if the ingredient isn't here, why did Kamil put that cryptic message in his letter?"

"That's what's bothering me—as well as the fact that Mia was the one to bring me the letter."

"Lady Hilda entrusted Lady Mia with the letter, rather than giving it to you directly," said Sir Osvalt, "and a line in that letter

implies that he'd found the last ingredient he needed for the miracle cure. Are you trying to say that Lady Hilda is hiding something?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I suspect," I agreed.

On reflection, Master Hildegard's insistence that she didn't know about my father's research was rather bizarre. I couldn't imagine that she would risk Luke's life by concealing information, so I'd assumed she was being honest with us. Yet no matter which way I looked at it, something didn't ring true.

"I can't believe Mother might be lying to us," said Mia.

"She must have a reason. One that we aren't supposed to know…"

"That's right. She would never lie to you without good reason, Philia." Sir Osvalt lowered his voice. "Should we hold her feet to the fire?"

Hildegard was a saint. I couldn't imagine her telling a potentially life-threatening lie without a significant cause.

"We can't leave Luke to suffer," I said. "Besides, now that we've learned so much, I don't want to be defeated by the disease that took the lives of Elizabeth and my father."

"In that case," said Mia, "we need to find a way to get Mother to tell us what she's hiding! She might be stubborn, but I'm sure she'll open up if Philia asks nicely enough."

"Mia… I'm not so sure things will go our way, but her stubbornness is no match for mine. I won't back down."

I gave Mia an encouraging nod, deciding to return to Master Hildegard's house one last time.

***

As soon as we got back to her mansion, Master Hildegard brought us into the reception room and served tea. "What's the matter? Have you found something?"

There wasn’t a shred of uncertainty in her gaze, which was fixed directly on me. She certainly didn’t seem to be hiding anything.

“Er, well…” Now that the moment had arrived, I was too nervous to get my words out.

How ridiculous of me. What was there to be hesitant about now? I swallowed, then slowly began to string my words together.

“Master, is there something you’re not telling us?”

“Where did that come from all of a sudden? I don’t understand what you’re asking, Philia.”

Unsurprisingly, she showed no uneasiness whatsoever. My master’s mental fortitude put Mia’s to shame.

“Master, I’m sure father found the key ingredient for the miracle cure. He knew what he needed to make a safe cure for the illness. He just wasn’t able to obtain it.”

I was almost certain of this theory. As Sir Osvalt said, my father had come to Girtonia in search of that ingredient. And yet, based on my research and my own experience as a saint in the country, there were no medicinal plants in Girtonia that seemed to fit the bill.

An important detail must have been hidden from us.

“Master, Kamil wrote letters to his younger brother to update him on his progress. There’s no way he wouldn’t have told you, his wife, the hidden truth about the missing ingredient. That’s why you were hesitant to give me the letter.”

“…”

“This is mere supposition, but would obtaining the necessary ingredient put us in significant danger?”

At that, my master finally averted her gaze. She slowly rose to her feet and left the room.

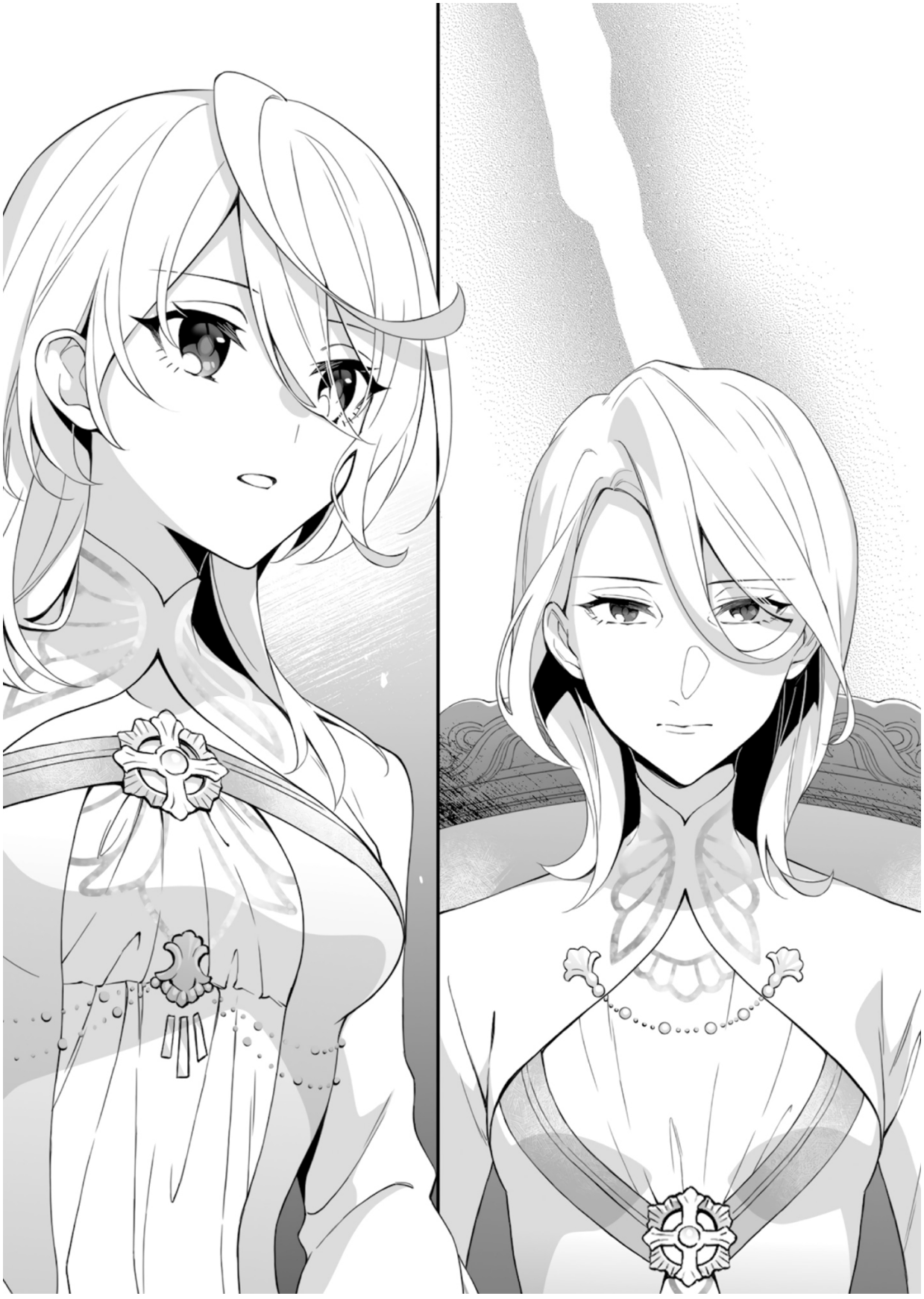
Mia and Sir Osvalt turned to me, looking impressed.

“You’re incredible, Philia. I didn’t know you’d deduced all that.”

"Me neither. I couldn't get a word in."

It had taken me some time to piece my thoughts together, but I was confident in my conclusion.

On edge, I waited to see how Master Hildegard would respond.



"I apologize for the wait. I wanted to show you this."

A few minutes later, Master passed me a pile of documents. The layer of dust on top of the stack suggested it'd been kept in storage for many years.

"Is this…my father's research?"

"It is indeed," said Hildegard. "I thought showing it to you would be pointless, so I held back. But since you're taking things this far, I'll let you read it to persuade you to give up."

"Give up what?"

"Developing a cure for the devil's seed, of course."

I rifled through my father's papers. Unsurprisingly, there were some discrepancies between his and Luke's work, but the overall results of their research were almost identical.

Luke had spent more time studying ways to suppress the symptoms of the sickness, so he'd made more progress in that arena. Like my father, he'd paused his research into developing a true cure, with one ingredient yet to be found. There was one thing, however, that set my father's research apart.

"He discovered an ingredient that might be the key to creating the cure," I said. "'The Moontear Flower.' That's it, isn't it?"

When I uttered the name, my master slowly nodded. "Are you familiar with that medicinal plant, Philia?"

"Yes, of course. It's a rare plant found in the wild outside of Sedelgard. It's extremely difficult to come by."

Truthfully, I only knew the Moontear Flower by name. This elusive plant was only found beyond our continent. It was allegedly fundamental to miracle cures for countless illnesses, but it was almost impossible to obtain. On rare occasions, the flowers could be imported from distant lands, but they were almost never sold at common markets. I had never even seen one.

And yet, in my father's research papers, the name of this elusive medicinal plant was explicitly listed among the ingredients for the miracle cure. This implied that my father had acquired a sample for himself.

"Master, how did my father get his hands on the Moontear Flower?"

He would never recommend an ingredient he hadn't tested himself. I could only conclude that he had somehow found the elusive flower.

Master Hildegard sighed. She appeared to think things over for a second—and then she turned her gaze away.

Now it was clear that she was hiding something.

The silence persisted for a while, filling the room with an oppressive atmosphere.

"There was a place in this country," she said at last, "where Moontear Flowers grew."

"There was?" I couldn't help but shout. I had never heard of such a thing. I was born and raised in Girtonia, and had even served as the country's saint, yet I was completely oblivious.

If such a place existed, why was no one else aware of it? I'd been certain that there was no inch of Girtonia I hadn't searched for medicinal plants. My doubt grew.

"You're aware of the restricted hazardous zone along the border between Girtonia and Parnacorta, yes? The Volcanic Miasma Zone?"

"Of course. It's a death zone, a place that not even saints can approach. Wait. Surely not…"

The Volcanic Miasma Zone was one of the few areas on the continent that were utterly off-limits. Unexplained phenomena comparable to magic explosions were a frequent occurrence, making it impossible to enter. Any ordinary person who dared venture inside would lose their life in moments.

It was difficult to imagine Moontear Flowers growing in a place that dangerous.

"Uh, Mother?" Mia asked, tilting her chin up in curiosity. "How did your husband obtain a plant from a place like that? Actually, how did he know it was there in the first place?"

I had the same questions. The area was forbidden. One needed permission from both Girtonia and Parnacorta simply to set foot within its borders.

"It was a stroke of luck," Hilda explained. "Twenty years ago, the area was not yet restricted, so anybody could venture there if they so wished. Be that as it may, the perils of the region meant that the only people who dared go there were apothecaries searching for plants or saints carrying out their duties. But then, one day, a massive explosion occurred. My husband was exploring nearby, and he was injured in the blast. Later, he found what looked like Moontear Flower petals stuck to his clothing. They must have been blown into him by the force of the explosion."

Master Hildegard spoke in an unruffled, detached tone as she recounted how the Moontear Flower petals had literally fallen into my father's lap.

Massive explosions were a regular occurrence in the region, causing numerous catastrophes. That was why Girtonia and Parnacorta had agreed to declare the area off-limits.

"The petals of the Moontear Flower proved an effective ingredient," my master continued. "With them, my husband created a temporary remedy that extended his life. But there simply wasn't enough of it. In the end, he concluded that he needed the Moontear Flower itself to produce a complete cure."

I could tell from the sorrowful look on Hildegard's face that she was reflecting on my father's death. By asking about it, I'd forced her to relive the past, stirring up feelings of sadness and solitude.

"You don't think Philia could fetch a Moontear Flower from such a perilous place," said Mia. "Is that why you want to convince

her to give up?"

"Of course. Retrieving a Moontear Flower would be an impossible task. There's no guarantee that they even grow there anymore. I wanted to show how pointless it would be to risk entering a restricted zone for something so uncertain."

Mia let out an exasperated sigh. "I knew it. But why didn't you tell us that before? Instead, you handed us that cryptic letter and withheld information, so we wasted all that time doing research at the library."

Mia made a valid point. If we had no hope of obtaining the Moontear Flower, she could simply have said so.

"It's more complicated than that," said Master Hildegard. "Do *you* know why I didn't mention the Moontear Flower, Philia?"

"Yes. Because if I learned about it, I'd go looking for it. You'd already predicted that outcome."

Mia's eyes widened in shock. "What? Hold on a second, Philia!"

Sir Osvalt, on the other hand, nodded thoughtfully. "That does sound like something Philia would do."

If there was any chance that I could cure Luke's illness—and create a remedy that could have saved Elizabeth and my father—I would reach out with both hands to grasp it, no matter how unlikely the odds.

"I know you," said my master. "People call you the greatest saint of all time and say there's nothing you can't do. You've even earned the title of archsaint. You've performed miracles time and time again, so it's only natural you'd want to take on this challenge."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say there's nothing I can't do," I replied, "but I do believe it's worth a try."

"If anyone can get the Moontear Flower, I guess it'd be you," said Mia.

