

NOVEL

1

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The Too-Perfect Saint

Tossed Aside by My Fiancé and
Sold to Another Kingdom

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“Welcome! A big, big, big
welcome to Her Holiness,
Saint Philia!”

“Huh?”



FERNAND GIRTONIA
Crown prince of the kingdom of Girtonia.
Does not make public appearances
due to his feeble constitution.

REICHARDT PARNACORTA
Crown prince of the kingdom of
Parnacorta. A pragmatist who prioritizes
his nation's prosperity above all.

JULIUS GIRTONIA
The second-eldest prince of the
kingdom of Girtonia. Springs
a nasty surprise on Philia.

OSVALT PARNACORTA
The second-eldest prince of
the kingdom of Parnacorta.
Friendly and empathetic.

MIA ADENAUER
Philia's sociable younger sister,
and a saint. Her sunny disposition
endears her to almost everyone.

PHILIA ADENAUER
Possibly the greatest saint of all time.
However, her excellence alienates her from others,
ultimately leading to her being sold to Parnacorta.



The earth shimmered gold.
We were drawing power
from the natural world at
an unprecedented rate.

“Now to begin!”

I invoked the ritual for the
Great Purification Circle to
cover the entire continent,
praying all the while that
we would succeed...



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Seven Seas Entertainment

The Too-Perfect Saint: Tossed Aside by My Fiance and Sold to Another Kingdom (Light Novel) Vol. 1

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89160-871-9

Printed in Canada

First Printing: February 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Prologue

“DULL.”

“Unfriendly.”

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

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

My parents, believing I would need to be exceptional to have any marriage prospects at all, put me through the rigors of a harsh and unforgiving education. Magic, swordplay, ancient and modern cultural refinements, etiquette—I learned it all. To top it all off, my family line was known for producing saints. I was expected to become a saint too, a perfect one at that, which meant I started training while still a child.

Getting abandoned on a snowy mountain in winter to fend for myself for a month, being buried alive in the desert, sleeping on a mountainous pile of needles... I earned my merits as a saint through grueling challenges that pushed my body and mind to the brink of breaking.

I put my heart and soul into striving for perfection. I had to be capable of anything and everything...and my hard work paid off. By the time I came of age, I was acknowledged as quite possibly the most powerful saint of all time, and engaged to His Highness Prince Julius, the second-eldest prince of our kingdom.

The day the marriage proposal was finalized was the first time my parents ever praised me. Although my family was highly regarded across the land thanks to its reputation for producing saints, it never hurt to be on closer terms with the royal family.

My parents were finally proud of me. My lifelong efforts had paid off, and happiness was within my reach...or so I thought.

One day, His Highness summoned me to the palace. “The trouble is,” he said, “you’re just too perfect. Where’s your humanity? Where’s your charm? It’s hard

to care about someone so powerful. Who cares about your so-called skills? You're a saint—all you do is pray."

Well, I'd always known I was charmless. That was why I strove for perfection.

His Highness continued. "Your younger sister Mia is something else, though! She's sweet, and captivating, and...how should I put it? There's just something about her that makes you want to protect her."

Mia was a year younger than I was, and we were as different as night and day. She was the epitome of innocence, utterly adorable, and my parents treasured her. She was quick on the uptake and a capable saint. I was proud to call her my younger sister.

"I'm sure Mia will be happy to hear that," I said politely. "She admires Your Highness, as do we all."

"Yes, very good! You see, I've decided to marry her."

Marry Mia? What was he talking about? His Highness was already engaged to me...

"Pardon me, Your Highness. Has Mia been informed of this?"

"No, not yet. But at my last ball, she listened to me with the loveliest smile! I could tell she was taken with me. And apparently, your parents care more about Mia's happiness than yours. They welcomed the idea of breaking off our engagement and betrothing Mia to me instead."

Had Mia wished to marry His Highness, I would've stepped aside then and there. But I couldn't accept this without hearing, from her own lips, what she wanted. I already knew my parents treasured Mia more than they had ever treasured me, but that wasn't her fault. We'd always been close, so I wanted to do whatever would make her happy.

"There's just one thing that bothers me," said His Highness.

"Huh?"

"As dull as you are, Mia adores you. I hope she doesn't try to refuse my proposal for your sake."

Indeed, Mia wasn't the type who'd even consider stealing someone's fiancé. She was so pure that even if she did have feelings for His Highness, she'd keep them to herself.

"Now," His Highness continued, "it just so happens that the only saint of the neighboring kingdom of Parnacorta suddenly passed away. Kind-hearted soul that I am, I took pity on them and offered to help them find a replacement. Surely, they could use a saint of your exceptional repute? The so-called greatest saint ever known? They said yes—and even offered resources and gold from their treasury in exchange! Turns out I'm quite the diplomat, huh?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" I'd heard of the passing of Parnacorta's saint, but I couldn't believe I was being bought and sold like a piece of meat.

"You sure are slow, huh? Your parents will gladly send you to another kingdom for the sake of ours. And when the masses hear how I tearfully let my fiancé go for the greater good, they'll love the royal family like never before. Don't sulk now—as the only saint in Parnacorta, you're sure to be well cared for. This arrangement makes everyone happy."

Everyone? What about me?

My own feelings aside, I didn't want to abandon Girtonia. Sightings of monsters had been growing more frequent all across the land of late, and I had a gut feeling that trouble was afoot. Without me, Mia would be the only saint left in the kingdom. I'd be leaving her with a heavy burden to shoulder.

I brought this up to His Highness, but he dismissed me.

"Don't be so arrogant. You think you're the only one capable of protecting this nation? Philia Adenauer, I'm breaking off our engagement and sending you to another kingdom. This decision is final."

And that was how I was exiled and sold to another kingdom—an inconvenient obstacle that my parents and Prince Julius had brushed aside.

When I returned to the family estate, my parents smiled at me as they never

had before. They couldn't have been more pleased with the deal they'd made.

"Well done, Philia. You know, I always thought of you as hopelessly charmless and dull, but it turns out you're worth something after all."

"Who'd have thought Parnacorta would pay such a fortune for you? The education we put you through paid off, though I suppose you put in some of the work, too. Now we're rising through the ranks! The future of the Adenauer family is secure."

Thirty percent of the price paid by Parnacorta would go to my family, and my father would receive the title of marquess. In exchange for selling me off, the Adenauer family would ascend from the lower ranks of the aristocracy to nobility. And with Mia joining the royal family in my place, my parents' social standing would only rise even higher.

To my parents, it was as if, by some strange alchemy, their unwanted child had been transmuted into a great deal of money and a powerful title. No wonder they looked delighted. Not once did either of my parents mention that we might never see one another again. At this point, it was clear that they'd completely abandoned me.

I'd always worked relentlessly because I wanted my parents to love me, even if it would never be as much as they loved Mia. But now, that tiny flicker of hope was completely extinguished.

"I'm sure His Highness told you this," said my mother, "but keep all this from Mia. She's too kind for her own good. It'd be a shame if that poor girl were to waste her life worrying about you."

"Of course," I replied. "I want Mia to be happy. But I'm concerned about abandoning her to serve as the kingdom's sole saint."

If it would make Mia happy, I'd gladly go to Parnacorta. But my absence would add to her burdens as a saint. I worried about how she would manage without me if monster attacks increased or unforeseen disasters struck. After years of casting protective barriers and weakening demonic forces, I knew how hard it could be.

My parents reacted with disdain.

“Watch your mouth! How dare you underestimate Mia? You’ve always been a slow learner, but that girl is a natural genius. You may have fooled some people in this kingdom into overvaluing your abilities, but don’t let it give you a fat head!”

“That’s right! Besides, the royal family has pledged to give Saint Mia their full support. The people will unite as one to protect her. There’s just something about her that sets her apart from you. She’s simply on a different level.”

I couldn’t argue. Mia was clever and talented, and far better than me at capturing people’s attention. Even so, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of foreboding...

But if our kingdom truly did rally behind Mia, my worries might turn out to be unfounded. I could sense there was no point in arguing further. All that remained for me to do was to shut up and leave my kingdom.

Mia, I prayed to myself, please be safe.

“Philia, what’s wrong? Why the long face?” Mia put down her book and peered into my eyes.

I hadn’t expected her to be waiting for me in my room. What could I say? Looking at her angelic, guileless face, all I could do was desperately swallow my words.

“I’m fine. I was just thinking about something.” I stroked her silver hair, one of the few features that marked us as sisters, as I downplayed her worries. It didn’t feel right to hide the truth from her, but it wasn’t entirely a lie. I was fine.

Mia wrapped her arms around me. “Hey, don’t hold back! I’m pretty capable, you know, and I adore my big sister more than anything in this world. Whatever’s troubling you, I’ll take care of it.”

Mia...you’re the reason I made it this far.

I was so grateful to have her in my life. If I could be a good older sister in her eyes, that was enough for me. She had no idea about the harsh education my parents put me through. They knew she’d be horrified, so they kept the reality

from her and forced me to stay quiet.

Goodbye, my beloved little sister. I love you so much. Please always be well.

And so, without my sister's knowledge, I stealthily left my homeland, Girtonia, for the kingdom of Parnacorta. I didn't know what to expect, but Parnacorta had bought me, so I braced myself to endure whatever came my way.

A saint's most common duties include healing the wounded and creating protective barriers, but our powers can be used for countless other things, such as purifying villages after a monster attack. I was particularly skilled at barrier spells and rituals for warding off evil. Through intense training to amplify the power of my prayers, I'd learned to create a Pillar of Light in record time. According to those who study such matters, no saint in history had attained such power.

And yet, I'd been sold off to a neighboring kingdom, most likely due to my lack of charisma. Life in Parnacorta must be hard for a saint—now more than ever.

I have to prepare myself...

Little did I know my life in that kingdom would turn out to be the complete opposite of what I imagined...

Chapter 1:

The Saint of Parnacorta

WELCOME! *A big, big, big welcome to Her Holiness, Saint Philia!*

“Huh?”

I’d been driven in a horse-drawn carriage to a checkpoint, where I went through immigration procedures. After that, I transferred to another carriage that was equipped for mountain crossing. At last, I reached the capital of the kingdom of Parnacorta, which spanned a vast basin.

I’d been ordered to begin my work as a saint in the capital. I changed into my robes and entered the church, nervous about my first job in a new kingdom.

A large banner hung from the ceiling. I read it, then reread it. Surely there was something wrong with my vision.

Welcome! A big, big, big welcome to Her Holiness, Saint Philia!

No, that was definitely what the banner said. But why? Parnacorta had spent a fortune to buy me, so I expected to be put to work at once handling monsters. This was like...like...

“Greetings, Saint Philia.” A middle-aged man with dark hair, glasses, and a pointed red hat bowed deeply. As he rose, I saw he was smiling from ear to ear. “Thank you so much for coming from your doubtless beloved kingdom to save Parnacorta! I am Bishop Bjorn, the head of this church. If there’s anything you need, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Behind him stood a crowd, apparently of church officials. I noticed tables piled with an array of delicious-looking food.

I spoke hesitantly. “Is this...a party?”

“Of course! It’s not much, but a welcome party was the least we could do for you, Saint Philia. I made the cake myself.”

“A...a welcome party? But what exactly...”

“Come now, everyone’s been looking forward to your arrival. Have a drink!” Bishop Bjorn handed me a glass and launched into a toast.

I automatically accepted the drink, still baffled. “Excuse me, I came here because I was told there was work to do...”

“Yes, and your job for today is to attend your welcome party! Everyone’s so glad that you’re here. The food here is from a nearby restaurant called The Hungry Wolf; the owner wanted you to have a taste of local cuisine. How is it? We planned a reception for this evening, but if you’re tired, we can call it off. We can always celebrate more later!” The bishop bowed again.

I was overcome with embarrassment. “Please raise your head. I’m sorry. It’s just that I’ve never attended a party like this...”

That wasn’t strictly true. I’d been to a few parties, but never one where I was the guest of honor. The engagement party for Prince Julius and myself had, of course, been called off. Besides, I didn’t do well at parties. I wasn’t sociable; I never knew what to talk about. As Prince Julius said, I was dull. In festive situations, I just wound up feeling out of place.