"Yes," said Master Hildegard. "I have to admit, Philia has a better chance than anyone. But please, abandon this goal. You could get seriously injured…or even die. If you're going to take on the challenge despite of the risks, I'm obliged to do everything in my power to stop you."

"Master," I said, "if I do nothing, Luke will die. Finding a substitute for the Moontear Flower in time would be even more unlikely, not to mention inefficient."

"He's not the only person to die from an incurable illness. The same happened to your father. As much as I pity Luke, you have your own life to think about. What if the worst were to happen in that perilous place? Think of Prince Osvalt."

Master had never tried so hard to stop me before, not even in my training days, when I'd practiced divine spells. It felt as though there was something more to her warnings.

"Hang on, Mother," said Mia, questioning Master's reaction. "Didn't you tell us that you were proud to call yourself Philia's mentor? You said that her curiosity and sense of justice were the source of her strength. I know you're worried about her, but you seem more emotional than usual."

She was right. Like me, Master Hildegard wasn't normally one to let her emotions surface. Today she was acting differently. Mia lived with her, so she'd know that better than anyone.

"Hahh… Do you remember these scars on my arms and shoulders, Philia? The ones I showed you long, long ago?"

"Those scars…"

A long time ago, when I was still a child, Master had showed me her painful scars. And now, I was faced with them again.

She told me they were from her own training days. She'd shown them to me to warn me not to let my guard down while I was practicing…

"Once, I ventured into that death zone by myself, searching for the Moontear Flower. That was how I got these scars."

"What?"

"Do you think I simply sat back and watched my husband die? If I could have, I would have fetched a Moontear Flower and saved him."

How could I have let something so obvious pass me by? There was no way my master wouldn't have tried to help my father—but in the end, he died, and she was left with painful scars. It didn't take a genius to work that out.

"In other words, you tried and failed. As remarkable a saint as you are, you couldn't obtain the Moontear Flower."

"That's right. I'd never been so devastated by my own powerlessness before. I might not have been as self-assured as you, Philia, but I was confident in my abilities as a saint. I was young and strong. My powers were at their peak."

When I was young, Saint Hildegard Adenauer was renowned as the greatest saint in Sedelgard. She'd honed her strength through diligent study and drawn on all her experience to train me. Yet powerful as she was, she'd not only failed to obtain the Moontear Flower, but returned with permanent injuries. At last, I understood how dangerous the Volcanic Miasma Zone truly was.

"Let me give you one more warning. You need to give up on finding the Moontear Flower. You may be more powerful than I was, but I'm speaking from experience. You'd be putting your life at risk for a slim chance of success. I can't allow you to go, knowing you could die in vain."

Master Hildegard's argument was completely reasonable. I could be putting my life on the line for nothing. It was undoubtedly reckless to take on this challenge.

"Master," I said, "I have to apologize. In spite of the risks, I must press on. If there's any chance that I create the cure that

requires the Moontear Flower, I want to take that risk."

"After hearing everything I've just said, you're still undeterred? You're a stubborn one." Hildegard stared me square in the face. Her gaze was so piercing that for a moment I forgot to breathe. "Just answer this one question. Why are you so hung up on finding a cure?"

I couldn't allow myself to falter. "I want to complete the cure that my father always dreamed of making."

"Are you saying that, as his daughter, you want to accomplish what Kamil was unable to achieve?"

"Yes. That's right."

There was silence. Without saying a word, Master Hildegard hung her head.

She'd shared her most painful experiences—a failure from her past and the loss of her beloved husband—in an attempt to stop me. I was such a thankless daughter.

"I was sure someone as intelligent as you would have more sense," she said at last. "You've changed, Philia."

She sank into silent contemplation for a while before looking up again. I wasn't sure whether she was appalled or disappointed, but I had no intention of backing down.

"Maybe I have. Logically, I know what you're saying is correct. However—"

"You want to take on the challenge, no matter how dangerous it might be?"

"Yes. That's what I'm planning to do."

My declaration was firm and unambiguous.

Master Hildegard's gaze sharpened. She began to gather her magic power. "You really are stubborn, aren't you? You're just like Kamil in that respect."

“What?” I was like my father? This unexpected comment elicited a cry of astonishment from me.

Hildegard looked pleased by my reaction. I’d never seen her look so tranquil before.

In that moment, it felt like we’d grown closer. Did I sense a motherly presence in her affectionate gaze? I could sense her magic, too.

“You can feel my magic on your skin, can’t you, Philia?”

“What? Oh, yes. It feels like it’s covering my body.”

As I reflected on my relationship with her, she threw a sudden question my way.

It caught me off guard, so I stumbled over my words, but she didn’t seem to mind. She simply carried on.

“Good. That’s the sensation you’ll feel in that dangerous region when an explosion is about to happen. I sensed it on my skin and used my own magic to defend myself, but I was a moment too late. That’s how I got hurt.”

“You can use magic to protect yourself from the explosions?”

“The explosions in that zone are similar to those caused by destructive spells, though their exact cause is unclear. However, I learned firsthand that condensed magic can form a shield against them. I survived dozens of explosions that way.”

It sounded like the environment was even harsher than I thought. I was starting to understand why my master was trying to stop me.

“And one more thing. There’s no limit to the size of the explosions. Massive explosions like the one that erupted about twenty years ago are rare, but if one were to happen in your vicinity, you’d never be able to defend yourself from it. The risk of death is never far.”

“How awful…”

"As I said before, it's highly likely that you're risking your life for nothing. Are you sure you still want to go through with this?"

Master was grilling me intensely, testing my resolve. As she said, this was an incredibly dangerous task, and there was no assurance that the Moontear Flower would conveniently present itself to me.

"Yes," I said. "Please respect my decision."

Sir Osvalt, who'd been watching in silence, suddenly leapt forward. "No, you can't! Philia, this is far too dangerous. You need to reconsider." His grim expression stood in stark contrast to his usual gentle demeanor.

"Sir Osvalt," I said, "forgive me for being so selfish, but I need to complete this cure."

"I want to support you, Philia, and until a moment ago, I was more than happy to do so. But after hearing Lady Hilda's story, I've changed my mind. This isn't just irresponsible, it's thoughtless. There's a difference between risking your life and throwing it away, isn't there?"

Sir Osvalt spoke in his most persuasive tone. He must have realized how determined I was. Thinking it over rationally, I knew he was right.

"I'm sorry, Sir Osvalt, but I've made up my mind. I'm going to follow in my father's footsteps. If I give up now, I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

I sprang to my feet in a show of fortitude. Then, I bowed my head to Sir Osvalt.

"Let me say it one more time. Please, allow me to do what I want."

"I'm sorry. Can't you compromise just this once? I can't bear the thought of losing the love of my life."

The word "love" made me feel warm inside. Of course, I felt the same way about him. But there were some compromises I

couldn’t make.

I shook my head.

“But *why*, Philia? I’m not the only one who’d be shattered by your loss. Lady Mia, Lady Hilda, and everybody around you would be devastated, too.”

Sir Osvalt made a desperate plea, his expression even more sorrowful than before. He was probably right. I’d forgotten that other people would be saddened by my death.

As I began to question myself, Sir Osvalt stepped forward his hands clenched together. “Philia, this is completely different from battling Asmodeus to save your sister or using a divine spell to summon the Pope’s spirit. It’s risking your life for nothing. I’m begging you to reconsider. If the worst were to happen, what would I do? I can’t imagine a world without you in it.”

Sir Osvalt seemed to struggle to force the words out. Seeing him like that, I finally realized my mistake.

He was right. There were people who cared deeply for me. I was no longer merely my own responsibility. When I remembered this fact, I felt embarrassed.

Why was I being so self-righteous? As nice as it was to help other people, it was equally important to take care of myself.

“I’m sorry, Sir Osvalt. I think I lost sight of the bigger picture for a moment. I should start paying more attention to those around me and act accordingly.”

“Philia…”

“But you will have to excuse me. As illogical as it might be, I still want to fulfill my father’s dream. I’m begging you to let me go.”

No matter the situation… I wasn’t going to back down.

I continued to bow my head deeply. Lord Osvalt gently placed a hand on my shoulder. When I looked up, his face was right in front of mine. His face remained clouded.

"I've been selfish, too. When we first met, I vowed to make your life as easy as possible, and here I am, unable to support your wishes."

"That's not true. I—"

"No, Philia. You're not in the wrong. I encouraged you to think about yourself and follow your heart. Who am I to hold you back?"

"Sir Osvalt…" Before I knew it, tears were welling up in my eyes.

Sir Osvalt gently caressed my head.

I was so happy to be his fiancée. I wanted to live with him forever.

But for that same reason, I didn't want to have any regrets. I didn't want to give up on fulfilling my father's dreams. Before we walked toward a bright future together, I had to remedy the past.

"Still, the Volcanic Miasma Zone is off-limits. Not even saints are allowed to enter. A military non-aggression treaty was signed, so you can't go there without the approval of both Girtonia and Parnacorta, can you?"

"Well, no…"

"You know what my brother's like. He'd never allow it. I was hesitant to say this because I don't like playing politics, but you'd be violating a bilateral treaty just to have your own way."

Sir Osvalt tried to counter my argument with logic, relentlessly pressing his point. It wasn't like him to assert his opinion in this way.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just–"

"In that case," I said, "will you help me win Prince Reichardt over?"

"Huh?"

"I don't mind who else opposes the idea as long as I have your backing, Sir Osvalt. Please believe in me. I'll make sure I come back alive. I won't let my life go to waste."

I knew it was reckless, but I had no intention of dying in vain. I couldn't really be sure I'd survive, but I hoped Sir Osvalt would believe me anyway.

I stared fiercely into Sir Osvalt's eyes. He covered his face with his hands and, to my surprise, burst out laughing.

"Ha ha, ha ha ha!"

"Sir Osvalt?"

I was trying to have a serious conversation. What was so funny?

"You're asking me to help you win over my brother when *I'm* the one trying to stop you! And you looked so serious about it! It's just completely out of character for someone as calm and collected as you."

"W-well," I stammered, "I was sure you'd come around eventually. It'd save time to ask you for help right now."

I hadn't expected Sir Osvalt to oppose my plans, but somehow, I remained confident that he'd stand by me in the end.

"I'm no match for you, Philia. I didn't think you'd take advantage of my love—but if you aren't going to back down, all I can do is admit defeat and put my faith in you. I love you, after all."

"Sir Osvalt, I would never—"

"I know. I understand you weren't trying to force me. But you know I'll stand by you no matter what. Sorry I can't help you this time, Lady Hilda."



Sir Osvalt gave Master Hildegard an apologetic smile. He'd probably intended to take her side before things unfolded as they did. Given his sincere nature, he was bound to feel guilty.

Even after hearing his words, my master said nothing. I couldn't tell what was running through her mind.

"Uh, Philia? I was wondering… Would it be okay if I put my life on the line with you?"

"What are you talking about, Mia?"

Mia gently took me by the hand. It was trembling slightly, and her anxiety was palpable. I found my eyes drawn to her face, only to discover that her expression was brimming with determination.

"I want to go with you to find the Moontear Flower. I won't regret it, even if it costs me my life. I want to help you achieve your goal, Philia."

"I don't want to put you in danger, too."

Mia's proclamation took me by surprise. Our master's stories must have shown her how reckless I was being, and yet she wanted to join me.

"I think I'm ready," said Mia. "With two of us on the case, it'll improve our chances of finding the flower and making it back safely. Maybe Mother would have succeeded if she had a friend with her."

"Well… Perhaps."

Mia made a sound argument. Two heads were better than one. Even a child would understand that logic. However, this was a decision that *I* had made. I couldn't drag anyone else into it, let alone a beloved member of my family.

I couldn't allow myself to put my sister in danger, but on the other hand, I couldn't bring myself to turn her down. I knew she was acting out of concern for me.

"Come on, Philia. You're not going to tell me to give up, are you? Isn't that a bit hypocritical when you're pushing forward with

your own self-serving goal? On some level, you must understand how Mother and Prince Osvalt feel."

"How Master Hildegard feels? Oh…"

If the worst were to happen to Mia, it'd hurt more than my own death. When Hildegard and Sir Osvalt heard me insisting on doing something reckless, they must have felt the same way.

"Anyway, Philia. I want to help you finish what your dad started. That's *my* selfish wish. Call me naive if you want, but now's the time to get Mother to indulge you. Ask her to let us go… Go on."

Mia smiled, encouraging me to express my selfish desires to Master—no, to Mother Hilda.

"M-Mother," I began. "Mother! Please let me go! I want to cure the disease that stole my father's life. I want to create the cure that he dreamed of making for so many years!"

My words flowed more easily than expected—and I surprised myself with how loudly my voice rang out.

As I pleaded with my mother, I prayed my feelings would get through to her.

Mother Hilda let out a cry of astonishment. "Oh, I wasn't expecting that. You might need Prince Osvalt's permission, since he's the prince of Parnacorta, but I don't see why you'd need mine. Do as you like."

She seemed genuinely surprised.

"It's only natural for me to ask your permission. I'm your daughter. Your approval means more to me than anyone else's."

"Do you really want me to be your mother, after all this time?"

"Yes. I want to be your daughter. It doesn't have to happen immediately—I don't mind if it takes time—but could we be mother and daughter?"

I mustered the courage to make this plea. If I wanted my mother's approval, there was no better time to express my true

feelings.

Hildegard fell silent, lost in thought. She must have stayed quiet for less than ten seconds, but to me, it felt like an eternity.

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

She casually rejected my request.

I'd been prepared for it, but it still came as a shock.

"Philia, when you get to my age, it's not so easy to change your way of life. But if you insist on going to search for the Moontear Flower, I'll lend you my full support—albeit in my own, special way."

With that, my mother gave me a gentle smile.

I was so happy that tears almost spilled from my eyes, but I managed to keep them at bay. If I started crying, I doubted I'd be able to stop.

"Thank you so much."

That was all I managed to say. If I said anything more, the floodgates would open.

"I have to ask, Lady Hilda," said Sir Osvalt. "How are you going to help them?"

"It's simple, Prince Osvalt," said Mother, looking a little taken aback. "I will tell Philia and Mia as much as I can about my experience in that danger zone."

Her response confirmed her previous decision. Maintaining our student-mentor relationship felt more natural to her, so that was how she would support me.

"You don't mind me calling you 'Mother', do you?"

"I don't mind it. It's just that I've been your teacher for far too long. Being called 'Mother' all of a sudden will take some getting used to."

So, that was what bothered her. Her reactions made more sense now. It had struck me as strange that she looked so stone-

faced whenever I called her "Mother."

"Should I switch back to 'Master,' then?"

"You can call me whatever you like. Do as you please."

It didn't seem like we'd be breaking out of the mentor-student mode anytime soon.

"Now then, Philia," Hildegard continued. "What's your next step? You may have my permission, but you still need approval from Girtonia and Parnacorta to enter the restricted zone."

"I know. I think I'll start by speaking to Prince Reichardt. Sir Osvalt can help me." I glanced at Sir Osvalt as I said this.

My mother's advice was important, but getting into the Volcanic Miasma Zone was my first priority.

"Going to ask a favor from my brother, huh?" Sir Osvalt pondered this. "You managed to steamroll me into agreeing to help, but winning over my brother will be even harder than convincing Lady Hilda."

"I'm sorry. I know I'm making an unreasonable demand."

"Haha. I'm used to it by now. We just have to be prepared." Face grim, he gave me a distant look.

Knowing Prince Reichardt, he would definitely oppose my idea. I had to find a way to convince him.

"In that case," said Mia, "I'll go get Prince Fernand on our side. It'll be a piece of cake. When I say jump, he asks how high."

"Isn't that an extremely rude way to talk about your fiancé?"

"But it's true! Just leave it to me."

Looking totally unfazed, Mia declared that obtaining permission from Prince Fernand would be simple. Yes, she was his fiancée, but didn't negotiating with a prince make her at all nervous?

"It's okay, Philia," said Sir Osvalt. "Let's trust Lady Mia."

"Understood. Mia, I'm counting on you."

Mia flashed me the cutest smile I'd ever seen. "Heh heh! I've got this."

With that, I focused on the task ahead. I would never let Mia die. And I wasn't about to die, either. I was going to do whatever it took to get my hands on the Moontear Flower.

"All right," said Sir Osvalt. "Now that we've decided what to do next, we need to ask Lady Erza for her assistance again. She and Mammon can get us back to Parnacorta."

"Yes. I appreciate your cooperation and understanding, Sir Osvalt."

"Come on, quit being so formal. I've made a promise. Obviously, I'll do everything in my power to fulfill it."

Sir Osvalt smiled, showing his gleaming white teeth. Hand in hand, we left my mother's mansion.

# Chapter 4:
# A Cure for the Incurable Illness

"YOU WANT TO GO BACK TO PARNACORTA? You never stop, do you?"

After hearing my plan, Erza agreed to help—albeit with an awkward smile.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I need Prince Reichardt's approval before I can search for the Moontear Flower."

"Hey, it's no trouble. After all, it's only Mammon's energy you're draining."

"Listen to yourself, Big Sis Erza! I knew you only thought of me as a means to an end!"

"Actually, you're more like a slave."

"How could you be so heartless?"

Mammon acted scandalized by Erza's attitude. As I watched their usual repartee, I almost started to laugh. Still, I was truly grateful that I could use Mammon's teleportation gate. Without his help, it would be impossible to travel from one nation to the other so easily.

Mammon condensed his magical power and an ornate, sinister door materialized in front of us. "Here you go. I'm more than happy to fulfill any request from a beautiful lady—that's just part of my service. Consider it a wedding gift. You can use it as much as you like."

"Thank you very much."

"Sorry for the trouble, Sir Mammon."

"You sure you want to emerge in front of the royal palace, rather than your own place?"

"Yes. That would be perfect."

In the blink of an eye, we were standing outside Parnacorta's royal palace. We headed straight inside.

"Oh, Prince Osvalt. And you've brought Philia with you."

"Sorry for dropping in unannounced. Where's my brother?"

"Prince Reichardt is in his office at present."

We asked a palace servant where His Highness was and then headed straight there. When we reached his office, we were let in without having to wait.

Prince Reichardt looked up from his work. "Osvalt and Miss Philia? What's the matter? You both look apologetic."

"Brother. The truth is, Philia wants to ask you a favor…"

"A favor? From Miss Philia? Now that doesn't happen every day. Go ahead and take a seat."

After hearing what Sir Osvalt had to say, Prince Reichardt urged us to take a seat on his office sofa. We did as he said and sat down.

"Now then, Miss Philia. What kind of favor would you like to ask me?"

"Prince Reichardt, I've come here today to ask for your permission to enter the forbidden zone."

My request elicited a suspicious look. "Sorry, do you mean the Volcanic Miasma Zone? What brought this on?"

I understood his confusion. Who wouldn't feel confused after being asked for permission to enter a no-go zone with no prior warning?

"The thing is, I want to create a cure for the devil's seed…"

I explained everything that had happened so far, including my reason for wanting to venture into the Volcanic Miasma Zone in search of the Moontear Flower.

"…and that's why I'd like you to give me permission to enter."

Prince Reichardt listened to my story in silence, but his face was stern. He certainly didn't *look* like he was going to oblige.

"Moontear Flowers might be growing in that desolate place? Intriguing."

"Your Highness…"

"Miss Philia, I have something to say to you. But first, Osvalt. It's unacceptable that you aren't trying to stop her. As her fiancé, it's your responsibility to stop her from making such reckless choices. Have you forgotten that you're a member of the royal family?"

"Sorry, brother." Sir Osvalt bowed his head, but Prince Reichardt continued his stern tirade.

"You need to stop acting so fecklessly. I know you have no interest in political power, but as royalty, you still have a duty to protect our citizens."

Sir Osvalt fell silent.

"Miss Philia is the saint of Parnacorta. If any harm were to befall her, the whole country would suffer. You are her fiancé, Osvalt—you should be willing to risk your life to protect her. Please don't make me say this again."

"Agh…"

Sir Osvalt tried to answer, but all that came out was a groan.

In reality, he had done his best to stop me, but it was noble of him to refrain from making excuses. As much as I appreciated his consideration, however, I couldn't bite my tongue.

"Prince Reichardt," I said, "Sir Osvalt *did* try to stop me. I selfishly forced him to oblige."

"I'm sure you did, Miss Philia, but at the end of the day, my brother failed to curb your recklessness. In other words, he didn't stop you at all. This is shameful. Following your heart is one thing,

but I never expected my brother to put someone he loved at risk of death."

His Highness turned back to Sir Osvalt, utterly exasperated. He heaved a small sigh. "Osvalt, have you forgotten what happened when I lost Elizabeth? You'd go through the same thing if you lost Miss Philia. Do you want to end up like me?"

"O-of course not! I love Philia. I want to have a future with her!"

"Then prioritize her life above all else! Sometimes, loving someone means making decisions that don't align with their wishes, even if it upsets them! If you refuse to do that, someday you'll make a fatal mistake!"

Prince Reichardt's dressing-down made Sir Osvalt fall silent.

Next, His Highness turned back to me. His gaze wasn't so piercing anymore. In fact, there was a certain tenderness to it.

"Miss Philia, I understand how you feel. I feel sorry for your father, too. Nevertheless, this makes no sense whatsoever. Why do you need to ride into the jaws of death? If you were to lose your life, it would grieve countless people. Your life is priceless."

"P-Prince Reichardt…"

To my surprise, the prince's words warmed my heart. He was such a kind and considerate person. How much hardship had he endured for the sake of his country since Elizabeth's death? It was beyond imagining.

"Miss Philia. I don't think you understand how much people cherish you."

"I do. Everyone here has been so good to me."

"No, you don't. Miss Philia, you're our country's saint and the future wife of our second prince. If that wasn't enough, you're an archsaint. A person as honorable as you has no reason to drag herself into a danger zone."

His Highness was most likely right. On this occasion, I'd been focused on my own selfish idea. When I reflected on it calmly, I could see the point he was making.

I couldn't allow my personal feelings to send the country into turmoil. That was an inexcusable thing for a saint to do. Protecting the country's peace was my duty. I'd known this from the first time my mother reprimanded me.

And yet—

"Prince Reichardt. There's still no way I can give up. I'm desperate to find a cure for the disease that took my father's and Elizabeth's lives."

"Miss Philia…"

"I'm begging you, Prince Reichardt." I stood and bowed deeply. "Please let me go into the Volcanic Miasma Zone."

"Please look up, Miss Philia," Prince Reichardt responded, sounding troubled. "I can't make sense of this. Why would someone like you, who is always so logical, go to such lengths to find a cure? I understand how you feel, but if you were to lose your life, both your sister and my brother would be overwhelmed by sorrow."

"I appreciate your concern, Prince Reichardt, but I swear I won't die. I assure you I'll make it back alive."

My declaration was met with silence. I stared straight back into Prince Reichardt's gleaming amber eyes.

No matter how I tried to sugarcoat it, I still came across as selfish, and I knew my plan was far from rational. And yet this was something I simply couldn't back down from.

"Brother. Philia despises that wretched illness that took Elizabeth's life. That's why she's seeking a cure."

"Osvalt…"

"Please try to see it from her point of view."

Prince Reichardt sat there in silence, seemingly at a loss. No doubt he still wanted to stop me.

"I remember what you went through back then as if it were yesterday. You lost the person you loved, were consumed by grief, and stopped caring about anything. There was nothing I could do to help you."

Prince Reichardt didn't respond.

"But now things are different. Philia can free you from the regrets you still carry with you, brother."

Sir Osvalt gave me what seemed like a reassuring smile. Then he turned to face Prince Reichardt.

"If there was a chance that you could have cured Elizabeth's illness, wouldn't you have risked your life to save her, even if it meant turning your back on your responsibilities as the crown prince?"

"Sir Osvalt, don't—"

"You loved Elizabeth that much. You would have done anything to save her, but you weren't able to. It was that frustration that sent you into despair, wasn't it?"

Prince Reichardt said nothing. Sir Osvalt had likely hit the nail on the head.

"Hahhh…"

His Highness silently thought things over for a moment before eventually letting out a small sigh. He looked up at me with resignation.

"As if a bothersome brother wasn't enough, it looks like I've found myself a troublesome sister-in-law as well." Prince Reichardt forced a smile. "But Miss Philia, I want you to keep causing as many problems as you can. If we lose you, I'll be immortalized as the stupid prince who let you get yourself killed."

"Brother!"

"Thank you, Prince Reichardt!"

I detected a hint of happiness in His Highness's reluctant smile. This was more or less the outcome I was hoping for. I'd suspected he had unresolved feelings about Elizabeth.

"There's no need to bow. I've never done anything quite this impulsive, but still… Philia Adenauer, I give you and your sister Mia Adenauer, saint of Girtonia, permission to enter the Volcanic Miasma Zone."

Prince Reichardt's tone was strictly business, but his expression was kinder and gentler than I'd seen on anyone else's face.