As I was lost in these thoughts, the welcome party began. I sighed to myself. Time to be a wallflower...

“Hey! How’s the salad? Good, right?”

As I was nibbling at my salad, a handsome blond man struck up a conversation with me. He must be one of the church’s associates, I decided.

Before I could respond, he continued. “I grew all those vegetables myself! It wasn’t easy with the drought we’ve been having this year.”

He was a farmer? So the guests weren’t just church officials.

“Is that so?” I said. “Give me two or three days, and I can increase the rainfall here.” Controlling the weather used to be difficult for me, but I’d slowly gotten the hang of it.

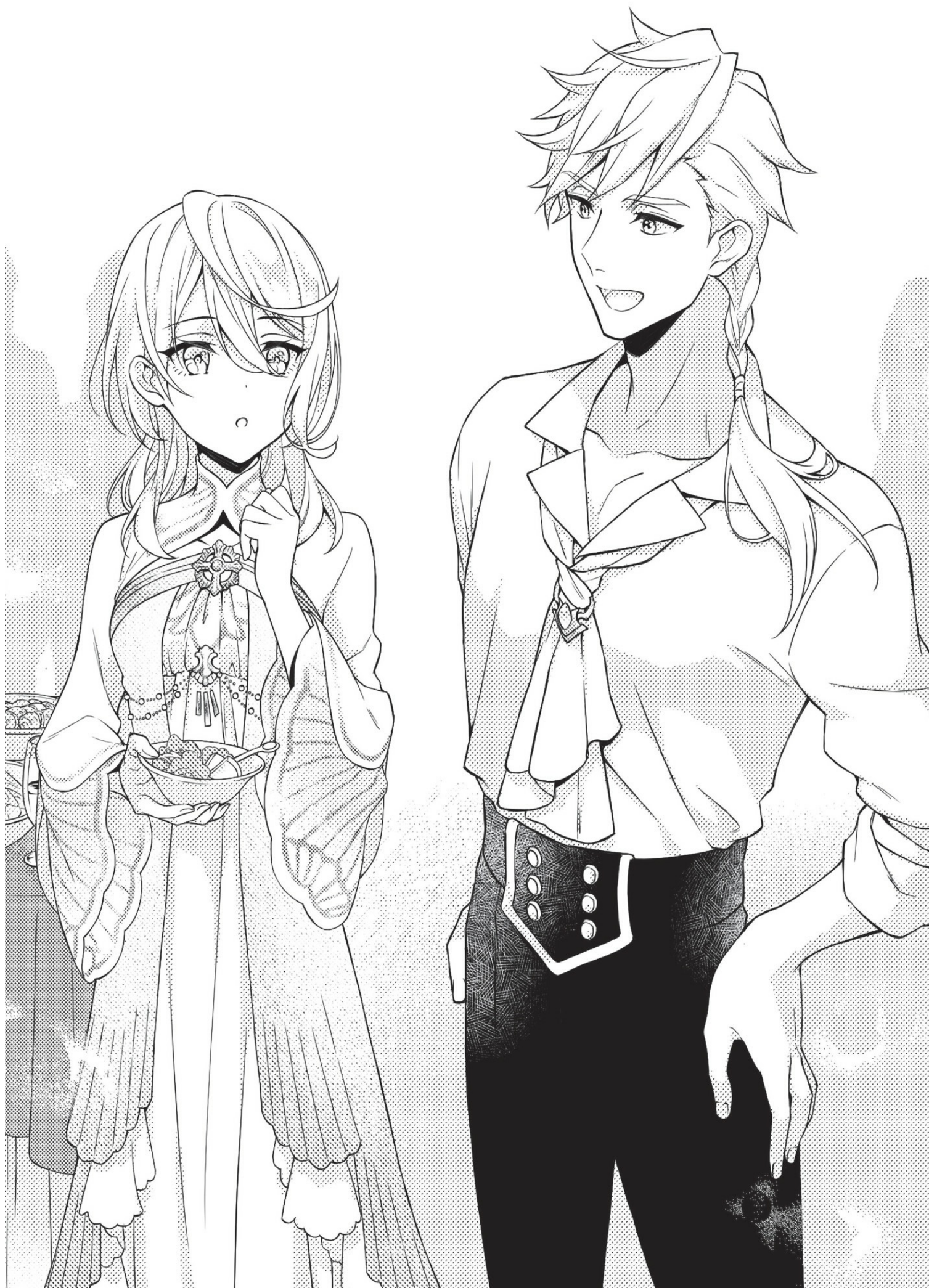
“Wow, really? It’s true what they say. Saints really are something else, huh? In that case, I’ll work twice as hard to get the crops ready!”

“You seem to be having quite the lively conversation, Prince Osvalt,” Bishop Bjorn remarked.

Wait... Prince Osvalt? As I recalled, that was the name of Parnacorta’s second-eldest prince.

I had to ask. “Bishop Bjorn...is this man His Highness, Prince Osvalt?”

“It is as you say, my lady.”



His Highness beamed in response. “Nice meeting you! I’ll be counting on you, Saint Philia.”

It was the first day of my new life in Parnacorta, and my welcome party was already proving a surprise in more ways than one.

After chattering away about vegetables, Prince Osvalt suddenly turned serious. “Listen, I should apologize for the undignified way you ended up here. As if an esteemed saint like you could be bought! It’s just that we lost our only saint, so we had to jump on Girtonia’s proposal.” He lowered his head in a deep bow.

I was flummoxed. Never in my life could I have imagined a member of a royal family bowing to a nobody from another kingdom.

Prince Julius had said that Girtonia approached Parnacorta with the offer to sell me, lending credence to my suspicion that it had been his idea from the start. After all, I was in the way of his plan to marry Mia.

“You must have left family and friends behind,” said Prince Osvalt. “We’ve all sworn to make life as easy as possible for you here, but there’s no way we can make up for what you’ve sacrificed. All I can offer for now are nice-sounding words, but I’ll work hard to make you fall in love with this kingdom. Someday, I hope I can repay you for coming here. But let’s talk about that some other time. This is a night for celebration.”

Prince Osvalt wanted me to love this kingdom... Come to think of it, did I love my homeland? It was where I was born and raised, and it was the land I had protected for so long...but I couldn’t say I loved it. I loved my sister Mia. I didn’t harbor feelings like that for Girtonia. Perhaps no one there had ever loved me because I hadn’t been able to love them.

With or without love, however, as long as I was the saint of Parnacorta, I intended to do my duty.

Bishop Bjorn explained Parnacorta’s circumstances to me. “Up to the very end, Prince Osvalt opposed the idea of paying another kingdom for a saint. He got into a rather heated argument with Crown Prince Reichardt over the

matter. But our kingdom is surrounded by monster-infested mountains. Noble ideals are well and good, but having a saint to protect us is a matter of life and death. Ultimately, Prince Osvalt agreed to purchase you, but he feels quite guilty about it.”

I had indeed felt the presence of large monster dens as I crossed the mountains. I had the impression that Parnacorta was a wealthy kingdom with much more abundant resources than Girtonia, but its geography put it in constant peril.

The welcome party ended without a hitch, and a carriage, apparently arranged for by the king of Parnacorta, arrived to take me home. On the ride there, I reflected on the fact that from the age of five to my engagement to Prince Julius, I’d spent hardly any time at home with my family.

My mother felt that as the firstborn daughter of the Adenauer family, I should undergo training in sainthood right away. I was sent off to be raised by the church. From that day, I was subjected to an education so harsh I barely had time to sleep. I think my parents told Mia that I lived at the church because I wanted to.

I still had no idea why my parents put me through such hardship. All I’d ever known was that to them, I was a nuisance. So when I finally returned to the family estate to prepare for my marriage to Prince Julius, I didn’t really feel like I was home.

“Lady Philia, this is the estate where you will be living from now on.”

I gazed up at a mansion easily twice the size of my family’s estate. Surely there was some mistake. “Isn’t it a bit too big for someone living alone?”

This can’t be. Whatever the case, this place is too large...

“We chose a residence of this size for you because we thought you might need butlers and maids to help you settle into your new life. And, of course, once you make friends here, you’ll have plenty of space for entertaining. If there’s anything you find lacking here, don’t hesitate to contact me so we can

make the necessary arrangements for you.”

That was the moment when all of Prince Osvalt’s talk about making life easy for me finally sank in. It was entirely unlike the treatment I’d been accustomed to.

Even if they hadn’t plied me with luxuries, I fully intended to work tirelessly for my new kingdom. It would spell disaster for the people and the current peace if my motivation ever flagged. On the one hand, I was grateful, but on the other, I felt immense pressure.

In any case, keeping my body in top condition was of utmost importance. I wasn’t used to a bed as soft and fluffy as the one I found here, but I had to get enough sleep. I closed my eyes and focused my energies on resting, reminding myself that sleep would help me recover and reach peak condition. The kindness with which I’d been treated so far helped, putting my mind at ease.

My new duties would start tomorrow. I concentrated on being ready to give it all I had.

I rose at my usual hour, well before sunrise.

“Lady Philia!” a servant exclaimed. “Where are you off to so early in the morning?”

“Huh? I have work to do,” I answered, confused.

A saint’s work is essential to the safety and prosperity of her kingdom. I had to start bright and early if I wanted to wrap up all the tasks on my list for today. Was that so strange?

“I’d better get a look at my new kingdom...”

It was still dim outside as I unfurled a map of Parnacorta. The sun seemed to rise rather late here, no doubt because the kingdom was surrounded by mountains.

“What are you planning to do with that map?” asked Leonardo, a narrow-eyed butler whose black hair was streaked with white.

“Nothing to worry about,” I assured him. “I’m trying to narrow down the most likely spots for monster dens.”

“I see, I see. I wouldn’t think you could glean that much from a map, but I should have expected as much of an extraordinary saint like Lady Philia.”

I’d been taken aback by Leonardo’s question. Until then, no one had taken interest in the tedious details of a saint’s work. But it was only logical that the staff would be ordered to keep tabs on me. After all, I was an outsider. If I were up to any suspicious business, they would report me at once. I couldn’t blame them.

“Excuse me, Lady Philia. I brought you some tea to keep you alert throughout the day.”

“Er...did I ask for tea?”

The maid, whose chestnut hair was tied in two pigtails, introduced herself as fifteen-year-old Lena. Nervously, she offered to take the tea tray away. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Do you prefer to drink something else in the morning? Please let me know how I can serve you!”

I hardly knew what to say. No one had made tea for me before, and I certainly didn’t know what else to order. Why would she do this for me?

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “Sure, I’ll have some tea. Ah, nice and hot...”

I checked the map as I sipped the tea. For the time being, I estimated the area I could protect in a day’s work and brainstormed ideas to improve my efficiency. My pen flew, scrawling calculations.

At last I headed to the front gate, eager to get to work. But why were Leonardo and Lena following me?

When I asked them, they said things like “We serve Lady Philia in all areas of her life,” and “Please let us support you as you work.”

Did they intend to wait on me all day long? I couldn’t believe it. Perhaps the kingdom was more desperate than I’d imagined to preserve the life of its only saint.

Well, never mind. My first stop was a mountain in northernmost Parnacorta. While the carriage made its way over the countryside, I finished formulating a recipe for an effective cure to an epidemic sweeping the land, and stopped in a village to hand it over to the local apothecary.

“Lady Philia,” he exclaimed as he looked over my notes, “you understand medicine? You truly are the greatest saint of all time! I had no idea this was part of a saint’s job.”

“It isn’t?”

“Er, well...not that I know of...”

I’d been taught that a saint’s role was to ameliorate any distress a kingdom experienced. To that end, I’d studied a wide range of disciplines, including medicine, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and architecture.

Come to think of it, though...when I was coming up with new medicines in Girtonia, Prince Julius had told me, “The royal apothecary complained about getting snide remarks from his colleagues. Don’t show up people at their jobs.” It was just another thing that made me unlikable.

Finally, after a long journey, we reached our destination.