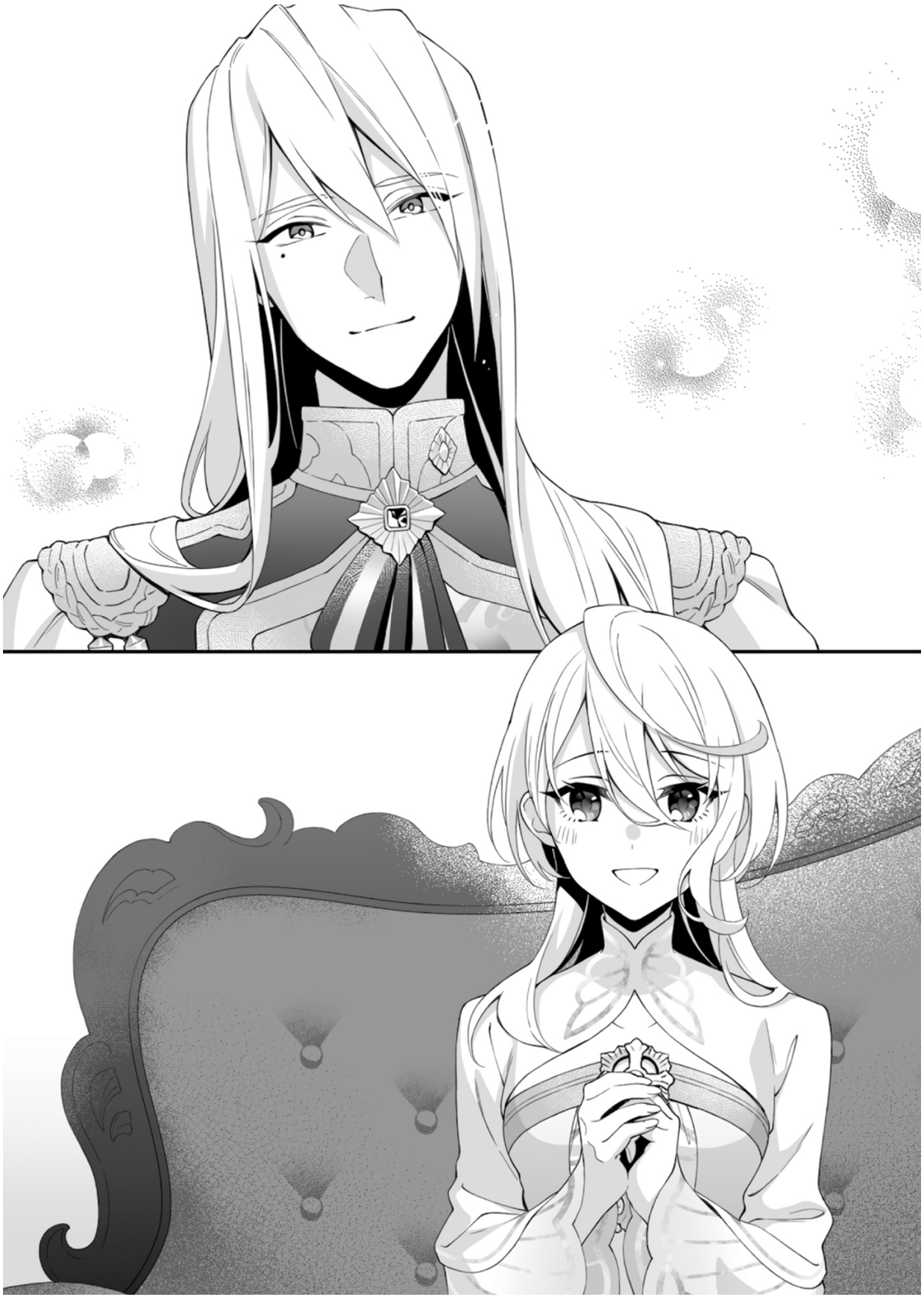
Thanks to Sir Osvalt's help, I'd won him over and obtained permission to step inside the Volcanic Miasma Zone.

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"Well, we managed to get my brother's approval."

"Yes. I'm sure Mia will come back with the go-ahead as well. Now we just have to wait."

After obtaining permission from Prince Reichardt, Sir Osvalt and I headed straight back to Mother's mansion. Mia had yet to return from Girtonia's royal palace, so it was Mother who greeted us.



"Something tells me Prince Reichardt gave you his approval," she said.

Our faces must have given it away before we had the chance to explain. "I'm sorry, Mother."

"Don't apologize, Philia. This was your decision. Anyway, I can't stop you now, can I? As soon as Mia comes back, I'll tell you everything I know."

"Very well. Thank you."

We were escorted to the drawing room for the time being. After hours of waiting and drinking tea, Mia at last returned.

"Hi, Philia! Getting permission was a breeze! Well, Prince Fernand looked a little annoyed, but when I threatened to call off our marriage if he didn't comply, he reluctantly gave us the okay."

"Mia! How could you do that to him?"

"It's no big deal. After all, we have no time to waste. Who knows how many days it would have taken for me to win him over with a logical argument?"

Mia didn't show the slightest hint of remorse. In fact, she looked completely unfazed. That girl was something else.

Nevertheless, she *had* helped us secure immediate permission from both Girtonia and Parnacorta.

"Mia does have a point, Philia," Sir Osvalt contended. "Though I can't help but feel sorry for Prince Fernand, we've got the authorization we need. She can apologize after making it back in one piece, can't she?"

"You're right," I said. "Now we need to collect intel from Mother and prepare for our expedition to the Volcanic Miasma Zone."

I glanced at Mother, trying to gauge her reaction. She sat down across from Mia and me.

"Philia, Mia, listen carefully. As I mentioned earlier, the Volcanic Zone is continually racked by phenomena resembling magical

explosions. The only way to protect yourselves is by using magic-based defense."

"Understood, Mother."

"If you sense an explosion coming, you must create a magical barrier to shield yourselves straight away."

Mother's advice seemed straightforward, but it would be incredibly difficult to put into practice. The explosions were constant, so we'd have to stay alert at all times. Even Mother had been taken unawares in the past.

"Should we practice a little before you go? It won't improve your skills, but it's worth knowing what to expect."

"That would be wonderful."

"All right," said Mia. "Let's do our best, Philia!"

After that, Mia and I practiced controlling our magic and casting spells that sharpened our senses. This grueling training reminded me of my early days with Mother, but we tried our best to keep up.

"Hah… Hah… How am I this exhausted? We haven't even set foot in the danger zone yet."

"You're right," I said. "I'm a little tired. Let's rest until dawn."

"Y-yeah… Good idea."

Looking completely worn out, Mia nodded and staggered inside.

"I'd heard stories about Lady Hilda's coaching," Sir Osvalt remarked, "but that was beyond anything I had ever imagined."

"You were standing around watching us the entire time, weren't you, Sir Osvalt? I thought I told you to get some rest."

"Don't be ridiculous. How could I rest while you two were working so hard?"

Sir Osvalt had been watching over us all through our practice. He truly was a kind person. His casual generosity had given me immeasurable courage.

"Philia Adenauer, the greatest saint of all time. I thought you were a natural genius, but I was wrong. Turns out you've been put through the wringer since you were a kid."

Erza made her way over, looking astonished. She must have been watching us as well.

"Don't exorcists go through rigorous training?" I asked.

"Of course we do. A *normal* level of intense training. The drills your teacher puts you through are beyond the pale, even by our standards."

"Is that right?"

Indeed, Mother's training was harsher than ever, but once I grasped her true intentions and threw myself into the training, her love was palpable. Receiving my mother's guidance for the first time in so long filled me with joy.

"Anyway," said Erza, "it's getting late. Are you still planning to depart at dawn?"

"Yes. I want to begin my search for the Moontear Flower immediately. I hear there are fewer explosions in the mornings."

It would be difficult to collect the elusive plant with constant, dangerous explosions happening around me, but I was determined to do it.

Mia had offered to lend a hand and Sir Osvalt was willing to put himself on the line for my sake. If I gave up now, all our efforts would go to waste. That was the one scenario I had to avoid at all costs.

"I have an idea," said Erza. "I'll get Mammon to take you as close as he possibly can to the danger zone. He's a demon, so I doubt the explosions will affect him so much."

"Don't be so sure. I'm tough, but there's a limit to how many explosions even I can take."

"Oh, that's a shame. Guess you'll end up dead."

"Talk about cold!"

Despite being a demon, even Mammon was wary of the Volcanic Miasma Zone. He was incredibly resilient—he could even survive having his head chopped off—but not against a barrage of magic explosions.

That didn't make his support any less valuable, though. As always, his teleportation gate would be a huge help.

"I'd like you to drop us off outside the danger zone, Mammon," I said. "I can't let you put yourself in danger."

"I knew you'd say that, Philia. Unlike Big Sis, you actually care."

"Before we go, Philia," said Sir Osvalt, "you should get a little rest. You must be exhausted."

"You're right. I'll take a quick nap to make sure I'm in top form."

I hurried inside. Mia must have been tired, too, because I found her fast asleep on the sofa. She hadn't even made it back to her room.

When I woke up after an hour's nap, Sir Osvalt, who'd apparently been awake the whole time, was there to greet me. "You're up already? We still have plenty of time."

I suspect that he needed sleep more than I did, but he insisted that he couldn't allow himself to rest when I was pushing myself so hard.

"I've learned how to recuperate efficiently," I explained, "so this much sleep will suffice."

"I see. I suppose I'll have to take your word for it." Sir Osvalt grit his teeth. It looked as if he wanted to say something, but was

biting his tongue.

Was he still worried that I was throwing myself into the jaws of death with no regard for my own safety?

I bowed my head apologetically. “I’m sorry for how unbelievably selfish I’m being.”

I’d lost count of how many times I’d apologized. I doubted any number of bows would ever make up for what I was doing, but I just couldn’t help myself.

“Come on, Philia,” said Sir Osvalt, sounding panicked by the sight of me bowing. “Look up. I’m not against your decision anymore. If I was, I wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of persuading my brother.”

“Sir Osvalt?” I lifted my head to find him gazing at me with distress.

“Even so, I can’t tell you how frustrated I feel. The woman I love is about to put her life on the line, and all I can do is pray,” Sir Osvalt said, telling me how he felt.

I couldn’t comprehend his feelings. He’d accepted my egoistic, self-centered behavior, and even helped get Prince Reichardt on my side. Why, after everything he’d done, did he still feel useless?

“Listen to me, Sir Osvalt. To tell you the truth, it made me happy that you were so desperate to stop me. At that moment, I could feel your love.”

“Philia?”

“It made me happy when you said you’d help persuade Prince Reichardt to give me permission, too. I could tell how much you cared. Now I’m sure I can’t live without you.”

These self-centered remarks might upset him, but I was desperate to get them off my chest. I wanted him to know how much I needed him.

"Sir Osvalt," I continued, pouring every ounce of gratitude I could muster into my words, "meeting you has been the greatest blessing of my life, and being loved by you is the most astonishing miracle. I'm so grateful. In this moment, I'm truly happy."

Sir Osvalt froze, his eyes widening. His face gradually turned as red as a tomato, and it wasn't long before his ears were bright red as well.

Wh-what was the matter?

"You can be so direct sometimes. It's adorable."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"What is there to explain?"

"But I don't understand…"

I'd always been told that I lacked charm, but every now and then Sir Osvalt would come out with a remark that threw me for a loop. I couldn't put my finger on why, but these comments sent a rush of heat coursing through my entire body.

He pulled me into a tight, reassuring embrace. It felt like he'd never let me go. "I'm thankful for the miracle that lets me hold you like this, Philia."

"Oh, Sir Osvalt…"

"Please don't die," Sir Osvalt whispered, sounding heartbroken. "I don't think I could cope with a world where I wasn't able to touch you."

I felt the same way. If it weren't for his warmth, I would have given up long ago.

"Don't worry. I'll make it back alive with the Moontear Flower in hand. I'd hate to die before I could marry you, Sir Osvalt."

"That reminds me. I'm really looking forward to seeing you in your wedding dress, Philia."

"Oh, Sir Osvalt…" I laughed.

We gazed into one another's eyes and smiled. Then we settled down with a pot of black tea and waited for Mia to rise.

"Good morning, Philia. Good morning, Prince Osvalt."

As soon as Mia woke up, we prepared for departure. There wasn't much to pack, so it didn't take long.

"There's a good chance that you'll come back empty-handed, but you two are my best pupils. You *must* come back alive. If you find yourselves in any danger, turn back. I'll be waiting for you."

These were Mother's parting words.

Her dewy eyes were filled with a tenderness I'd never seen before. She must have been holding back tears.

"You're not crying, are you, Mother?"

"Mia!"

Stunned by her bluntness, I glanced at Mia. Despite the tense circumstances, she was wearing her usual mischievous smile.