“The monster den here is larger than I expected,” I said. “Please stay back.”

From the foot of the mountain, I could sense the presence of many monsters. I’d been concerned about this issue since my arrival, but only now did I understand just how serious the infestation was. If I’d delayed for even a day or two, monsters might have swarmed the kingdom.

“We’ll need four,” I muttered to myself. “No, eight.”

To create a holy sanctuary, which would serve as a barrier against evil, I had to surround the area with Sacred Pillars of Light. The more Pillars a barrier had, the more powerful it became, but it took about thirty minutes of prayer to create a single Pillar. In other words, I’d be praying for at least four hours.

Kneeling, I clasped both hands in prayer. Soon, the clouds covering the sky began to part. Light streamed down upon me.

Behind me, I heard Leonardo gasp. “Amazing! I never thought a Pillar of Light could be created so quickly. It took your predecessor, and her predecessor before her, half a day to raise one.”

It had taken me that long in the past. My mother had scolded me for being a dimwit, so I’d prayed for a grueling three straight days and three nights to improve my speed.

Four hours passed. Now surrounded by eight Pillars of Light, the mountain was covered in a pale silver glow.

After sealing the northernmost mountain, I called Leonardo and Lena over. “This barrier will contain the monsters lurking in the mountains. Even if someone happens to run into them, they’ll be weakened to the point that they can’t cause any harm.”

“Thank you so much, my lady,” said Leonardo. “Now, why don’t we head back to the carriage?”

It had been a while since I’d raised eight Pillars in a row, so I was a bit tired. But there was still much to do. “No, I must study the local ecosystem. Understanding how the monsters survive here will help us in the future. Then we’ll head to the westernmost mountain to create a similar barrier.”

If we didn’t hurry, these tasks would drag on to the next day. I cursed my lack of efficiency, but with my middling talent, this was the best I could do.

“I’m sorry for keeping you this late.”

I managed to wrap up my first set of tasks as the saint of Parnacorta just before a new day began. I’d hoped to cast some more barriers and summon the rain as I’d promised Prince Osvalt, but Leonardo and Lena stopped me from doing any more work. They told me a number of things I wasn’t used to hearing, saying that I’d already pushed myself to the brink casting the first barrier, and that my body wouldn’t be able to take any more.

“You’re already working five times as hard as our previous saint,” said

Leonardo, “and you’re even working on things that are outside a saint’s scope, like medicines and dam blueprints!”

“If you force yourself to keep at it, you’ll fall ill,” Lena agreed. “No matter how much we begged, you barely took a single break.”

I noticed tears welling up in the corners of their eyes. What were they worried about? As a saint, I was expected to treat my body as a temple, so I took great care of my health. Except for a few times when I was young, I’d never been sick. I could use recovery magic and meditation to banish the worst of my fatigue, so a quick fifteen-minute rest was enough to keep me going for the rest of the day.

Still, I figured I shouldn’t keep them out with me for too long. I decided to heed their advice and call it a day.

As soon as we got home, both Leonardo and Lena urged me to rest the next day.

“Why don’t we take tomorrow off? Lady Philia, you can’t go on like this!”

“I have word that the royal family was shocked by the way you worked,” said Leonardo. “They’d like you to set aside a day to rest and take care of yourself.”

“Rest? A saint can’t rest! It would be detrimental to the national interest.”

The very idea!

I remembered the danger this kingdom was in. If I took even a day off, monsters could wreak havoc and cause inestimable harm.

“Lady Philia’s health comes before the national interest!”

“Don’t push yourself too hard! This place is still new to you!”

Still, I insisted. “This kingdom is in a precarious state. If nothing else, I need to raise barriers in the east and south tomorrow. As a saint, I can’t compromise on that. You two can take a break, though. I don’t mind.”

I knew that most people found it difficult to work from before dawn to after midnight. Thanks to my training, I could go without sleep for a full week, but it would be exhausting for people like Leonardo and Lena to follow me around.

That was why I usually worked alone, and from the next day forward, I decided, that was how it would be in Parnacorta.

But Leonardo and Lena looked appalled by the suggestion.

“That’s not going to happen!” Leonardo declared. “As a butler born and bred, I can’t take it easy while my young mistress is throwing herself into her work.”

“I agree,” Lena chimed in. “As a maid, I can’t possibly turn a blind eye to my mistress’s needs!”

I didn’t understand their reasoning at all, but it was clear they would both be joining me the next day. If that was the case, all I could do was put in my best effort.

“Saint Heal!”

I held Leonardo’s and Lena’s hands and cast a healing spell on them. I’d invented it myself for strength, nourishment, and recovery from fatigue. It could even treat chronic aches such as lower back pain and stiff shoulders. It was supposed to help people relax, but Prince Julius had rejected the idea. He’d told me no one would like it because it would cut into the business at spas and hot springs.

“Incredible!” Leonardo exclaimed. “I feel as if I’m in the bloom of youth! I’m bursting with energy! What kind of magic is this?”

“Mr. Leonardo, your hair’s pitch-black!” Lena pointed out. “Oh, this feels so good! What a relief. It’s like I just got up from a good night’s sleep.”

From that day on, the two of them accompanied me as I fulfilled my saintly duties. I worried that I was accomplishing less than I had in Girtonia, yet everything I did for Parnacorta was met with cheers and thanks.

For example, Parnacorta was known for the strength and impeccable training of its knights, but battling monsters had diminished their numbers. The military was pleased by the protective barriers I cast. Back in Girtonia, I’d been told that I was taking away the soldiers’ jobs. It was a relief to be of help at last.

Yet even as I grew accustomed to my new life, the more I studied the monster

nests, the more signs I saw that disaster was on the horizon.

“All of this...points to the worst possible outcome.”

I recorded the size of the monster dens surrounding the kingdom and the ferocity of recent monster attacks. Comparing these statistics with my own previous notes and those from ancient manuscripts, I came up with a hypothesis.

Perhaps for the first time in 400 years...

“Is something the matter, Lady Philia?” Lena asked as she fought off werewolves and death grizzlies without breaking a sweat. “You have such a grave expression on your face.” My prayers had weakened the monsters inside the barrier, but Lena’s skills were impressive nonetheless. She was adept at hitting the creatures’ vital points with a single blow.

Leonardo was no pushover, either, overpowering the monsters with formidable kicks. In our weeks together, I’d come to realize that they weren’t just my butler and maid, but also my bodyguards.

“I don’t have any definite proof yet,” I replied, “but the Demon Realm may be approaching the surface.” In the course of my archeology research, I’d learned that once every few centuries, the Demon Realm—the habitat of the demonic monsters I was charged with subduing—crept closer to the surface world of humanity. These eras were heralded by a drastic increase in monster activity.

The current state of the world closely mirrored that of the last such era, 400 years ago. In other words, we would need to prepare for an all-out monster invasion.

“That sounds like a big deal! So that’s why you’ve been surrounding the kingdom with new barriers...”

“That’s right. I’m sure people are annoyed at me for ruining the scenery with Pillars of Light, but I believe that human lives take precedence.”

Leonardo, just back from subduing monsters of his own, looked startled. “The

scenery? I hardly believe anyone cares about that. This is a potential crisis. I'll report it to the royal family immediately."

I wasn't too keen on that. "I'm afraid I don't have conclusive evidence that the Demon Realm is drawing near. It's just a prediction, based on the data."

"What are you talking about, Lady Philia? Do you have any idea how many people have been saved by your wisdom in the brief time that you've been with us? Even if it turns out you're being overcautious, better safe than sorry, don't you think? No one would blame you for being concerned."

I couldn't share Leonardo's confidence. "I'm glad you think so, but as a saint, I can't overstep my bounds."

Lena's gentle voice reassured me. "Don't worry, my lady! All humans make mistakes. Even you, Lady Philia, are a human being before you're a saint. You don't have to be all-knowing. Besides, this is exactly the sort of problem the kingdom should unite to solve!"

I had to admit she was right. We needed to develop preventative measures as soon as possible. And if I turned out to be mistaken, surely I could sincerely apologize and take full responsibility.

Leonardo informed the royal family that the Demon Realm might be encroaching on our world for the first time in four centuries. That very day, Prince Osvalt set up a countermeasures task force. I was a bit surprised by how quickly he sprang to action, never having expected him to act so quickly on my inconclusive information.

In any case, I had to explain my predictions. Compiling my archival research and current observations, I drew up a report on the possible impending approach of the Demon Realm.

"So what can we expect as the Demon Realm approaches our world?"

In the royal palace's grand conference hall, His Highness Prince Osvalt, second-eldest prince of the kingdom of Parnacorta, had gathered experts from

all fields and key political and military figures to discuss preparations for a hypothetical Demon Realm encroachment in the near future. I'd been invited to speak at the conference, so I'd brought materials to demonstrate the types of dangers we could potentially face.

Back in Girtonia, I'd come up with some proposals to curb monster activity. But when I tried to bring them up, my father sharply rebuked me, saying, "Don't be such a meddlesome woman." Since then, I'd held back from expressing myself in public.

That was why, when I was first approached regarding this conference, I'd declined politely and sent my research to the palace. But when His Highness learned of my decision not to participate, he went out of his way to visit my mansion late one night. Bowing to me, he pleaded with me to attend. "Lady Philia, I would like to hear your honest opinions as a saint. I beg you...please, for the sake of this kingdom, lend me your strength."

After that, I couldn't decline a second time. That was how I found myself standing before an audience in the royal conference hall, with His Highness asking for my thoughts.

Speaking a little too quickly in my nervousness, I described major monster incursions of the past and what might happen in the future. "I don't exactly know the details, but around 400 years ago, the monster population suddenly exploded by ten-to twentyfold. Humanity was decimated. Entire kingdoms were obliterated. I'm attempting to protect the kingdom by erecting Holy Sanctuaries with Pillars of Light, but if large numbers of monster dens spawn within them, even those barriers could be destroyed."

Of course, this was all uncertain. According to my research, this phenomenon occurred in cycles every few centuries, but there could be deviations from the predicted pattern. It was also possible that nothing would happen at all.

"Ten times the number of monsters, huh?" Prince Osvalt frowned. "This is beyond the level of a national crisis. For now, I say we triple the national defense budget."

He said he would spare no expense when it came to funding the necessary

countermeasures. The Prime Minister, who managed the domestic budget, had an uneasy look on his face, as if he had to say something that His Highness might not want to hear. Still, he managed to call for some restraint on spending.

“Your Highness,” he ventured, “I must say that this year’s budget is already rather tight. Should we really spend so freely on the basis of an uncertainty?”

The Prime Minister was a voice of reason. To take a large amount of money out of the national treasury at the words of an outsider like me... It was perfectly understandable to oppose such a decision.

While hoping that no harm would befall the kingdom, His Highness emphasized the need to do our utmost to avoid regrettable missteps. “You don’t understand. Can’t you see that nothing happening is the best possible outcome? Let’s act now to prevent disaster in the future. We don’t want to wait until it’s too late and cry about how we could’ve done this or that. I’ll take full responsibility for figuring out how to rebalance the budget. But I’m saying this now: I won’t budge on this, especially after Lady Philia put so much work into warning us.”

How could he speak with such easy confidence? Didn’t he fear the consequences? If I was wrong and this turned out to be wasteful spending, not even his royal title would save him from censure.

“That’s settled, then,” His Highness continued. “As a provisional measure, we’ll increase our forces. Lady Philia, do you think this many additional soldiers will help?”

The commander of the Knights of Parnacorta and other military heads hurried over to Prince Osvalt to provide counsel. His Highness jotted down a number of additional troops and their deployments on a map, which he then showed to me. Once again, I was taken aback. This would be too massive a force for all-out war. Something else nagged at me.

“Simply recruiting more infantry won’t solve the problem,” I said. “Countless soldiers could lose their lives for nothing.”

“Unfortunately, this is the best we can do. As it is, we’ll have to dip into next year’s budget to make ends meet.”

If the Holy Sanctuaries were breached, we would be facing more powerful and ferocious monsters than I'd ever encountered. A slapdash, half-trained army, no matter how large, would be crushed. The Knights of Parnacorta were famous around the world for their swordsmanship, but swords could only do so much against hordes of monsters.