"I am, Mia. The thought of you coming back and not being able to resume your proper training almost brought me to tears."

For a second, Mother shot us a cold glare. There was nothing that scared me more than the intimidating air she gave off.

"Ugh. I was just trying to lighten the mood, but now I'm not even sure if I'll survive what awaits me when I make it back alive…"

"Be careful who you joke with."

"Hehe, you're right. In that case, I guess I'll have to come back alive so I can learn from my mistake," Mia said in a carefree tone, flashing a smile. It was reassuring to see her acting like her usual self.

"Well, well," said Erza as she and Mammon walked up. "The archsaint and her sister are about to risk their lives, and yet they're both remarkably calm. Perhaps you two would be more suited to being exorcists than saints."

“Cool Philia and charming Mia. They’re both treasures. On that note, are you ready for me to open this portal?”

After Erza complimented us on our composure, Mammon concentrated the magic power inside his body and posed the all-important question.

It was finally time to head to the Volcanic Miasma Zone and collect the Moontear Flower.

“Yes. I’m ready when you are.”

“Like Philia, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

We both nodded and looked at Mammon.

On our cue, Mammon sent out his magic, causing a large door adorned with sinister-looking embellishments to appear in front of us.

“Philia! Keep faith. I’ll be waiting for you! And Lady Mia, take care of Philia for me!”

Sir Osvalt’s reassuring cry filled me with energy. We responded with words of reassurance.

“Thank you so much, Sir Osvalt. I promise I’ll make it back alive!”

“Don’t worry, Prince Osvalt. I’d never let Philia die!”

I wasn’t scared of anything anymore. I could confidently state that I was primed for our expedition, both mentally and physically.

“Now that you’ve said goodbye to your hubby,” said Mammon, “I’ve linked the door to your desired location.”

Mammon opened the gate and ushered us inside.

“Ready?”

“Yup. We’ve got this, Philia.”

Mia and I exchanged glances, nodded at one another, and stepped through the gate.

For a brief moment, everything went dark—but just as quickly, we found ourselves staring at a bleak, barren wasteland.

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As soon as we stepped through the gate, Mammon surveyed our surroundings "We must be on the edge of the area affected by the volcanic zone. The air's even heavier."

I felt uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the peculiar, thick atmosphere bearing down on us.

"You don't have to wait around for us, Mammon," I said. "Bringing us this far is more than enough."

Erza had ordered him to wait for us, but I wasn't so keen on that idea. Although we were outside the danger zone, it was best to stay on the safe side.

"I appreciate the concern, but you don't need to worry. A little trouble won't faze me. I mean, I'm the guy who doesn't mind getting his head ripped off. Besides, if I don't bring you and Philia back in one piece, Erza's gonna kill me." With a smirk, Mammon planted himself on a nearby rock. It seemed like he really did intend to wait for us to come back.

"I never knew Mammon was so loyal, Philia," said Mia.

Mia's comment brought exaggerated tears to Mammon's eyes. "What are you talking about, Little Miss Mia? Once I've made a promise to a beautiful woman, I'll do whatever it takes to keep it—even if it kills me."

While Mammon was living at my mansion, he spent his days in cat form to entertain us, and he always seemed to go along with Erza's ridiculous demands. Perhaps his willingness to stick around wasn't so surprising after all.

"All right, Mammon. I promise we'll be back, so just wait there."

"Sure. I'm on it. Take as much time as you need. We demons have way more patience than humans, after all."

I gave him a small nod, then turned toward the volcanic zone. Explosions echoed through the air, apparently without pause.

"Once we enter the danger zone, it's imperative that we stay focused. Keep your senses keen, from your toes to your fingertips."

"Yeah. I know, Philia."

We looked at each other and exchanged nods one more time, then strode toward our destination. In just a few minutes, we'd be in constant danger, so we needed to stay focused.

"It's not like we'll be able to chat casually in there," said Mia, "so I'll say this now… I'm really happy to be standing by your side, heading toward the same goal, Philia."

"Really, Mia?"

"Not to put you on the spot, but you saved my life and you've always been my idol. This felt like the only way I could ever repay you."

Mia's admission left me rather surprised. It had never occurred to me that she saw it that way. I was fully aware that I was recklessly risking my life, but I hadn't considered that she'd view that in a positive light.

Still, Mia would never joke about something so serious. I knew she was telling the truth.

"Philia," she continued, "I'll be on your side no matter what."

"Thank you. You know, the simple knowledge that I have your support has been my salvation on countless occasions. You don't need to repay me for anything."

"Yeah, but after all's said and done, I still want to stay by your side."

Mia stretched, then turned to look my way, smiling contently.

Her smile had given hope and comfort to so many people in Girtonia—and it had saved me more times than I could count, too.

As nerve-wracking as our march into danger was, Mia's indomitable charm filled my heart with courage.

"I don't deserve a sister as lovely as you," I said.

"Don't be silly. My admiration for you will never change or fade, Philia."

"I'm so glad you came with me."

After responding to my sister's kind words, I devoted my attention to the situation in front of us. We'd just stepped into the forbidden zone. From this point on, even the slightest lapse in concentration could cost us our lives.

The two of us exchanged silent nods, and then continued on our way.



"This is harsher than I expected. And these thick clouds make it so dim and gloomy."

"I get why this is a no-go zone. If it wasn't for my magic defenses, I would've lost an arm by now."

Mia and I had already been hit by an explosion. It struck me on the left leg and Mia on the right arm. The moment it hit, I sensed magic power enveloping my body and quickly conjured a small barrier for protection. As Mother had warned, creating a powerful barrier on the spur of the moment was a challenging and perilous task.

As if that wasn't stressful enough, the entire area was shrouded in a dense layer of storm clouds that blocked out almost all sunlight. In the dim light, we constantly had to watch where we stepped.

There was one silver lining, though. I'd heard that the Moontear Flower gave off a faint light. That would make it easier to spot in the darkness.

"I can't believe Mother made it back alive after suffering that injury," I said. "It's hard enough trying to concentrate when you're *not* injured. With wounds as enduring as those, it must have been nearly impossible."

"That's true. I think she was lucky that her legs were unharmed. With any other part of the body, you can get away with using Heal as an emergency treatment."

As we spoke, an unpleasant bang seared my eardrums. Another stream of explosions erupted around us.

I understood it now. The mana in the vicinity was extremely unstable. This must be the cause of the violent magic explosions.

Records claimed that in ancient times, when the Demon Realm and Heaven were torn apart, our world was beset by natural disasters and calamitous dimensional distortions. Perhaps the mana in this area was in disarray for the same reason.

"With mana as unbalanced as this," I said, "we can't risk casting ancient spells."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing. I was hoping I'd be able to absorb mana to recover the magic energy I used to defend myself, but at this rate—"

"Indeed. Capturing unstable mana would result in even more distortion. One wrong move could trigger an explosion inside your body."

"Argh." My words brought a nervous smile to Mia's face. "I didn't realize the effects would be that nasty. I was just going to give up because unstable mana's so hard to absorb."

If we couldn't use ancient rituals, our options were limited. Like Mia, I'd planned to restore my magical energy by absorbing the mana in the atmosphere, but that was impossible.

"If my calculations are correct, we should have enough magic energy to defend ourselves for a little over an hour."

"Yeah. If we want to be efficient about it, we should split up and search for the Moontear Flower separately. What do you say we meet back here in an hour?"

"Good idea. Let's reconvene in an hour's time."

With that decision made, we split up to search for the Moontear Flower.

Of course, I wasn't conducting an aimless search. It was reasonable to assume that no flowers would bloom in an area that was constantly ravaged by explosions. This suggested that Moontear Flowers were most likely to grow in theoretical safe zones—relatively stable areas within the hazardous region. At least, that was my hypothesis.

"I should probably search from a higher spot," I mused to myself.

Without hesitation, I scrambled up a rock to see what lay in the distance. To my disappointment, I couldn't spot any stable areas.

Explosions were erupting as far as the eye could see. It didn't look like there were any safe zones at all.

With no way to restore my magic, I didn't have much time to explore. And a single slip-up could result in instant death…

This was even more nerve-wracking than using divine spells.

"I still have time, but I can't afford to waste it. I need to hurry."

The mental pressure was more intense than I'd expected. I could feel myself starting to panic.

*Stay calm. Sir Osvalt and Mia are behind you.*

I closed my eyes. It took me less than a second to focus my mind and regain my composure.

But that was when disaster hit.

With a boom, the rock beneath my feet exploded, and steam spewed into the air.

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I must have lost consciousness for a moment.

As soon as I came to, I tried to push myself up off the ground. The scenery before me had completely changed. As I dropped into a defensive stance, I could see I'd been thrown far away by the force of the explosion.

"The rock I was using as a vantage point was blown up," I muttered. "That was careless of me."

Normally, evading a blast of this scale would be no issue for me, but I'd been too focused on shielding myself to react in time.

"I have to stand up…" I cried out. "My leg!"

Oh dear. I must have been injured by another explosion while I was unconscious, because blood was pouring out of my right leg. If I didn't treat it quickly, I could end up in trouble.

"Heal!"

Ideally, I would have used Saint Heal, but focusing on recovery, even for a moment, would leave me vulnerable to another explosion. I didn't want to diminish my magic reserves, either.

The main downside of the Saint Heal spell was the amount of magic energy it consumed. To counteract this, I generally used ancient rituals to absorb mana. That was why I hadn't thought twice about using it to cure Mia's drunkenness. All I needed to do was absorb some mana, and my reserves were replenished.

Now that I couldn't absorb mana, however, I needed to expend as little magic energy as possible.

"As important as restricting my magic expenditure is," I reflected, "I don't see how I can make it back to Mia with this leg."

My only hope was to reach the meeting point, reunite with Mia, and flee to a safe zone. There was a flaw in that plan, however. The explosion had thrown me some distance, so I was likely to run out of magic before I made it back. And what's more…

"My leg is taking longer than I expected to heal. At this rate, I won't make it."

If my magic ran out, I'd be completely vulnerable to the explosions.

Despite the mortal danger, I managed to keep my cool. I wasn't sure if that was thanks to my training or because the reality of the situation had yet to sink in, but it was most likely the latter.

*I don't want to die.*

I dreamed of marrying Sir Osvalt and building a happy life with him. That goal was almost within reach. Despite this, I'd ignored his and Mother's advice, disregarded Prince Reichardt's warning, and ruined everything with my selfish quest. The epithet "the greatest saint of all time" and the title of "archsaint" now felt utterly absurd.

When it mattered the most, my arrogance had gotten the better of me. My overconfidence led me to believe I could fulfill my

late father's dream. I brought this upon myself.

No. It was too early for regrets. I couldn't abandon all hope.

I focused my mind and scanned my surroundings. There had to be a way to overcome this hopeless situation…

"Philia!"

Was I hearing things?

I heard an unfamiliar man's voice. I automatically turned toward the source, only to find a beam of light piercing through the clouds and shining toward a patch on the ground. For some strange reason, I couldn't sense any explosions coming from that spot.

Dragging my injured leg, I started limping toward it. It was as if the light was pulling me in.

It was like a dream.

Illuminated by the light were Moontear Flowers, the elusive medicinal plant, emitting a silvery glow. As soon as I saw them, their captivating beauty stopped me in my tracks.

All light seemed concentrated on the bed of glowing flowers basking in the beam from above. The mystical scene before me was more breathtaking than anything I had ever encountered, but there was something ethereal and fragile about it as well.

*I've found it, Mother—the plant you searched for, hoping to save my father's life. It's right there.*

"Gyah!"

My thoughts were interrupted by an explosion beneath my feet, blasting me away from the flowerbed. I'd been so entranced by the otherworldly sight, I let my guard down for a moment. I'd been too slow to defend myself.

I needed to hurry up and administer emergency treatment. As long as I could heal my injuries, there was still hope.

"Heal!" I glanced down at my injured leg in disbelief. "I-I don't have enough magic…"

I never thought I'd end up so trapped. I didn't have enough magic to cast Heal, and I'd injured my leg *again*.

My situation had worsened dramatically.

"I have to keep going… If I give up now, I'll be too ashamed to face Sir Osvalt…"

I had to keep going, even if I had to crawl. I'd finally found the ingredient my father had searched so long for. There was no way I was going to lie down and wait to die!

I didn't want this beautiful scene to be the final stroke of good luck I'd ever experience.

"What?! Another explosion?"

I expended the last remnants of my magic to shield myself as I crawled toward the Moontear Flowers.

Was I being punished for acting out of self-interest, instead of for the benefit of my country? I was a saint, after all.

"I'm sorry, Sir Osvalt, Mia, Mother…and the people of Parnacorta, who have been so good to me."