Nonetheless, Prince Osvalt impressed me. He'd demonstrated leadership by putting the kingdom's safety over his political interests. I'd never met anyone like him before.

I was still worried about Mia, and also a bit concerned for my homeland. But I had a kingdom to protect. I was the saint of Parnacorta, and the mandate of heaven decreed that I put its safety first. I made up my mind.

"There is a way. It will be a burden on the kingdom, but it's the only feasible option I can think of."

All heads turned to me.

"What are you suggesting?" His Highness asked.

"I will cast a Great Purification Circle over the entire kingdom. If all of Parnacorta is under holy protection, all monsters that dare enter will be severely weakened."

The Great Purification Circle was the most powerful ritual I'd learned for handling a large influx of monsters. It was a protective circle on a massive scale, capable of exclusively targeting demonic creatures. It couldn't stop monsters from entering, but its purifying magic would neutralize their powers, making them easy to exterminate.

If I could enclose the kingdom in this circle, soldiers could clear the land of monsters with little or no danger.

There was just one problem.

"To cast this circle over all of Parnacorta, I must be within a radius of ten kilometers from the center of the kingdom at all times. In other words, I would be unable to leave the royal capital."

This was why I hesitated to use this technique.

Being confined to the capital would severely limit me as a saint. I wouldn't be able to perform many of my usual duties, such as gathering medicinal herbs and creating fertile ground for crops. Considering how much the kingdom had paid for my services, the people were bound to be displeased if their new saint suddenly stopped working for them.

This also meant I would be unable to visit my homeland, Girtonia. Even if it were plagued by monsters, I couldn't return home to help. I hoped Mia and the Girtonian army would be able to get by without me, but I couldn't help but worry.

Still, I was now the saint of Parnacorta, and I had to propose the option that would best protect my kingdom. Surely the council would reject the idea anyway, once it was clear how much the kingdom would lose by keeping me glued to the capital.

But Prince Osvalt nodded thoughtfully. "We could work with that. You've already done so much for us, Lady Philia. This could be a chance for you to take a well-earned break. Unless maintaining the circle would be too tiring..."

"No. Once I invoke the ritual, it won't draw much of my energy. It's just that my range of movement will be limited to the circle's core."

Most rituals were like that. Invocation was the difficult part; after that, it just took a small, steady supply of magic to keep the spell running. At any rate, I didn't understand why the people of Parnacorta were always telling me to take it easy. I didn't feel at ease sitting around with nothing to do.

How should I proceed?

If I cast the purification circle, I'd certainly have more free time. But I remained anxious for Mia, the sister I left behind in my homeland.

I had become Parnacorta's saint. I couldn't cast barriers for Girtonia. But every time the thought of Mia in danger crossed my mind, I was beside myself with worry...

“Something wrong? Why the long face?” Prince Osvalt asked.

“Oh... I was just thinking of my younger sister back home. She’s a fine saint in her own right, but she doesn’t have any knowledge of ancient rituals. She can’t cast a Great Purification Circle.”

“You’re afraid she won’t be able to handle the approach of the Demon Realm?”

“I apologize, Your Highness. As the saint of Parnacorta, I shouldn’t concern myself with another kingdom’s safety.” Why couldn’t I stop myself from worrying? Once again, I was failing at my duties. I ought to leave Girtonia’s interests to Mia...no, to Prince Julius and the rest of the government, and yet...

“Hey, no need to apologize. Saint Mia is your younger sister, right? What big sister wouldn’t worry about her little sibling?”

“Prince Osvalt...”

“I have an older brother,” said Prince Osvalt. “Royal responsibilities aside, I want to help and support him, as his brother. You’re a human being first, saint second, right? If there’s anything you can do for your sister, go ahead.”

A human being first? Before coming to Parnacorta, I’d never dared think such a thing. Of course, I knew that Prince Osvalt had an older brother, but it was a new relief to learn that he wanted to be a pillar of strength for that brother, just as I wanted to protect my sister.

“I suppose you’re right,” I said. “In that case, may I write her a letter? I’ll share the countermeasures I’ve developed for Parnacorta. Or shall I refrain from sharing information that would benefit another kingdom?”

“Why would you even think that? You said that Lady Mia is a fine saint in her own right. If you share your knowledge with her, I’m sure she’ll be able to come up with her own plans. I know we paid Girtonia handsomely in exchange for you, much as I hate to admit it—but they might have their own ways of dealing with this situation, different from ours.”

“I hope so. If Girtonia acts quickly and with national unity, they should be able to mitigate the potential danger.” I was sure it wasn’t too late, especially if the people rallied around Mia. She had won their love and support as I never had.

With Prince Osvalt's permission secured, I wrote to Mia, advising her to survey the kingdom and formulate appropriate measures against the rising of the Demon Realm. I sent the letter along with a prayer for her safety.

"The preparations are complete."

I had raised sixteen Pillars of Light at key locations along Parnacorta's borders and affixed talismans soaked in my blood. All that was left was to recite an archaic incantation and offer a prayer to God at the altar of the cathedral in the royal capital.

"Remarkable. To see an ancient ritual performed so splendidly—I made the right decision, after all, to propose bringing Saint Philia to my kingdom!"

I was interrupted at the altar by a tall man with long, flowing blond hair who strode into the cathedral as if he owned it. As he approached me, church officials bowed their heads, one after the other.

"Prince Reichardt!" cried Bishop Bjorn. "Had I known you would grace us with your presence, I would have prepared for the occasion."

So this was His Highness Prince Reichardt, Crown Prince of Parnacorta. Prince Osvalt's older brother...

"The fault is entirely mine," said the prince. "I apologize for dropping by without advance warning. I'd planned to say hello to our new protector much sooner, but only now have I finally found the time."

"Of course, sire," said the bishop. "But if you'd informed me of your plans, I could've baked a cake for you."

"That's a shame. In that case, I'll have to stop by again."

With this small talk completed, His Highness finally turned to me. "It's an honor to meet such an extraordinary saint. Your reputation precedes you."

"Not at all," I stammered. "I'm nothing special. You honor me by speaking to me."

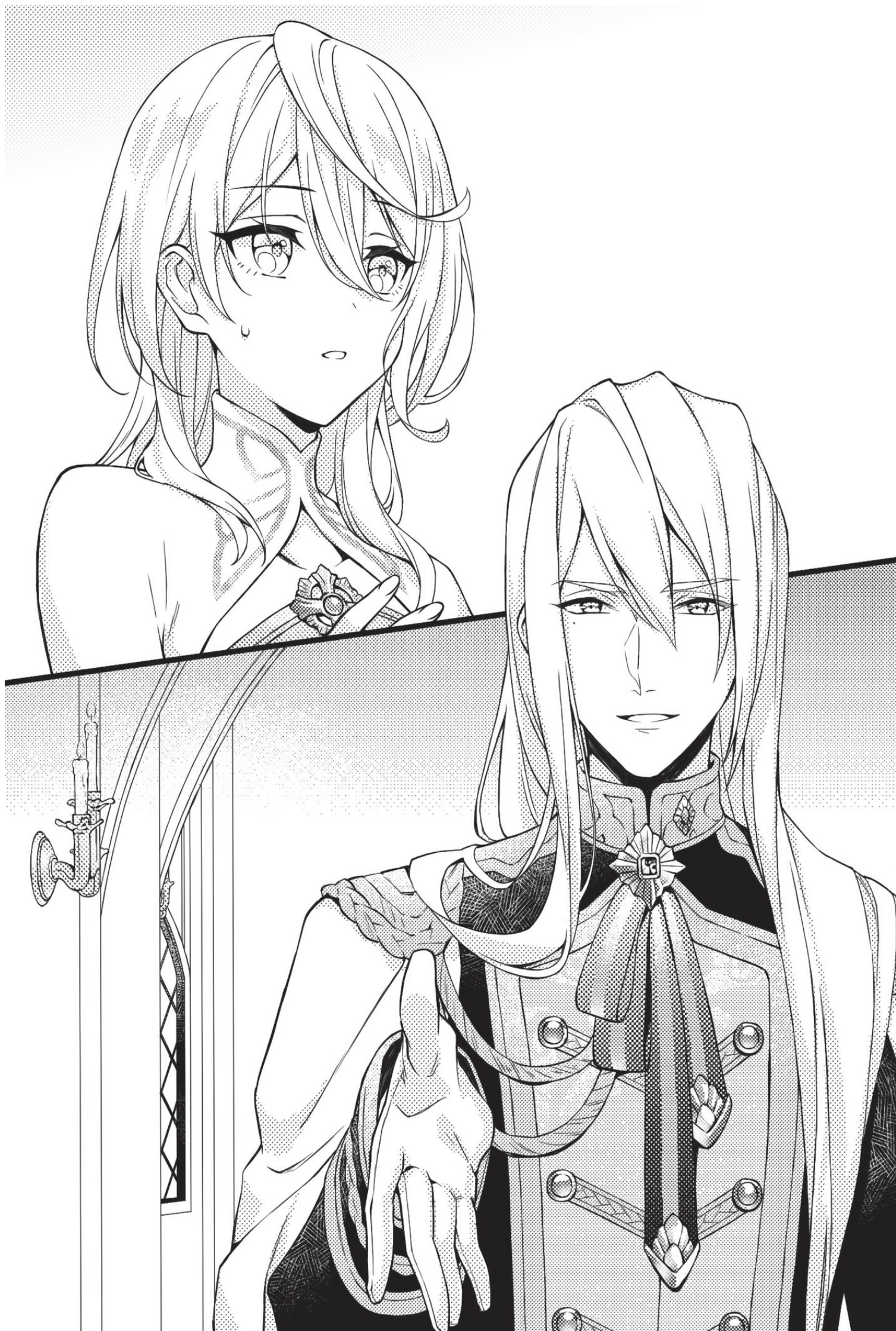
Prince Reichardt responded with a gracious smile and extended a hand for me to shake. He and Prince Osvalt might be brothers, but I sensed that their

personalities couldn't be more different. The crown prince, in particular, had an almost androgynous elegance to him...

“Well then, I leave the well-being of this kingdom in your hands.”

After Prince Reichardt took his leave, I returned to work. Kneeling at the altar, I began to invoke the ritual to cast the Great Purification Circle. From this moment on, I would be unable to leave the capital.

“Lady Philia! I've gathered the herbs you asked for!”



Lena, my maid and bodyguard, held up a basket of medicinal herbs. Seeing her, I was reminded of foraging for herbs with Mia back in Girtonia. I'd asked a traveling peddler how Girtonia was doing; so far, it seemed, Mia was holding the kingdom together.

"Thank you," I said. "Now we can create new medicines."

After casting the Great Purification Circle, I left the extermination of monsters to the Knights of Parnacorta. Unable to leave the capital, I suddenly found myself with an abundance of free time. For the moment, I'd decided to focus on formulating new medicines and refining the existing recipes. Doing nothing made me deeply uncomfortable—I just couldn't get used to it.

"Um, what kind of medicine is this?"

"Oh, this? It's for corns—those lumps on your feet, see?" I'd been studying this condition for a while now, and the treatment was becoming more effective.

"Huh...I didn't know medicine could help with that. Would you like some more tea?"

"Yes, please. Now, apply this poultice, and the corn will come off cleanly the next morning."

Lena was helpful, attentive, and great at making tea.

"I've wondered about this for a while, but...Lady Philia, do you have any hobbies?"

Hobbies? Activities to fill free time? I thought about it. Mia enjoyed going to the theater to see plays and operas. She was keen on music as well. She invited me along a few times, and it was pleasant enough. But whenever I had free time, I generally looked for some way to make myself useful. I didn't know much about entertainment. It was probably part of what Prince Julius had found charmless about me.

"None, really," I said at last. "If anything, I suppose reading might count. I like studying ancient tomes, combing through scholarly texts, doing my own analyses..."

"Oh, I like to read too! Mostly romance and mystery novels."

N-novels? In other words, fiction. Literature produced solely for entertainment. The closest I'd come to that sort of thing was reading picture books to Mia when we were children, before I was sent to live with the church.

"Lady Philia, I'll lend you some of my favorites!" Lena's smile disarmed me. "If you can read those enormous old books, you'll breeze right through my recommendations. They're lots of fun for killing time!"

No one had offered to loan me anything before. I felt a warmth build in my chest.

"Lunch is ready, my lady." Leonardo, my butler and bodyguard, called out to the front walk where Lena and I were chatting.

I'd been enjoying good food since moving to Parnacorta. I could go without food for a week if necessary, but lately I'd been eating three meals a day, not skipping even one. Not only that, but food was starting to taste better.

In Girtonia, whenever things were too busy, I was expected to prioritize work over food. Here, my schedule was comparatively light.

"Sir Leonardo's been cooking a lot lately," Lena explained. "That's his hobby."

"Oh, is that so? I must say...er..." I fumbled for a polite response. What a surprise. They do say that looks can be deceiving, but I never would've imagined that Leonardo had been the one whipping up all those delicious meals.

Perhaps hobbies were useful after all. They could feed your own soul, but also others'.

I finally managed to compliment Leonardo as we enjoyed his homemade creations. Looking back, it occurred to me that in Girtonia I'd never had casual conversations over meals.

"I had no idea you made these fine dishes, Sir Leonardo."

"You embarrass me, my lady. People often say I don't seem like the type, but I quite enjoy spending time in the kitchen. I'm honored to hear that my cuisine suits your palate."

"I wish I enjoyed something that much," I said, envy creeping into my voice.

“Is that so?” said Lena. “I hope, at least, you enjoy these chats as much as I do.”

“You do? But I’m hardly an entertaining conversationalist.”

“It’s so much fun to talk to you! You know so much, Lady Philia. I always learn something new and interesting... I feel like I’m becoming smarter just talking to you. Who wouldn’t enjoy that?”

I was about to say that fun was the last thing that people ought to associate with me, but I knew Lena would argue right back. I said nothing, but I couldn’t hide my surprise. No one had said such a thing about me, so I’d always thought of myself as plain and uninteresting.

“I enjoy my interactions with both of you,” Leonardo added. “It’s my job, of course, but I mean what I say from the bottom of my heart.”

Lena nodded. “We may not be on your conversational level, Lady Philia, but I hope you learn to enjoy our chats too.”

Talking about nothing in particular was fun. Spending time with friends was fun. Both Leonardo and Lena assured me of these things as if they went without saying. Someday, would I be able to let my guard down and feel the same way?

Another maid approached the table. “Lady Philia, a letter from Girtonia has arrived.” It was from Mia. I opened it at once, eager to see my sister’s response to my warning about the rising Demon Realm.

The contents left me reeling.

I’d warned Mia about the looming threat that the Demon Realm posed, but I couldn’t have prepared myself for this.

I couldn’t hide my shock.

“What can I do?” I gasped.

In my letter to Mia, I’d laid out the worst-case scenario my research had suggested, as well as potential ways to handle it. But it was clear from her letter that she hadn’t read mine.

Fortunately, she'd figured out herself that something was wrong from the rise in monster activity in Girtonia. In her letter, she seemed confident that I would be able to explain everything. She also mentioned that it was strange not to hear from me since my departure.

I may be biased, because Mia is my younger sister, but I've always respected her sharp intuition. She'd sensed trouble and taken the initiative to reach out.

But why hadn't she received my letter? I guessed that Father or Mother—or, more likely, both of them—had intercepted it. As hard as it was for me to understand, they were bent on cutting off contact between their daughters.

Sending another letter would likely be a wasted effort.

But if my predictions were right, it wouldn't be long until the Demon Realm reached our world, so there was no time to spare. I had to think of another way to deliver a warning to Mia.

"Lady Philia, is something troubling you?" Leonardo approached as I muttered fretfully to myself. "If you need someone to lend an ear, you can tell me anything."

I was reluctant to burden him with my problems, but I was out of ideas. I opened up and told him the entire story. Lena joined us and listened as well.

Leonardo stroked his chin. "Are you sure the letter to your sister was deliberately intercepted?"

"I wish I knew exactly what happened, but there's no time to find out."

Leonardo and Lena went silent as they thought this over. At last Lena spoke up. "Hey, Mr. Leonardo. Miss Himari can make absolutely sure that the letter reaches Lady Mia, can't she?"

"I was thinking the same thing. Surely no one else is better suited for the job."

Himari was one of the maids working at the mansion. I found her name unusual, but Lena had explained that she came from a small, far-off island kingdom called Murasame. She was petite, wore her black hair tied back in a ponytail, and said little.

Why Leonardo and Lena would bring her up, I had no idea. "You think Himari

should deliver a letter to Girtonia? Why?”

I couldn't wrap my mind around the idea of a maid delivering mail. Mia was probably surrounded by more bodyguards than I'd ever had when I was a saint of Girtonia. No one from another kingdom would be able to approach her easily. And if Himari was arrested, it could trigger an international incident.

“Don't worry, Lady Philia. Miss Himari can go anywhere with ease. You see, she's a ninja.”

“A ninja?” I'd come across the word before.

From what I recalled, ninjas lived in the Murasame Kingdom and were masters of stealth and espionage. I'd only encountered mentions of them in historical texts.

“As Lena said,” Leonardo added, “Himari is quite capable. Like Lena and myself, she is under direct orders from the Parnacorta royal family to guard you.”

“G-guard? But, unlike the two of you, I don't see her around much...”

What did he mean by that? He said she guarded me, as he did, but I only ever saw her infrequently...

Lena turned and shouted into the air. “Miss Himari! Lady Philia wants you!”

No sooner had Lena called than Himari suddenly materialized from the wall right in front of me. How long had she been there?

“Himari, you heard what Lady Philia said. Do you think you can deliver a letter to her sister, Lady Mia?”

“Of course.” Himari knelt on one knee before me and bowed her head in reverence. “In the name of the Fuuma clan, I will see this mission through. Lady Philia, my mistress, do not hesitate to command me.”

So Himari had been by my side all this time, even while I was carrying out my saintly duties. I hadn't noticed her at all. She truly was a master of stealth.

I made a silent note to hone my detection skills. Monsters often attacked via ambush, and I clearly needed to be more aware of my surroundings.

“Well then, Miss Himari, could you please deliver this letter to my sister Mia? But don’t put yourself in danger. If there’s any chance that you might be caught, don’t hesitate to make your escape.”

“As my lady wishes. I will deliver this letter from my mistress, even at the cost of my life.”

As soon as I handed her the letter, Himari vanished from the room.

It was extremely risky for someone to approach another kingdom’s saint unannounced, but we were racing against time. *Please, may Himari be able to reach Mia.*

I offered a prayer to God for Himari’s and Mia’s safety.

After Himari left, Lena was in high spirits. “So,” she asked as she poured more tea, “what’s Lady Mia like? Is she a beauty like her big sister? I bet she is!”

Was she really that curious? Well, some people took an interest in saint-producing families...

“People have always praised her beauty,” I said. “She’s also quite charming. She can get along with anyone. Back in Girtonia, she has the hearts of all the people.”

“But Lady Philia, you’re the greatest saint of all time! They must be wild about you, too.”

“Oh no, not at all. I started my saintly training at a much younger age than Mia did. That’s the only reason my skills are more developed. Sainthood came naturally to Mia. I still remember the day her powers emerged. The first time we set out to do our saintly duties...”

Starting from a young age, I lived a life of holy solitude, enduring rigorous training from my parents and my aunt, who had been Girtonia’s chief saint before me. It took ten years for my powers to develop.

Mia, on the other hand, made her debut as a saint after only six months of training. We saw each other from time to time, but didn’t really get to know

each other until we began working together as saints.

Mia was unmistakably a prodigy. It took her no time at all to grasp things. It worried me that her training period had been short, but those worries dissipated the first day I saw her in action.

I doubled down on my saintly work to set a good example, after that. I didn't want my sister to be disappointed in me.

All I ever wanted was to keep walking the path of sainthood ahead of her, making sure the way was clear. Whenever I felt discouraged, I remembered Mia looking up at me with shining eyes and saying, "Philia, you're the best! I always knew you were. I swear, someday, I'll become a saint like you."

Oh, Mia. How had she fared since I left Girtonia?

Chapter 2:

The Danger Encroaching Her Homeland

Mia

UNTIL RECENTLY, the kingdom of Girtonia had two saints. I was one of them, while the other was my sister, who was a year old than me: Philia Adenauer.

There's no question Philia was a prodigy. Her knowledge of sainthood and mastery of holy spells went beyond what any saint in history has achieved. I'll never catch up to her. Put simply, she's perfect. I refuse to believe there's anything she can't do.

I can cast barriers, sure, but not as well as Philia can. She's definitely more powerful than the kingdom's last two saints, our now-retired aunt and our grandmother. In just a few years as Girtonia's chief saint, she built a reputation to match that power.

What's really amazing about my sister is that she's never limited herself to the usual responsibilities of a saint. She devotes herself to uplifting people's lives in all ways. She conducts research in fields I can barely understand, concocts new medicines, studies monster ecology, and develops agricultural programs.

I respected Philia wholeheartedly. And when she announced her engagement to His Highness Prince Julius, our kingdom's second-eldest prince, I was so over the moon that I jumped for joy.

With the older sister whom I was proud of well on her way to becoming queen, our kingdom's peace and prosperity were assured.

At least, that was what I thought.

One day, my sister suddenly disappeared from Girtonia without a word. The next thing I knew, people were saying she'd become the saint of the neighboring kingdom of Parnacorta.

When I asked our parents about this, all they would say was that she had left for Parnacorta of her own accord. Apparently, Parnacorta had lost their only saint, and they'd arranged for Philia to fill the gap in exchange for an enormous payout of gold and resources. Although our parents were tight-lipped about it, it looked to me like they'd received quite a lot of that fortune. I couldn't believe it.

In no time, Father was in talks with the capital's most famous architect to build an enormous new mansion, while Mother was buying up jewelry and high-end clothing.

"Is there anything you want?" they'd ask, and I'd suppress the urge to throw up.

How could Philia have agreed to this? How could Father and Mother be so nonchalant?

Sure, Philia had spent most of her life away from home, training to better herself. So maybe she wasn't too attached to us. But still...

I couldn't handle the idea that a saint like Philia, who worked harder than anyone for the sake of our kingdom, could be handed off like merchandise. From time to time, our parents made noises about missing her, but it felt like lip service. I hadn't seen that side of them before, and it made my skin crawl.

Something just wasn't right. Did Philia really abandon the kingdom of her own free will? What happened to her engagement to the prince? I was a lesser saint with no serious commitments, so why hadn't I been the one approached about going to Parnacorta?

That reminded me. When Philia had vanished, His Highness had spoken mournfully about how much he hated to let his beloved fiancée go. Tears had come to his eyes as he talked about prioritizing the kingdom's future over his own happiness. He had to know what had led to Philia becoming a saint in another kingdom.

One day, my parents received word that His Highness would be visiting to celebrate Father's promotion to marquess. I decided to take this opportunity to

seek the truth.

If Philia's decision to go to Parnacorta was fully her own, I'd drop the matter. I'd pledge to be like her, a saint who sacrificed everything for the greater good. I'd do my best to bury my feelings about her and focus on my duties.

I wanted to believe my parents, but my doubts were eating at me. I couldn't ignore those feelings.

I fully intended to approach His Highness and ask about my sister. But before I could say a word, he stepped up to me. "Mia Adenauer, will you be my wife? A sweet, beautiful woman like yourself is perfect for me."

Prince Julius had just broken off his engagement with my sister. And now, he was proposing to me, of all people—the younger sister of his former fiancée.

What is going on...? No. What did Prince Julius do to my sister?