The next explosion, or the one after that, was going to kill me. It seemed I was going to have to make peace with that.

Although I had my regrets, there was no fighting God's judgment…

"Philia!"

"What?"

"Philia! Hold out your hand! I'm right here!"

In that moment, I heard Mia shouting at me. When I turned in the direction of her voice, I spotted her in the bed of Moontear Flowers. My eyes widened with shock at this unexpected sight.

"You don't have time to gawk!" Mia extended a chain of light before me. I mustered all my remaining strength and reached out for it.

As I grabbed hold of the chain, Mia called out my name again. Her face was set in grim determination.

This girl was something else.

"You've become an incredible saint, Mia…"

This was something I'd felt for a long time. I had a feeling that one day she'd become the kind of saint that not even I could hold a candle to.

"Philia! I'm so glad you're safe!"

At that moment, I knew I was correct. Perhaps I was overly biased, but by the time I reached Mia and found myself enveloped in her embrace, I was shaking with pride.

"Thank you, Mia. You saved me."

"It's no big deal. Just look at how many Moontear Flowers we found!"

Surrounded by the fantastical radiance of Moontear Flowers, I hugged my sister in gratitude. I was so proud of her.

Once we'd picked the Moontear Flowers we needed, Mia leaned in and whispered to me. "After the big explosion, I heard what sounded like a whole mountain crumbling. That was when I saw you getting blown away. I was shocked, but I knew I had to do something. I've never had to think so hard in my life."

After seeing the height I'd fallen from, Mia managed to guess where I might have fallen and came to rescue me.

"I wasn't sure whether you were injured or how seriously you were hurt, so I was desperate to get to you as quickly as possible."

"And while you were searching for me, you found the Moontear Flowers."

"Yup. As you predicted, there was a stable flow of mana in the explosion-free areas. I figured that as long as I managed to pull you toward me, we could use Saint Heal to replenish our stores of magic energy."

Defending against explosions required precise manipulation of magic energy, but Mia had done it with astonishing speed. Not for nothing did she have a reputation as the fastest spell-caster on the continent. She'd used her superior instincts to take rapid action, rescuing me in record time.

No praise could do her achievement justice.

"I'm glad I made it in time. Right, Philia?"

"Yes. You saved my life. I can't thank you enough—"

"You don't need to say anything else. I was just returning the favor. Besides, it's only natural for a little sister to help her big sister in a time of need."

Mia put a finger to her lips and winked at me with a contented smile. She seemed so much more mature than before, almost like a different person.

"I won't thank you, then, Mia. But let me say this one thing. Your growth has astounded me. You are the greatest saint there is."

With a sweet smile on her face, Mia grabbed me by the hand. "What are you talking about, Philia? You're the greatest saint. You always will be."

"Oh?" She spent all her time watching me from behind, trying to chase after me. "If you insist, I'll try as hard as I can to make you proud."

"You already have. You're so odd, Philia."

Mia smiled as she absorbed mana, filling her body with magic energy.

I had fully recovered my magic powers as well. I used Saint Heal to fully repair my battered right leg, so moving wasn't going to be an issue.

"We need to stay alert on our way back, too."

"Yes. I know, Philia."

Our return journey was risky as well, but somehow, we managed to escape the Volcanic Miasma Zone and keep our Moontear Flowers safe.

This time, we had a clear idea of which route to take back. We warned each other of the dangers and handled any explosions in our path, so the return trip was much smoother.

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"Philia! Lady Mia! What a relief! I'm so glad you're safe!"

After escaping from the Volcanic Miasma Zone, we had Mammon send us back to Mother's mansion. As soon as we arrived, Sir Osvalt came running over to us. We'd only been apart for a short time, but it felt as if I hadn't seen his face in ages.

"Sir Osvalt! I had a close shave, but Mia—"

"My sister never disappoints, does she? Look how many Moontear Flowers she gathered!"

"Wow! That's marvelous. You found the miracle plant and came back with an armful!"

I tried to interrupt to explain how Mia saved me, but she pressed her index finger to her lips, as if to ask me to keep a secret. Was she trying not to cause any unnecessary worry for my fiancé?

Mother seemed astonished by the amount of Moontear Flowers we had brought back, too. "This…is unbelievable. I never expected you to find one flower, let alone so many."

"It's all thanks to the information you shared with us, Mother, not to mention our teamwork. Right, Philia?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Thanks to a series of fortunate events, everything went well."

I was too happy to be alive to give it much thought, but I suppose it truly was an outstanding achievement.

"A series of fortunate events, you say? I suspect you two made your own luck with hard work and cooperation. Oh, Philia, and Mia, too—you make me proud to be your mentor."

Mother's expression softened. Our safe return must have come as a relief to her. I was tremendously proud to receive praise from my mentor.

"Oh? You're proud to be our mentor? Is that all, Mother?"

Mia, however, seemed displeased with Mother's comment. How could she possibly take issue with it?

"Ahh… Fine… I'm proud to be your mother, too."

"M-Mother!"

"You played me like a fiddle there, Mia. But Philia, you've done an excellent job. I'm sure my husband is up in heaven, boasting about his wonderful daughter, too."

The words "wonderful daughter" felt like the greatest honor I could ever receive. I savored the joy of the moment as warmth flooded my chest.

With the Moontear Flower in hand, there was only one thing left to do. Luke's condition was growing worse by the day, and we couldn't afford to waste any time.

I turned to Erza.

"You need to see that apothecary fellow in Gyptia, right? Mammon!"

"Yeah, yeah. You never give a poor demon a chance to rest, Big Sis."

Erza came over and swiftly began giving Mammon orders.

With this key ingredient, we should be able to finalize the cure for the devil's seed. Luke would make a full recovery.

"When I get back," I said, "I'll express my gratitude properly."

"All right. You don't need to thank me, but let's have another catch-up soon."

"We'll see each other at the wedding, right?" said Mia. "Philia, send my best wishes to Luke."

"I will."

After saying goodbye to Mother and Mia, I stepped through the teleportation gate that Mammon had created and was reunited with Lena and the others. As soon as we arrived at the doorstep of Luke's cottage, a chorus of concerned voices greeted me.

"Lady Philia!" said Lena. "I'm so relieved you're safe! I was worried sick!"

"Hold back the tears, Lena," said Leonardo. "Philia never knows what to do when you get emotional."

"But even you were worried this time. I'm so glad you're safe, Lady Philia."

"I was prepared to take my own life in the wake of my master's death."

As soon as I went through the teleportation gate and arrived in front of Luke's cottage, I was greeted by voices—each one of them expressing concern for me.

"I'm sorry for making you all worry so much," I said.

"Philia! You don't need to apologize! It all turned out okay in the end, right? That uncle of yours… What's his name again? Lulu? Anyway, you're going to save his life!"

"It's Luke. Lena, you really need to learn people's names."

"We all understood that you could not leave your uncle's ailment untreated, Lady Philia."

My attendants accepted my recklessness with relieved smiles. I was so lucky to have such kind people around me. From my very first days in Parnacorta, they'd always supported me.

"Thank you. Lena, Leonardo, Himari—I know I have my shortcomings, but I hope you continue to stay by my side."

I bowed my head. For a moment, I was met with silence. Had I said something inappropriate? Perhaps it was an unsuitable comment, considering how much worry I'd caused.

"Lady Philia!" Lena tearfully leaped toward me, taking me by surprise.

"Lena?"

"We'll always stick by you! Even if the whole world's coming to an end!"

Tears poured down her face. How was I meant to react?

"Please avoid making Lady Philia uncomfortable with your nonsensical statements," said Himari. "Staying by our master's side is our inherent duty. I could not ask for a superior master."

"I'm on the same page as Himari. I, Leonardo, intend to assist you in any way I can, Lady Philia."

Himari peeled Lena off me and bowed, as did Leonardo. Once again, their kindness touched a chord deep in my heart.

"Don't hold Philia up too long, you guys," said Sir Osvalt. "Remember, Lady Erza and Sir Mammon are with us too."

"Personally, I quite enjoy watching these silly little farces."

"Hey, what'd you say? That's so mean, Erza!"

"You're such a sweet little thing, Lena," said Mammon.

Everyone was chattering away at Luke's doorstep. As Sir Osvalt said, we needed to put the conversation on hold until the mission was truly completed.

"My apologies," I said, "but I should go in and see Luke."



With that, I knocked on the door.

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When Luke saw the Moontear Flowers, his eyes widened. “So this is the Moontear Flower, the mysterious medicinal plant. As I thought, my older brother identified the final ingredient. I’m astounded that you managed to find it in such a short time.”

I couldn’t blame him for being surprised by the sight of the elusive flower. “Yes. My sister and I managed to collect these.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re both saints, aren’t you? Well, well. I suppose saints are as impressive as people say they are. You certainly made easy work of collecting Moontear Flowers.” Luke bowed his head, as if he were praying. “I’m terribly grateful.”

In truth, it had been quite the ordeal—one that almost cost me my life. I decided not to admit that, though. It felt unfair to trouble Luke, who was already on his sickbed, with more worries.

“Please look up, Luke. I still have to concoct the remedy, so save your thanks for after your illness is cured.”

Luke raised his head and gave me a nod. “All right, then. I very much appreciate your help, Lady Philia.”

How lovely. He had undergone a complete transformation, his eyes sparkling with life and hope. In order to turn that hope into a reality, I needed to make my father’s long-held dream come true.

The devil’s seed took my father’s life, as well as that of Prince Reichardt’s fiancée, Elizabeth. It felt like fate had guided me here. Now that I’d made it this far, I wanted to see it out until the end.

I had some confidence in my knowledge as an apothecary. With my father’s and Luke’s research in mind, I was sure I could create the miracle cure.

And so that was what I was going to do.

I was determined to achieve what my father, Kamil, had long hoped to accomplish and save Luke from the sickness that plagued him.

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A few days later, I completed my work in Luke's laboratory.

Fortunately for me, thanks to Luke's research and the papers my father left behind, the cure was almost complete. I just needed to make minor adjustments when adding the Moontear Flower. The formula itself wasn't much of a challenge.

"What an impressive display of skill, Lady Philia," said Luke. "Your expertise is truly remarkable."

"Not at all. If anything, I should thank you for allowing me to look at your research, Luke. It was incredibly enlightening."

"Don't be silly. You finalized the remedy so quickly. 'Extraordinary' doesn't even begin to describe your talent."

Before us lay a sparkling golden powder, the remedy for the devil's seed I had made using the Moontear Flower.

Once Luke took it, he would be as right as rain. I was sure of it, and yet…

"This is a scary medicine to take. The Moontear Flower should counteract the toxic effects of the other plants in the formula, but if I didn't balance the elements correctly…"

"Hold on there, Philia. Are you saying that if the Moontear Flower doesn't work properly, things could go horribly wrong?"

"Indeed. This medicine could even be considered a poison. Of course, in theory, it shouldn't have any detrimental effects—but that's still only theory. Luke, you will be the first patient afflicted with the devil's seed to take it, so—Oh!"

Before I had the chance to finish, Luke swallowed the remedy without a shred of hesitation. As an apothecary, he should have

understood the risk better than anyone.

"I always believed that my brother, Kamil, was the greatest apothecary in the world," he said. "And now, his daughter—Lady Philia—has completed the research he never got the chance to finish. How could I not trust you?"

Luke flashed me a smile. He had faith in my father—in his brother. That thought filled me with inexplicable joy.

I spent the rest of the day at Luke's cottage, monitoring his condition.

The next day arrived.

"It's been a while since your last dose of the medicine that suppresses your symptoms—"

"Yes. It's been more than twenty-four hours now, and I don't seem to be experiencing any further attacks. The cure must be a success!"

"That's good to hear. It will probably take some time before you recover completely, but most of your symptoms are likely to disappear within a few days."

"Yes, I already feel stronger. Lady Philia, thank you so much for everything you've done for me."

Luke bowed his head repeatedly, his eyes welling up with tears. I could see the strength of his life force in his eyes.

I would have preferred to stay with him until he made a full recovery, but I couldn't neglect my duties in Parnacorta any longer. I just needed to have faith in my family's research and pray that my uncle recovered.

"Raise your head, Luke. We will meet again. Please stay well."

"I'll do my best. Take care, Lady Philia and Prince Osvalt. I'll make sure to be there on your wedding day, after my illness has subsided."

"It's okay, Luke," said Sir Osvalt. "You don't have to push yourself while you're still in recovery."

"I insist. I need Philia to see me in good health."

After saying our farewells, we decided to head back to Parnacorta. We had Erza and the others with us, so there was no reason to prolong our trip.

"It's a little sad to think that our journey together is coming to an end."

"Finally admitting it, huh?"