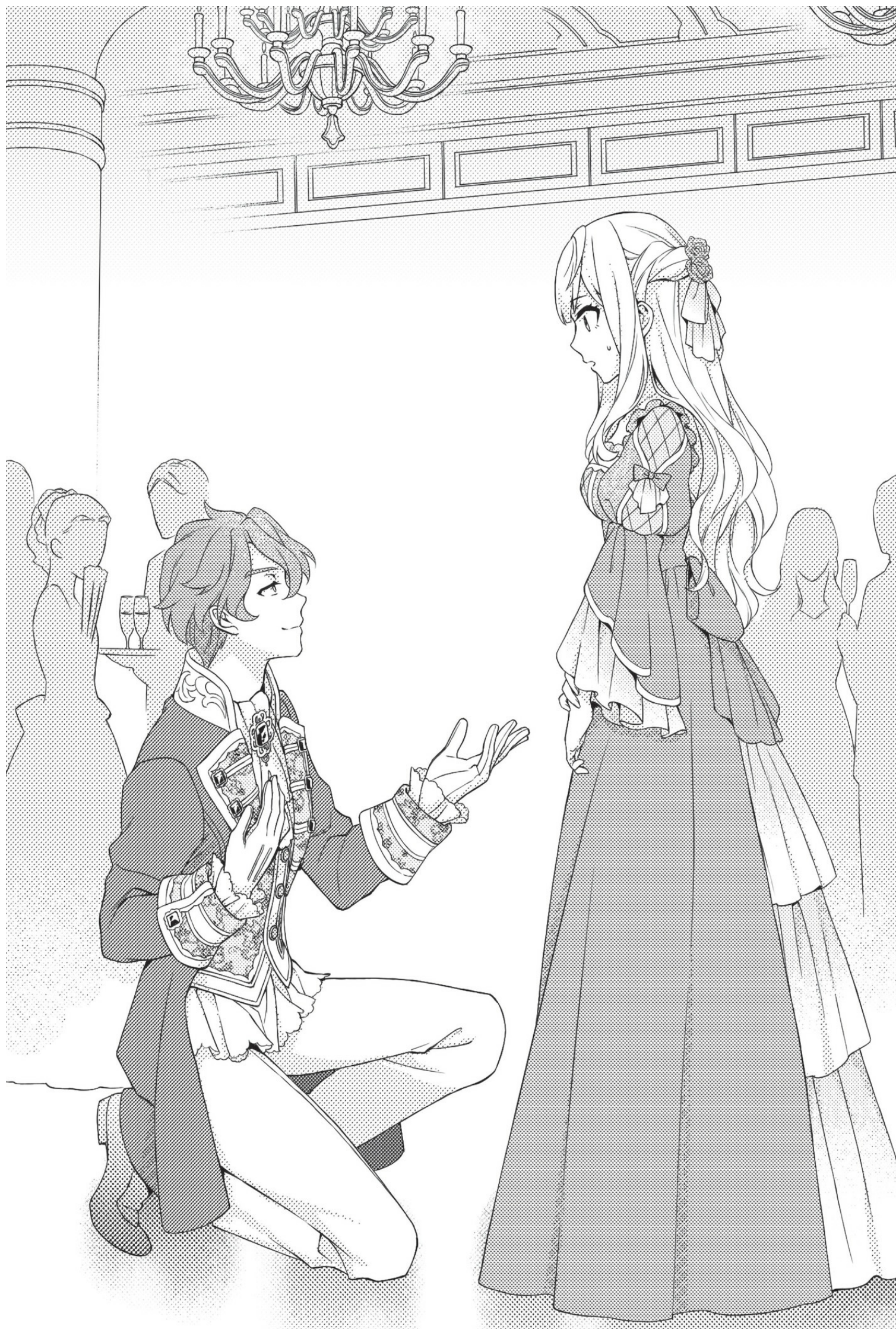
That nagging feeling in my heart did not go away. Instead, it only grew.

Proposing marriage to me here and now... Your Highness, all I feel toward you now is suspicion...

I tried to stay calm and think rationally about Prince Julius.

You'd expect someone who had just lost his supposedly beloved fiancée to have the decency not to propose to another woman just days later—let alone his former fiancée's sister. Had grief and disappointment made him desperate? No, it didn't seem that way. He looked confident, even smug.

If it weren't for his past with my sister, I might have welcomed the proposal. But there was no way I could marry someone who'd propose at a time like this.



However, Prince Julius might be the key to the truth behind Philia's departure. And our parents had been working for years to get closer to the royal family. Philia had mentioned that when she announced her engagement.

Come to think of it, that was another reason I found it strange that our parents were so blasé about Philia's departure. Weren't they upset about losing their long-held dream of joining the royal family? They hadn't so much as mentioned it.

Could our parents have known that His Highness would propose to me...?

In any case, to get to the bottom of the matter, I had to get His Highness to tell me what he knew. I needed to get close enough to draw the truth out of him.

"Please give me some time to think it over. It hasn't been long since my sister left, so marriage isn't even on my mind at the moment. I'm flattered that you would consider me, though."

I lied. I wasn't the least bit pleased by His Highness's proposal. I even found it repulsive. But if I wanted to seek the truth, I couldn't incur his displeasure. I had to conceal my feelings and play pretend.

That being said, to actually accept his proposal would be disastrous. I had to string him along, make him lose his cool, and get the information I needed out of him. Manipulation didn't come naturally to me, but to find out what had really happened to Philia, I was willing to become a demon. If the prince thought I was all sunshine and smiles, he was sorely mistaken.

"You're right, of course. It was impudent of me. I know you hold your sister in high regard. She was a remarkable saint. Perfection itself. I didn't deserve her."

"My sister would surely be pleased to hear His Highness say that."

He'd backed down more quickly than I expected. Maybe he sensed my unease, as hard as I tried to hide it. But seconds later, he mounted another advance.

"Why don't we forget about marriage for now? Let me take you out on a date. I'd like you to get to know me better." As he spoke, his gaze roved up and

down my body.

I nodded wordlessly. To get the truth, I'd have to cozy up to him.

His Highness responded with a satisfied smirk. Clearly he had no idea how I truly felt. With a casual wave, he strode off to greet my parents. Had he ever loved Philia? Maybe I was starting to jump at shadows, but my suspicions kept growing deeper.

After the prince's visit, Father was all smiles. "Well, well, Mia!" he laughed. "I hear His Highness proposed to you. You said yes, of course?"

My jaw dropped. Who in their right mind would find such an indecent proposal amusing? "No, Father. Considering how soon it's been since his engagement to Philia, I couldn't possibly consider marriage right now."

For one brief moment, at the sound of Philia's name, Father's eyes narrowed. But his smile quickly snapped back into place.

"I see, I see. Well, it's true it hasn't been long since that girl ran off, so I suppose you're still adjusting. But Philia is moving forward with her new life as another kingdom's saint, and I'm sure she'd want her beloved little sister to be happy, too."

Was Philia happy, I wondered? She'd reached heights beyond any saint in history and gotten engaged to a prince. But just as her good fortune was about to reach its peak, all of that came crashing down on her.

I also began to sense something off about Father. I tried to continue to act normal. His Highness still seemed like the best source of information, but maybe I could get something out of my parents.

I could no longer keep playing the good girl. It was time to be cunning—to trick people into letting their guard down.

And then what? I had no idea. Sooner or later, I'd have to think of something.

From that day on, I began to seriously probe the mysteries around Philia's departure. I joined Prince Julius on some dreadful dates and combed through

the house whenever my parents were away.

But I couldn't neglect my duties as a saint, and lately there had been an unusual uptick in monster attacks.

If Philia were with me, no doubt she would've figured out the cause in no time.

My dear sister Philia, couldn't you at least write to me...?

"Wow! Well done, Lady Mia!"

"She's even faster with a spell than Lady Philia!"

"I can't believe how quickly she filled the void her sister left."

At Prince Julius's orders, I was assigned ten times the bodyguards I'd had before. They cheered me on as I cast a barrier in a pitch-black forest infested with monsters. It would take me more than a day to enclose a forest this size. How could anyone compare me to Philia?

If Philia were here, she wouldn't just cast a barrier. She'd collect medicinal herbs and dowses for rare minerals. She'd make use of ancient rituals and spells she'd picked up in her studies; she could read all the archaic languages in the church libraries. The people of Girtonia might not feel my sister's absence yet, but in time the loss would be clear.

Our parents and Philia had always told me I was a prodigy, but I had a long way to go before I could catch up to my sister. She was perfect in every way, and so passionate about her work...

At least I could cast spells faster than Philia could. Even those who acknowledged her as the greatest saint of all time insisted that I was the fastest when it came to spell activation.

But my barriers weren't as sturdy as my sister's. A large horde of monsters attacking at once might break through. To prevent that, I usually cast two or three layers of barriers as reinforcement.

From the time I spent with Prince Julius, trying to suss him out, it was clear that he was trying to replace Philia with me. He often took the chance to put Philia down while showering me with compliments.

“There’s nothing interesting about Philia,” he’d say over dinner. “You, on the other hand, are charming, and so amusing. I have such a delightful time with you.”

He had no idea how furious it made me to hear him casually laugh as he insulted my sister. I started to get the feeling that he’d sold her to another kingdom just to be rid of her...

“Lady Mia, watch out!”

“The monsters are everywhere!”

Oh, no... I’d let my guard down for a moment while casting a barrier, and now goblins and lizardfolk were crashing through the trees toward me. Since my bodyguards were too stunned to do anything, I was left with no other choice.

“Silver Judgment!”

The monster-exterminating spell was as deadly as ever. Cross-shaped blades of silver light pierced through the monsters one by one, killing them on impact.

“Incredible! She took out an entire horde in an instant!”

“She cast that spell so quickly, I didn’t even see it!”

“Even in battle, she’s so beautiful and graceful.”

My bodyguards rushed toward me, relieved. Sometimes it seemed more like I was their bodyguard...but at least everyone was all right.

I shouldn’t have let my guard down, but this was the first time monsters had managed to attack faster than I could cast a barrier. No doubt about it: there was something strange about these new attacks. And if even I could sense trouble, Philia ought to have it all figured out.

No matter how I looked at it, the continued silence from my sister was

unsettling. Philia always worried about my well-being. If she sensed the slightest danger, she'd gather all the information she could and tell me everything.

When I got home that night, I asked Mother, "Are there any letters from Philia?"

"Letters from Philia?" Her face was a blank mask. "None that I'm aware of."

"Are you sure you didn't forget to give me any?"

"I'm afraid we've heard nothing from her. I'm sure that girl is too busy with her new life to bother to write home. She's always had a cold streak, that one."

Philia wasn't cold; she just wasn't good at expressing her emotions. Underneath, she was kinder than anyone. I thought our parents, of all people, would've known that.

Were there really no letters? Or were they being kept from me?

Mother must have spoken to Father, because at dinner he said, "Mia, I think it's time to forget about your sister. Philia now belongs to another kingdom, as she wished. You have to move on and accept that you can't rely on her anymore."

With my parents presenting a united front, I wouldn't be able to get any more out of them. I came up with a new idea: I secretly wrote a letter to Philia. If my sister was trying to contact me, this would let her know that her messages were being intercepted.

I had another date with His Highness the next day. It would just be a short meeting, but I hoped to get some new information out of it.

"You're doing so much better without Philia," Prince Julius said. "Your bodyguards have told me all about your tireless efforts, your speed and skill."

This was my third private meal with His Highness, but I still hadn't gotten

much out of him. Instead, he kept ladling on flattery, always peppered with derogatory remarks about Philia. His Highness knew how I adored my sister, yet he kept pushing my buttons by insulting her. I couldn't understand why.

The meal was almost over. I'd have to be direct. "Your Highness, did my sister really decide to go to Parnacorta on her own? You're sure she wasn't forced at all? I can't imagine someone who'd given everything to our kingdom would leave just like that."

It was too much to hope that he'd answer honestly, but maybe I could catch him off guard and get a glimpse of the truth.

His Highness swirled the wine in his glass. Holding it up to the light, he replied, "This again? Your parents must have told you that your sister chose this path on her own. Anyway, how much did she really do for the kingdom? In hindsight, it's clear she just wanted to show off and put herself above her station. It was a headache for me, let me tell you. I mean, put yourself in my shoes for a moment. I had to appease our nation's intellectuals—apothecaries, doctors, architects—every time she outdid them!"

My sister was just showing off? Philia had always told me that being a saint wasn't just about casting spells. A saint has to put her kingdom first and contribute in any way she can to its peace and prosperity. The stuffed shirts who complained about her were the selfish ones, pressuring the royal family to make Philia stop helping people because it made them look bad. They just wanted to keep slacking off.

Besides, His Highness had been Philia's fiancé. Shouldn't he have stood by her instead of agreeing with those ridiculous demands? He talked as if Philia was nothing more than a nuisance.

Now he was showing his true colors. He couldn't hide behind syrupy sweet talk any longer.

"In that regard, Mia, you prove yourself a prodigy by focusing only on your duties as a saint—no unnecessary activities on the side. You're beautiful and endearing, and everyone loves you for it. That's fantastic. I know now that you are the greatest saint of all time, in the truest sense of the word."

I couldn't take another minute of this. How could he place me on a pedestal

while tearing Philia down? Compared to what my sister accomplished through talent and hard work, my work as a saint was barely worth mentioning. Her achievements, like the purification ritual she invented, were significant and groundbreaking—not just to our kingdom, but to the entire world.

How could the kingdom not realize that? How could it let my sister go?

His Majesty the King was old and sickly, and Crown Prince Fernand had a weak constitution. Recently, more and more of the power to shape national policy had moved to Prince Julius's hands. It shocked me just how much he made light of Philia's achievements.

His Highness sipped his wine. "I tried going out with her because she was supposed to be such a big deal, but she had so much less sparkle than you."

That was enough for me. There was no longer any doubt in my mind that Prince Julius had sent Philia away. To him, my sister had been nothing more than a novelty to toy with and toss aside.

I'd encouraged him to keep drinking to loosen his lips, but he'd let slip even more than I expected. His words nearly made me throw up. I'd gotten what I wanted, but it gave me no joy.

Prince Julius leaned forward. "You've made me forget all about your sister, so why hold back any longer? A woman as beautiful and capable as yourself is worthy of being my wife! Marry me, and I'll give you anything you want!"

His crass lines only made me sick. Thank goodness Philia hadn't married this man, after all. He wasn't fit to kiss the ground she stepped on. I worried about how Philia was being treated in Parnacorta, but at least she wasn't Prince Julius's wife.

Philia, I'm sorry. I really can't stand this person... Which is why I'm going to become his fiancée. To take revenge on your behalf.

Philia, I know you won't be happy about this choice I'm about to make. I hope you can forgive your sister for being selfish and brash.

When I announced my engagement to Prince Julius, Father was all smiles and

praise. “Mia,” he said, laughing, “you made the right choice! Now the Adenauer family will be secure for all eternity!”

It was as if Philia’s engagement had never happened. Father had started using her room as a storage space, reasoning that she wouldn’t be back anyway. Watching the changes in our family, I felt like I’d been living in the dark up to this moment. All this time, the truth had been withheld from me.

Mother embraced me and said she’d miss me. “Once you’re a princess, you’ll have less time to spend with us. The big house will feel empty without you. Let’s treasure our last moments together as a complete family.”

Philia had already left home. We weren’t a whole family.

“After you’re married, you’ll always be welcome back, of course.”

I was too lost in thought to do much more than grunt in response. If Philia really had written me a letter, and my parents hid it from me... I didn’t know who to trust anymore.

Anyway, first things first: Prince Julius. I was certain that he’d initiated the idea of selling my sister to Parnacorta. I’d accepted his proposal in a fit of anger, convinced I could use it to strike back at him somehow, but so far I hadn’t been able to think of a good way to take my revenge.

“Maybe I should have strung him along some more...”

“Did you say something, Mia?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about work. Without Philia around, there’s been a lot more for me to do.”

“Oh, I see.”

Truth be told, I didn’t have time to spare. I’d been racing to keep the monsters at bay, but it was hard to fill the void Philia had left.

My bodyguards told me, “Don’t push yourself. Get some rest. We’ve got you covered.” But with Philia gone, deaths were increasing. This was no time to lie down on the job. Maybe it was arrogant of me to keep striving, but Philia taught me that a saint had to do whatever she could, even if she didn’t think she was

up to the task.

I'd been working on the tightest schedule of my life. Tomorrow, same as every day, my work would begin early in the morning.

"You've cast barriers over ten areas, but your technique is as impeccable as ever!"

"Maybe His Highness is right—the greatest saint of all time might be Lady Mia, not Lady Philia."

"Lady Mia looks as beautiful as ever today! His Highness is the envy of all."

Whew...that was exhausting. Why couldn't the bodyguards bring me a towel instead of lavishing me with praise? Water would be nice, too.

Men. Would it kill them to be more perceptive?

An unusually short soldier appeared at my side. "Lady Mia, I brought you a towel and some iced tea."

"Thank you. Ah, my favorite tea blend!"

How unusual for a guard to be so attentive. And judging from his voice, he was very young.

Wait. There was something under the towel. A letter? Could it be...?

"I knew it," I said under my breath.

My name was written in meticulous, elegant penmanship that I recognized as Philia's. She *had* written to me, after all! She must have received my letter, realized from reading it that I hadn't heard from her, and come up with a way to get a message to me. She'd sent someone all the way from Parnacorta to stealthily blend in with my personal guard, risking their life just to deliver this letter.

"Thank goodness..." Knowing that Philia had allies in Parnacorta was an indescribable weight off my shoulders. This letter couldn't have been delivered without gifted people willing to put their lives on the line to help her.

Well, of course. No matter how she'd gotten to Parnacorta, someone of my

sister's caliber was sure to be welcomed and treated with warmth and hospitality. Maybe my fears for her were unfounded.

As if reading my mind, the mysterious messenger spoke up. "Worry not, Lady Mia. My mistress, Lady Philia, is in good health in Parnacorta." My heart soared. Writing to Philia had been the right idea after all.

Around me, I could hear the guards whispering. "That soldier talking to Lady Mia...do we have anyone that small in our ranks?"

"No, I've never seen him before."

"Lady Mia has such a lovely smile on her face. He must be sweet-talking her."

"Who is that, some kind of child soldier?"

Before I knew it, all the guards in the vicinity were staring at us. There was no way we could continue the conversation here. I lowered my voice. "Um...I'll keep my window unlatched tonight. I'd like to talk some more, if possible."

Maybe it was selfish of me to ask this agent to take even more risks, but I was desperate for any news of Philia.

"Very well. If that is what Lady Philia's sister wishes, I can easily arrange it." This person had quite the unique way of wording things. With that, the short "soldier" stepped into the woods and vanished into thin air.

In response to my bodyguards' questions, I said that the soldier had brought me something I'd accidentally left behind, and I'd simply been thanking him. Eventually they dropped it.

Thinking it over later, I doubted that my bodyguards would've been much help if that agent had been an assassin or something. Good thing I wasn't so easy to kill.

That night, the short "soldier" showed up in my room. That was how I met Himari, a maid and bodyguard at Philia's mansion in Parnacorta.

"Um...Himari, was it? I didn't expect you to enter through the attic. I left the

window open for you...”

“The window is visible to the guards at the gate. I was left with no recourse but to adopt an alternative route.”

The guards must have noticed my window open and decided to keep an eye on it. Fortunately, that hadn’t caused much trouble for Himari.

What a fine person. How was it that I had so many bodyguards, and none of them had been able to stop her?

“Lady Mia,” said Himari, “Lady Philia wishes you to know that we are in a race against time. Indeed, she fears it is already too late for one saint to contain the threat on her own.”

Himari was right. I shuddered as I read Philia’s letter.

My sister surmised that the Demon Realm, the dwelling place of monsters, was approaching the surface world where we lived—an ominous prediction that made my heart sink. She laid out possible future scenarios: barriers falling before mass swarms of monsters, as well as the destruction and slaughter these rampaging creatures, more ferocious than ever, would cause. If this happened across the kingdom, I certainly wouldn’t be able to handle everything on my own.

It seemed Philia had used an ancient ritual called the Great Purification Circle to protect Parnacorta. She knew more than anyone about ancient and modern rituals, so this was a solution that only she could have come up with. Unfortunately, it was beyond my abilities. Philia suggested I apply my spellcasting speed to casting as many barriers as possible, even if they weren’t very sturdy—a “quantity over quality” tactic.

While I was at it, monsters would still need to be subdued. Philia hoped I could convince our aunt, a former saint and our predecessor, to come out of retirement.

To sum it up, the kingdom of Girtonia would be unable to overcome this crisis unless it immediately launched an all-out war to keep the danger at bay.

“The kingdom should expend all possible efforts, huh?” I murmured. “Easier said than done.”

“Lady Philia did indeed fret that her wisdom might go unheeded.”

“She said that? How could she think people would ignore her?”

Did Philia have reason to think she wouldn’t be taken seriously in Girtonia? It was true, then. She’d been treated callously before she was sold away.

In any case, I had to hurry. There was much to be done: warning people that danger was imminent, preparing for the worst...

No, it was too much. I couldn’t come up with a feasible plan. And if Prince Julius ignored Philia’s warning, the kingdom was doomed.

“Would you care to leave this place?”

“Huh...?”

“It would be hardly any trouble for me to whisk you away to Parnacorta. Lady Philia fears for your safety. You would be wise to seek refuge while you can.”

Escape to Parnacorta?

I hadn’t thought of that. It sounded wonderful. I could shrug off the heavy burdens of sainthood, meet my sister again, and make sure we were both safe.

But...

“I’m a saint,” I declared. “I protect this kingdom. If a harsh winter befell our land, I couldn’t just take off for a holiday in a tropical country. You know that. You wouldn’t make that suggestion to my sister, would you?”

I was proud to be a saint, just like Philia. I might be inexperienced, incapable, and in way over my head, but I couldn’t abandon my post. Even if the kingdom were overrun with monsters, I’d have to do whatever I could, however little, to mitigate the damage.

Philia, I thought, I know this is a tricky situation. But I’ll do my best to help this kingdom.

“You remind me of Lady Philia. She can be quite stubborn.”

“That’s the best compliment anyone could ever give me.” If only I could become a saint on Philia’s level.

Without her, I’d have to carry on alone. I clenched my fists tight and steeled

myself.

“Lady Mia’s resolve is clear to me. Do you have a message for Lady Philia?”

“A message for my sister? Please tell her, ‘Someday, let’s go to the opera again.’”

Himari’s eyes widened slightly, but she replied only, “As you wish.”

Then, before I could even nod in acknowledgment, Himari vanished from my sight.

Philia, I haven’t given up yet. I believe the day will come when we can meet again.

In hindsight, maybe running away was the smarter choice. What chance did Girtonia have?

Philia

“**D**ID MIA LOOK WELL?”

Five days after I sent Himari on her mission, she returned safely, having delivered the letter to my sister. I was relieved. At this point, any preparations she could make would be rather last-minute. But if she could convince Prince Julius and others in the kingdom to act decisively, they might be able to stave off disaster.

Would His Highness take my advice, though?

“Thank goodness I suggested to Mia that she pass my words off as her own,” I told Himari. If my sister claimed that she discovered the Demon Realm’s impending approach on her own, it’d be an easier pill for people like Prince Julius to swallow.

But when I heard that Mia turned down Himari’s offer to escape to Parnacorta, a pit of worry opened up in my stomach again.

“Are you concerned for Lady Mia?” Himari asked. She could see right through

me. Of course I was concerned! Danger was fast approaching, and yet I couldn't be there for her.

"I thought I was doing a good job of hiding it," I said. "You're great at spotting the cracks in people's armor."

"Since childhood, I have learned the art of reading faces. To some, it may well seem like mind-reading. In any case, I could steal your sister from Girtonia in an instant, if you wish it."

Himari could say the most unsettling things without missing a beat. I knew she was thinking of Mia and her safety, but if we really did that, Mia would be outraged. I couldn't trample on her honor.

"Mia doesn't want to be rescued," I pointed out. Knowing my sister as well as I did, I had to respect her wishes.