"I suppose so. Still, we can always visit when we have free time. All is well."

"That's true. The next time we meet, it'll be at the wedding. I can't wait to see you dazzle in your wedding gown."

Without this pair, I never could have completed the cure. Erza gave me the push I needed, and Mammon assisted me on my quest. I couldn't thank them enough.

"Erza, Mammon, I just want to say—"

"Hey, no need to thank us. We did this because we wanted to. And like I've said before, I still owe you for the whole Asmodeus situation, not to mention the debacle with the pope."

I wanted to express my gratitude properly, but Erza wouldn't hear it. "That's not the case at all, Erza. You've given more than enough back already."

"Sorry, Little Miss Philia. When it comes to Big Sis, stuff goes in one ear and out the other. Now then, the gate is ready. Quick, get inside."

Without further ado, Mammon hurried us through the portal leading to Parnacorta.

My initial objective had been to ask Mother to walk me down the aisle. When I left my country, I never could have envisaged that

it’d turn into a life-threatening mission to find a cure for a deadly disease.

As soon as we emerged in the garden of my mansion, Sir Osvalt stretched, his face the picture of contentment. “Whew! I felt the same way when we came back from Dalbert, but nothing feels as right as the air back home.”

“Sir Osvalt, I’m sorry for keeping you away from your kingdom for such a long time.”

“Oh, I wasn’t complaining. After a long, enjoyable journey, the familiar air tastes better than ever. I love that feeling.”

I couldn’t help smiling. It was just like him to enthuse over even “familiar air.”

“I’ll go open the windows to let some fresh air in,” said Lena.

“All I left behind were non-perishable ingredients,” said Leonardo. “I ought to fetch groceries.”

“I’ll start cleaning!”

Upon our return, Lena, Leonardo, and Himari swiftly sprang into action. They, too, looked happy to be back on familiar ground.

“On that note, we’d better head home.”

After watching Lena and my other attendants hit the ground running, Erza and Mammon told us they were leaving.

I was reluctant to say goodbye. I doubted I would ever get used to the fleeting sadness I felt when I bid someone farewell.

“Lady Erza and Sir Mammon,” said Sir Osvalt, “I know you said we didn’t need to thank you…but stay well.”

“Yes, please take care of yourselves,” I added. “I look forward to the day we meet again.”

“Same to you two, okay? I promise we’ll be at the wedding.”

“See you later, you two!”

With bright smiles, the pair—who promised that we'd meet again—stepped through the teleportation gate and returned to Dalbert.

"I owe you an apology, Sir Osvalt. I refused to take no for an answer and pushed through with my own desires. Mia interrupted before I had the chance to say this earlier, but the truth is—"

"I'm sorry, Philia. I never should have doubted you. I should have had faith. I'm embarrassed that you had to see that side of me."

As I attempted to admit that I'd nearly died, Sir Osvalt interrupted me with an apology of his own.

Why would he say such a thing? I was the one who should have been apologizing.

"Please listen to me, Sir Osvalt. I—"

"No, I'd rather be spared the details. The way Lady Mia was acting, I can guess you had a close call. I'm just relieved that you're here by my side. To be honest, I'd hate for you to do something so reckless again, but from now on I'll always stand by you."

It seemed as though Sir Osvalt had already figured out what I was going to say. He was staring at me with a solemn gaze.

He was truly kind. I felt even guiltier about making him worry.

"Thank you, but please let me apologize for worrying you."

"All right. This situation got a little messy, but if there ever comes a time when you have no choice but to do something crazy, I'll go with you. I'll support you."

"Thank you, Sir Osvalt."

Our journey had taken unexpected twists and turns, but it was almost at an end. There was still one thing left to do.

"We need to visit Elizabeth's grave and share the news."

"Oh, good idea," said Sir Osvalt. "I'd better tell my brother the news, too. After all, I went against his fierce opposition. I sent

Himari ahead of us with a message to let him know we're safe, but still…"

"Yes, that's true. I need to thank Prince Reichardt."

On that note, we made our way to the royal palace.

# Chapter 5:
# Love in My Hands

"WHAT A LOVELY DAY IT IS, Lady Philia," said Lena, gazing out the window.

The weather was mild, with the deep blue sky stretching out as far as the eye could see. The mere sight of it filled me with inner peace.

When Lena spotted the flower I was growing in a vase full of mana, her eyes began to sparkle. "Oh, how beautiful. Is this the Moontear Flower?"

That's right. I'd started conducting research into the Moontear Flower. Although I'd completed the formula for the cure and saved Luke's life, that didn't mean the devil's seed was truly conquered.

I needed a way to mass-produce my remedy. The battle wouldn't truly be won until it was available to all. Only then would I feel comfortable sharing my victory with Elizabeth and my father.

With Mammon's help, Mia and I had managed to retrieve some Moontear Flowers from the Volcanic Miasma Zone, but apothecaries couldn't make regular trips there. Not only did one need permission from both Parnacorta and Girtonia to enter the area, but it was all but impossible to get there without help from Mammon, a demon familiar of an exorcist working for the head church in Dalbert. In other words, retrieving the flowers required the involvement of three different nations, and even then, the supply was limited.

Therefore, the most pressing task was to find a way to cultivate Moontear Flowers and grow them outside the Volcanic Miasma Zone.

"Prince Reichardt, Prince Fernand, and the Pope of Dalbert are all cooperating so I can start continent-wide research," I told Lena.

Our findings, along with samples of the Moontear Flowers we collected on our expedition, had been shared with research institutions across the continent, allowing more people to take part in the project. So far, we knew that the unusual environment and light inside the Volcanic Miasma Zone were crucial to the Moontear Flower's growth. I was basing my research on those findings.

"Oh. So that's what you've been studying lately."

"Yes. Luke has also returned to his apothecary work and is assisting with the research over in Gyptia."

Luke, the first known person on the continent to have fully recovered from the once-incurable devil's seed, had not only resumed his medical work, but was helping to find a way to grow Moontear Flowers at Gyptia's research institute. He'd described it all to me in a recent letter.

"Lady Philia. Lady Grace of Bolmern is here to congratulate you."

"Lady Grace is here?"

"Yes. She's waiting in the reception room. She wants to speak with you before the ceremony."

"Understood. I'll be there right away!"

That's right. Tomorrow was my wedding day.

So much had happened since Sir Osvalt proposed to me, but the wait was finally over. Tomorrow, I was getting married.

"Lady Philia! Congratulations on your marriage! Please accept my heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the entire Mattilas family! I was so excited about the ceremony tomorrow, I simply couldn't stay away!"

"That's very kind of you, Grace. You're almost making me blush."

"Hehe. That's not like you, Lady Philia. Keep your head held high."

"All right. I'll do my best."

When I walked into the reception room, Grace received me with a bright smile. We hadn't seen each other in quite some time, but her cheerful demeanor quickly melted the ice. We spent some time catching up and exchanging small talk.

"I was so impressed when I heard that you'd created the cure for the disease that took dear Liz's life. As your top apprentice, I couldn't be any prouder."

Grace's eyes glistened as she spoke. She'd been close to Elizabeth while she was still alive, and I could tell that my work meant a lot to her.

"Prince Reichardt said he was pleased as well. Elizabeth was truly loved, wasn't she?"

"Lady Philia…"

When Sir Osvalt and I shared the news with Prince Reichardt, he bowed in gratitude—a gesture that took me by surprise.

"Miss Philia," he said, "it may be out of place for me to say this now, after I tried to stop you venturing into that hazardous region… but thank you for settling the score for Elizabeth."

I would never be able to fathom how profound his love for his fiancée was. But when he lifted his head, he looked more at peace than I'd ever seen before.

Grace went on. "In Bolmern, my sister Emily has absolutely thrown herself into researching the Moontear Flower. You've inspired her to begin studying topics she never would have bothered with before."

"Oh, is that right? Please give her my regards."

"Of course. She's obsessed with developing a more efficient cultivation method than yours. It's preposterous, frankly…"

Grace sighed as she took a sip of her tea. Despite the way she made it sound, I detected a hint of pride on her face. Deep down,

she respected her hard-working sister.

"Anyway, I can't wait to see you in your wedding dress tomorrow, Lady Philia."

"Of course. Thank you for taking the time to visit me."

After our conversation came to a close, Grace bowed and left the mansion.

It was just past noon. My next guests would be arriving soon.

As it turned out, they showed up in only an hour.

"Lady Philia, you have some more visitors. Come on in, Lady Mia and Lady Hilda."

"Philia! Congrats on the big day! I wanted to come earlier, but I had some last-minute saintly duties to take care of—"

"It's a saint's first responsibility to carry out as many of her obligations as she can manage. I'm sure Philia would hate for you to neglect your duties."

Mia and Mother were already chattering away as they entered the reception room. Both saints were snowed under with work but, as promised, they'd managed to find the time to attend my wedding.

"Mia, Mother. Thank you for making the effort to come."

"I wouldn't miss your big day for the world, Philia. Mother was looking forward to it, too."

"I wouldn't go that far. That said, it'll be a pleasure to witness you seizing the happiness your life has to offer you."

My mother smiled at me. These days, she seemed more serene than before.

When I first came to Parnacorta, I never would have dreamed that I'd get married, let alone receive Mia and my mother's blessings. I was so happy that this day had come.

"Prince Fernand says he'll be here tomorrow," Mia added.

"Will he? I'll have to greet him once the ceremony is over. I need to thank him for everything he did for me."

"Of course. I'll pass on your thanks, too. I already told you this in my letter, but Prince Fernand was really impressed with the cure. He struggled with his own health for a long time, so he appreciates the noble work you've done in helping people who suffer illness." Mia gleefully shared how Prince Fernand felt.

Given that I'd acted out of selfishness, I felt slightly guilty when people called my work noble. That said, I was happy to be able to help others.

"Mother," I said, "I'm counting on you to walk me down the aisle tomorrow."

"Yes, I know. I promise I won't embarrass you."

"I never imagined you would…"

Her response was nonchalant. Thinking about it now, I'd probably inherited her tendency to conceal her emotions. When I viewed myself from that perspective, aspects of my personality that once made me insecure began to feel like evidence of our familial bond. Perhaps someday I could even learn to love those sides of myself.

"Philia," said Mother, "as I said before, it's too late for me to start acting like your mother, but I'm pleased to see you commencing a new journey." Without saying anything more, she quietly took a sip of Lena's tea.

"Mother…"

I felt warmth slowly seeping through my chest, but I wasn't sure why.

Maybe it was because we didn't need to say much in order to communicate. Simply being in the same space was enough; our hearts shared more than words ever could.

*I see it now, Mother. Love is something I've always had.*

I hadn’t always been able to see it, but throughout my journey, I’d always been loved.

“I’m so excited about tomorrow, Philia.”

“Yes, so am I. As wonderful as marrying Sir Osvalt is, I’m even more delighted that so many people will be there to celebrate with us.”

I shared a nod with Mia, then looked up through the window. As before, there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Tomorrow was sure to be a wonderful day.

***

“Parnacorta Cathedral. The moment’s finally here…”

It was the day of the wedding ceremony. I’d arrived at Parnacorta Cathedral, where the ceremony was to be held.

Renovation work on the cathedral had only recently been completed, and a majestic atmosphere enveloped the tall white edifice. The design was nothing short of divine.

“All right, Lady Philia,” said Lena. “The only thing left for you to do is get changed.”

“Very well. I’d appreciate your help.”

Lena and Himari helped me into my pure white wedding dress, just as they’d done during the fitting. Then I waited in the dressing room for my big moment to arrive.

“You look incredibly, unbelievably beautiful, Lady Philia! Uuugh, I can’t hold back the tears.”

Lena, overcome with emotion, began to cry. I hadn’t expected her to start weeping. I panicked before handing her a handkerchief.

“Please don’t cry, Lena. You saw my dress when I tried it on.”

“I can’t help it. Today your beauty is beyond words. I was moved when you tried it on before, but this time you’re on a whole

other level." She dabbed at her tears. "Ugh, thank you for the handkerchief."

Lena articulated even more of her thoughts as she wiped her tears with the handkerchief. Her pure, honest nature had buoyed my spirits so many times before.

Himari, seemingly unable to turn a blind eye to Lena's emotional outburst, warned her. "Stop it, Lena. You've bothered Lady Philia."

Himari was as dignified as ever. Like Lena, she was someone I could depend on, if not quite in the same way.

"Himariii. Don't you…tear up…when you look at Philia…in her wedding gown?"

"Pardon me? What a comical notion. I'm tremendously moved by the spectacle, but even so…"

Himari's expression shifted and her eyebrows twitched. On closer inspection, her eyes had reddened slightly.

"Hey. You *are* tearing up!"

"Don't be so absurd! I would never—"

"Enough already, you two. I'm happy. Just knowing that you care so much about me is more than enough."

At this, they both fell silent. "Lady Philia…"

As we were confirming our next steps and waiting for the moment to arrive, there was a knock at the door.

"Okay! The bride's attendant, Mother Hilda, is ready! Lady Philia, it's time!"

Lena checked who was at the door. It sounded as though Mother had finished getting ready.

I rose to my feet and began my progress toward the cathedral, with Lena and Himari by my side.

"Philia, let me congratulate you one more time. I never imagined I'd be the one walking you down the aisle at your wedding. Even now, it doesn't quite feel real."

"Mother…"

"I was nothing more than your teacher and your aunt… No, enough of that. I have no doubt that my husband, Kamil, is smiling down at us from heaven, delighted to see the beautiful bride you are today. That's all I wanted to tell you."

Mother's eyes narrowed as she smiled.

I was sure my father was happy for me, too. My mother's words touched my heart.

"Lady Philia, this way."

We arrived at the entrance of the cathedral. I followed Himari's guidance and moved forward, one step at the time.

At last, the wedding was about to begin.

"Are you ready, Philia?"

"Yes, Mother. Let's go."

I linked arms with Mother. Together, we stepped forward as the doors to the venue swung open.

***

The cathedral was enshrouded in silence. The only sound filling the space was the echo of our footsteps.

Sir Osvalt, all but glowing in a white tuxedo, was already standing in front of the altar. I walked up and positioned myself by his side.

"I'm amazed. I tried to picture how beautiful you would look, but it seems my imagination was lacking. I see you almost every day, but I still couldn't imagine a woman as beautiful as the one standing right here."

"You're such a charmer, Sir Osvalt."

"I'm not trying to flatter you. You know I'm no good at that. Everyone is mesmerized by your beauty, Philia."

As soon as our eyes met, Sir Osvalt complimented me on how I looked in my dress, sending my heart racing. I knew his words were sincere, and that made me feel strangely shy. I couldn't help it.

"We will now commence the wedding ceremony of Osvalt Parnacorta and Philia Adenauer."

Unsurprisingly, Bishop Bjorn was officiating the ceremony. After checking that we were ready, he began the ceremony.

"Do you, Osvalt Parnacorta, vow to love Philia Adenauer in sickness and in health?"

"Of course, I do. I will devotedly love Philia forever."

Sir Osvalt answered with confidence, his gaze steady and true. His words moved and delighted me.

"Do you, Philia Adenauer, vow to love Osvalt Parnacorta in sickness and in health?"

"I do. I pledge to love him forever."

"The couple will now exchange rings as a symbol of their love and devotion."

Mother Hilda brought out a white box and opened the lid to reveal two white-gold rings.

I took the rings from her and slid one onto Sir Osvalt's finger. Then he placed my ring on mine.

"You may now seal your marriage with a kiss."

On Bishop Bjorn's cue, we turned to face one another. At that moment, uncounted emotions surged inside my heart.

The joy of all the days we'd shared, the many people we'd encountered, the thought of spending the rest of our lives together… All of it tangled together, pulling at my heartstrings.

I surrendered myself to these emotions as I awaited his kiss. And then his lips gently touched mine.

After a brief moment, his soft lips pulled away. I opened my eyes to find Sir Osvalt standing in front of me, looking a little shy.

"Philia."

He spoke my name in the same casual way he always did, yet for some reason, it felt special.

"Yes."

With this short response, I looked back up at him. Sir Osvalt smiled timidly and pulled me closer once again.

"Philia… I know I've said this before, but I'll work hard to ensure you never regret marrying me."

"Ha ha… You don't need to make pledges like that anymore. I'm already convinced that marrying you was the right decision."

"Are you sure? That means a lot. I'm delighted that I was able to marry you. I love you."

Why did being in his arms feel safer than any other place in the world? I couldn't shake the feeling that the emotions surging within me were filling a hole that had been within me all this time.

"In the presence of God, I now pronounce you husband and wife! Congratulations!"

In response to Bishop Bjorn's announcement, the guests erupted into celebratory cheers. With the most important people in our lives watching on, our wedding ceremony ended on a perfect note.

***

# Hildegard

I STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE I was attending my daughter Philia's wedding.

I gave birth to her after becoming a saint. After she was taken away from me, I watched over her as her teacher. During that time, I continued to pray to God every day, but I was never as thankful to Him as I was on the day of her nuptials.

The only sound that could be heard in the silent cathedral was our footsteps. As one would expect, guests had come from far and wide to attend the ceremony. They watched us quietly, holding their breath as one, as Philia embarked on her new journey to happiness.



I happened to look up and caught sight of a vast stained-glass window. The image depicted God and the genesis of our world. I recognized it as a painting done by Prince Osvalt's grandfather, the previous king of Parnacorta. Bishop Bjorn had once told me it was one of his favorite paintings.

The fact that I was contemplating such irrelevant matters suggested that I was more nervous than I cared to admit.

It was Philia's—my daughter's—big day. On the day she was ripped out of my arms, the prospect of someday walking her down the aisle would have seemed absurd.

Philia looked cheerful. When I heard that people found her, like me, unexpressive and lacking in charm, I was plagued by guilt…but over time, she'd started to smile more often. It was evidence of a kind of magic beyond the mastery of saints.

Without a doubt, it was thanks to one man that she was able to recover her ordinary human emotions. And there he was, standing in front of the altar… Prince Osvalt.

*Thank you for looking out for Philia, Your Highness—not just as a saint, but as a human being as well.*

*You embraced her apparent lack of emotion with open arms, accepting it as something that makes her unique. It only took a short conversation with you for that to become clear.*

*Meeting a gentleman like you, who loves her for both her strengths and her shortcomings, may have been the greatest blessing she's ever received.*

Philia walked to the altar and stood by Osvalt's side. Since I was the one to give her away, I could watch from beside the altar as the couple made their all-important vows.

As soon as he and Philia locked eyes, Prince Osvalt confessed how beautiful she looked in her dress.

She blushed. I could instantly tell that she was feeling shy. So, this was yet another emotion she had learned to express.

Since she met Prince Osvalt, Philia's face had begun to show expressions it never had in Girtonia. I already knew that, but on this day, she looked happier than ever. It was a new thing for me to witness…and it gave me a lump in my throat.

"We will now commence the wedding ceremony of Osvalt Parnacorta and Philia Adenauer."

Bishop Bjorn was conducting the ceremony. After checking that Philia and Prince Osvalt were ready, he began.

Once the pair had exchanged their vows, I gave the white-gold rings to Philia. Philia placed one on Prince Osvalt's ring finger. Next, Prince Osvalt slipped the other ring onto Philia's.

"You may now seal your marriage with a kiss."

At Bishop Bjorn's words, the couple turned to one another. After a delicate moment, they kissed.

Once they pulled apart, they gazed contentedly into one another's eyes.

It was too late for me to play the role of Philia's mother, even if that was what she desired. And yet, in my heart of hearts, I longed to be her mom. That was how I'd felt when I was putting her through stringent training as a child, and that feeling had never changed.

I wanted her to be happy. That was my only wish.

As the happy couple confirmed their love for one another, they looked as though they were in their own world. Maybe it was a cliché, but it really did seem impossible for anyone else to get near them. That was simply the atmosphere they were wrapped in.

My wish had come true. Today, Philia was undoubtedly the happiest woman in the world.

As I watched her beam with joy, my tear ducts began to sting.

Darn it. I was determined to observe Philia's nuptials with a smile on my face, and now I was tearing up.

"In the presence of God, I now pronounce you husband and wife! Congratulations!"

When Bishop Bjorn declared that Philia and Prince Osvalt were officially married, the attendees began shouting their congratulations from the pews.

"Philia does look happy, doesn't she, Mother?" said Mia.

"She does indeed."

"Here. You can use my handkerchief."

"You need that more than I do, Mia. I'll use my own."

"Huh? Aha ha. I was so happy, I didn't even realize I was crying. Philia… Congratulations."

Mia must have felt the same way I did. No…her love for Philia was more powerful than anyone else's. The girl beside me, wiping away the tears streaming down her face, loved and admired her older sister more than anyone else in the world.

Philia wasn't just lucky to have met Prince Osvalt. Having Mia as her sister was a blessing, too.

"Philia," I said, "we named you with the hope that someday you would find happiness. Now you and your husband have made our wish a reality."

When I saw the radiant smile my daughter was giving me, my thoughts drifted to the wish Kamil and I had made all those years ago.

# Epilogue

AFTER THE WEDDING CEREMONY, a lavish soirée was held in Parnacorta's royal palace.

Sir Osvalt and I mingled with a host of guests, greeting everyone. The crowd included Mia and Prince Fernand, Luke—who'd made a full recovery—and even Erza, who'd come on the pretense that she was representing the pope. We chatted with the well-wishers and had an altogether enjoyable time.

"Could I speak with you in private for a moment?"

"Sir Osvalt?"

Sir Osvalt escorted me out onto the balcony. From there, we had a panoramic view of the palace garden. Every time the wind blew, colorful petals, illuminated by the moonlight, fluttered through the air, creating a dreamlike scene.

"This is so beautiful."

"Yes, it really is."

We gazed at the view in silence.

After a few moments, Sir Osvalt spoke again. "There's something I want to tell you."

"Something you want to tell me?"

"Yes." He drew a slow breath in, then began to weave his words together with apparent determination. "Philia. I'm not sure whether it's right to say this on the day of our wedding, but I felt obliged to say it now."

I said nothing.

"I was against you coming to this country as the result of a transaction. I still feel deep remorse about it. However, I didn't fall in

love with you because I felt guilty. As selfish as it might be, I was genuinely enchanted by you."

He spoke simply, staring me straight in the eye. What was this man trying to do?

"Excuse me, but are you proposing again? We're already married."

"You can interpret it that way if you like. What I'm saying is that while I still feel guilty, my guilt has nothing to do with my feelings for you."

Sir Osvalt's admission was painfully earnest. I knew no one who lived their life with as much integrity as he did.

"I love you, Sir Osvalt. I don't think that feeling will ever change. For that reason, I shall shoulder half of your guilt."

"Huh? But it wasn't your fault—"

"It doesn't matter. As your wife, I want to share both your happiness and your sorrow."

Sir Osvalt seemed momentarily taken aback, but his familiar smile soon returned. He gently rested his hand on my hair.

"I see. Thank you, Philia."

He gazed lovingly at me before pulling me in and squeezing me tight. I wrapped my arms around his back.

I felt so connected to him, it was as though our two souls had merged into one. The bliss of being with the person I loved almost brought me to tears.

"I'll continue to cherish you forevermore," I said.

"And I'll love you forever. No matter what happens, I'll always be on your side."

"Sir Osvalt…"

We exchanged glances. Before we realized what we were doing, we found ourselves kissing.

We were so deeply connected that it felt like our hearts, bodies, and souls were intertwined. Nothing would ever be able to tear us apart.

I was certain that we were both thinking the same thing. There was no evidence to back up this notion, but it felt natural.

*I'm so happy that I'm married to Sir Osvalt,* I thought.

At that moment, it fully hit me that I was his wife.

"Sir Osvalt," I said, "I'm overjoyed that I'll be able to stay by your side forever."

"Philia? Ha ha ha. What a coincidence. I was reveling in how happy I am to be able to spend my future with you."

From this day forward, I could experience life by my beloved husband's side. That was the most precious gift I could ever ask for.

I didn't know what the future had in store for me, but I was sure things would turn out for the best. Our powerful bond would see us through.

As Sir Osvalt flashed a cheerful smile, I surrendered to his warmth and closed my eyes once more. That way, I could truly savor this blissful, dreamlike moment.

# Afterword

THANK YOU TO ALL MY READERS for picking up a copy of Volume 4.

First of all, I'm relieved that Philia and Osvalt were able to get married.

For a while now, I've wanted to write about Philia's and Hilda's relationship, Philia's father, and Prince Reichardt's regrets. It's satisfying to finally be able to put their stories down on paper.

Ayakita, who draws the manga adaption, portrays Reichardt as a very handsome man, so I made sure to put extra effort into my descriptions of him. The manga depicts all the characters wonderfully and is a great source of inspiration when I'm writing my novels.

Masami created flawless illustrations for me once more. As a writer, I couldn't be happier.

I can't thank my editors enough for the excellent advice they've given me. I'd also like to express my thanks to the staff who gave me this opportunity.

Thank you very much to all the readers for joining me on this ride.

On that note, I'll call it a wrap for this volume. I hope we can meet again down the line.

—FUYUTSUKI KOKI




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