"If that plan does not please you, would you prefer to dispatch me to serve as her bodyguard? I can stealthily vanquish any scoundrel who dares lay a hand on Lady Mia. I must caution you that, in my estimation, the soldiers currently assigned to her cannot be relied upon."

Himari hadn't been impressed by her encounters with the Girtonian military. Compared to Parnacorta, which boasted the best knights in the world, Girtonia's soldiers probably seemed weak. But a saint was supposed to be able to protect herself to begin with, so Mia's bodyguards were really more like attendants.

"That's a wonderful offer, Himari, but why would you go this far? This must be beyond the scope of your duties." It was strange to me that she would care for Mia that much. What kind of person would pledge her life to a saint from another kingdom?

"Lady Philia, do you not also go far beyond your duties as a saint? Besides, I can see that Lady Philia and Lady Mia hold each other in high esteem. I had four younger brothers and sisters, but they all lost their lives in a clan war. I do not wish for my mistress to suffer a similar loss." A profound sadness and tender longing shone in her ebony eyes.

Himari had a point. I respected Mia's courage and resolve, but I wanted her to

live.

In that moment, I forgot my place as a saint. Selfishly, I wished only for Mia's survival.

"Himari, I have a request. Would you please protect my dear sister Mia? If worse comes to worst, take her to safety."

"As you wish, my lady. I will protect Lady Mia steadfastly."

"You stay alive as well, all right? Come back safely."

"Is that an order, my lady?"

"No, it's a personal request."

At this, Himari vanished without a sound.

I immediately began to regret making such a selfish request. Was there anything else I could do for my sister?

"Excuse me, Lady Philia, but you have a visitor."

Hearing Lena's voice, I turned. "A visitor? Who is it?"

"Well..."

"It's been too long, Miss Philia. Thanks to your efforts, peaceful days have descended upon Parnacorta."

Standing at the door with a bouquet of yellow freesia in hand was His Highness, Crown Prince Reichardt of Parnacorta. I hadn't seen him since we first met during the ritual to cast the Great Purification Circle.

"Your Highness!" I exclaimed. He'd caught me by surprise, but I hurried to remember my manners. I bowed my head. "Forgive me for not properly introducing myself last time. Good day, and thank you for coming out of your way to visit me. Does His Highness have a matter of national import to discuss with me?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing of the sort. I apologize for springing this visit on you. I come here today not on business, but rather with a request."

"A request?"

This perplexed me. What could he possibly want from me? I couldn't think of anything.

His Highness gazed into my eyes. "Miss Philia, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Huh? Your w-wife?!"

Speaking as casually as if we were discussing the weather, Prince Reichardt offered me the bouquet in one outstretched hand. I was left speechless.

"Whaaaat?! Prince Reichardt is proposing to Lady Philia?!" Lena's face flushed red. Clearly, she was even more taken aback than I was.

Of course I was also shocked, but the doubt in my mind was stronger. Why would he propose? I was a foreigner, new to Parnacorta, with no deep ties to the kingdom. An outsider.

As the crown prince of Parnacorta, Prince Reichardt was first in the line of succession, which meant that whoever he married was destined to become queen. What could he possibly gain by marrying a woman bought from the kingdom of Girtonia?

"Your Highness," I stammered, "surely you jest. How could someone like me marry the crown prince?" He had to be playing a joke. I had no idea why he'd go out of his way to make fun of me, but that was the only plausible explanation I could think of.

But the prince didn't smile. "I'm not the kind of person who would joke about such a thing. Nor do I have time to waste on pranks. I would like you to remain in this kingdom, and to do so as its queen. Which is why I'm asking you to marry me."

His beautiful amber eyes were clear. He looked sure of himself. Strange as it seemed, his proposal was utterly serious.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't flattered. Anyone would be thrilled to receive an offer of marriage from a prince. But at the same time, I was terrified. I couldn't forget what had happened with my previous engagement.

Prince Reichardt and Prince Julius were different people; I understood that much. But I could never be as endearing as Mia.

A dull, dry, insipid, and charmless woman—that's who I really was. Prince Reichardt had only met me twice, so he didn't know that about me. He was probably just intrigued by my novelty. Once he knew the real me, the novelty would wear off, and he'd drift away.

"Pardon me, Your Highness...but I can't think about marriage yet."

His Highness replied with a smile. "Proposing to you like this, when there are more pressing matters at hand, was quite inconsiderate of me, wasn't it? There's no need to rush. I'll wait for your answer. Take all the time you need to think it over."

At least he was considerate enough to realize that he'd put me on the spot.

"In the meantime, I'll take my leave. Lena, I'm counting on you to keep up the good work."

"Of course, Your Highness! I'll put my life on the line to protect Lady Philia!"

With a respectful bow, His Highness and his retinue left the mansion.

Did he really just propose to me? I still couldn't believe it.

"Lady Philia, could you please pass me those flowers?" said Lena. "I'll use them to spruce up the mansion."

Even after handing over the bouquet to Lena, I continued to stare in a daze in the direction that Prince Reichardt had left in. I was still staring when another carriage pulled up. Had His Highness forgotten something?

"Reichardt—I mean, my brother—did he come over?"

Prince Osvalt, Prince Reichardt's younger brother and the second-eldest prince of Parnacorta, sprinted toward me with a troubled look on his face. I replied in the affirmative.

"Drat! Guess I'm too late. That idiot brother of mine said that he was going to propose to you. Were you okay with that?"

“I don’t know about okay, but he did indeed propose.”

Flabbergasted, Prince Osvalt scratched his head. “What was he thinking? I told him not to put you on the spot. It’s going to cause trouble for him, too.”

I could only guess that Prince Osvalt was against the idea of his brother marrying someone so unsuitable.

“Sorry he sprung that on you while you’re still getting used to life here. He put you in a tight spot, didn’t he? Don’t be afraid to say no.”

“Er...”

“You didn’t come here by choice, so I want you to be as free as possible to live your own life. No matter what it takes, I’ll defend your liberty!”

Prince Osvalt grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me deeply in the eyes. His face was earnestly sincere. I’d never been this close to a man, so I was a little embarrassed.

But then he suddenly switched topics. “Oh, that reminds me! I think I’ve come up with a new way to make fertilizer.”

“Er...is that so? May I see your plans?”

Prince Osvalt was deeply interested in agriculture, and had devoted himself to the study of fertilizers and farming methods. I also knew a fair amount about this topic, so we’d gotten in the habit of sharing our thoughts.

But at the moment, it felt strange to suddenly start chatting about agriculture, at a much earlier hour than his usual visits.

“By the way, I talked to Leonardo, and he said things might get rough for your sister.”

“I appreciate your concern.”

Now we were talking about Mia? I’d just gotten used to the fertilizer discussion. Prince Osvalt must have known I was fretting over Mia and felt concerned for me. For some reason I couldn’t understand, that alone was enough to make me happy.

“I think Parnacorta shares some of the responsibility for this situation. I’ve

decided to try reaching out to offer whatever support we can. Know that you can count on me to help out.”

Prince Osvalt’s proposal left me speechless with astonishment. He always had the right words to say to ease my deep-seated apprehension. His carefree smile smoothed over the anxieties brewing within me.

Could that be why talking to Prince Osvalt made me feel a warmth in my heart?

I found myself scrambling to utter even a word of thanks.

Osvalt

“SO, REICHARDT AND OSVALT. How is our saint doing?”

My father, King Eigelstein of Parnacorta, didn’t mince words. Someone must have told him we’d both gone to see Saint Philia.

Philia Adenauer recently took over the post of saint of Parnacorta, though she hadn’t technically been inaugurated, or even sworn into office. The shameful truth was that our kingdom bought her from another kingdom.

Given the circumstances, I was ashamed to show my face to Lady Philia. However, not meeting her in person would be extremely dishonorable, not to mention irresponsible. With that in mind, I visited Lady Philia on the day she arrived and swore that if she ever wanted to return to her homeland, I would do my best to make that happen for her.

If I were to describe Lady Philia in one word, it would be “wise.” Quick-witted and cultured, she was the definition of brilliant. Though she didn’t like to talk much, she knew everything about anything. No wonder she was regarded as the greatest saint of all time. She seemed to have no flaws at all, which made it all the more bizarre that Girtonia would give her away in exchange for money.

Most people would have a little trouble adjusting to suddenly being sent to a new job in a foreign country, so I told Lady Philia to take it easy until she was all settled in. And yet, I heard she set off for work first thing in the morning.

Leonardo and Lena, two trusted former attendants whom I'd sent to work for Lady Philia, said she did three times the work of her predecessor.

On top of all that, she took the initiative to better people's lives and enrich the kingdom in other ways: developing medicines, drawing up proposals to cultivate farmland, and more. As a member of the royal family, I was ashamed to see her work harder for the kingdom than I did. I'd have to do better.

From the day she arrived, Lady Philia had thrown herself entirely into being the saint of Parnacorta—a feat not just anyone could manage. Most people would struggle with lingering attachments and internal conflicts, in her situation. It took enormous fortitude to land in a completely new environment and immediately start moving forward.

Then, not long after her arrival, Lady Philia warned us of a great calamity that could befall not only Parnacorta, but all the kingdoms in the land. When I sought her counsel, she came up with an excellent proposal. She volunteered to shield the entire kingdom with her purification magic, even though casting the spell would trap her in Parnacorta's royal capital. In short, even though her homeland was also in danger, she put Parnacorta's safety first.

See why I say she's an incredible person? Watching her strive to carry out her duties as a saint as perfectly as possible filled me with reverence.

That was why I swore to put her first at all costs. I hoped that someday we'd grow close enough that she could open up and share some selfish desire for me to fulfill.

My brother Reichardt was quick to answer our father. "Miss Philia seemed to be in good spirits. She was also pleased with the bouquet I gave her," he said in his usual mellow tone.

As the future ruler of Parnacorta, Reichardt had received a well-rounded education in what it meant to be a king. As a result, he'd become extremely nationalistic. He put the kingdom's interests above all else—including his own life.

In other words, he'd proposed to Lady Philia out of concern for Parnacorta's future. That was, after all, the driving force behind everything he did.

But I was starting to think there might be another reason.

"Reichardt, I heard that you proposed marriage to Lady Philia. You've only met her twice." Judging from Father's admonishing tone, he, too, was taken aback by Reichardt's sudden proposal.

Reichardt confidently responded in the affirmative. "Indeed, I have only met her twice. But it is only natural for me to want a perfect saint like her to be my future queen." He clearly saw nothing wrong with the idea.

"You do know that Lady Philia isn't Elizabeth, don't you?"

"Naturally."

I wasn't surprised Father brought up Elizabeth, my brother's former fiancée. Why former? Sadly, she had passed away.

Elizabeth had been our kingdom's previous saint. Despite her frail health, she put up a brave fight, protecting our kingdom with her prayers and spells. I considered her a hero. Always kind, ever a source of comfort to the people around her, she was like a second sun over Parnacorta. My brother was deeply in love with her. Yes, not even he—pragmatic and rational as he was—was immune to falling in love. It wasn't until he met her that he started saying that just as a saint's duty was to protect the kingdom, it was a ruler's duty to protect the kingdom's saint.

When she passed away from illness, my brother blamed himself. How could he ever be king when he couldn't save a single life?

Then, about three months after Elizabeth's passing, Reichardt suggested we take in Lady Philia as our new saint. It was hard not to suspect that my brother saw Philia as a stand-in for his late fiancée. With Philia, he could carry out his unfulfilled obligations to Elizabeth. It didn't sit well with me, but it was a tragic situation all around.

Reichardt, you're not alone. Lady Philia is not a replacement for Elizabeth. As his younger sibling, it was up to me to make my stubborn brother face these truths.

“Very well,” said Father. “On to a different matter. We received a request from the Mattilas family in the northern kingdom of Bolmern to have Lady Philia teach their fourth daughter, Lady Grace, purification magic. Lady Philia has agreed, and Lady Grace will arrive tomorrow morning. As you know, the girl is Elizabeth’s cousin. I expect both of you to treat her with consideration.”

The Mattilas family was a prominent clan in Bolmern, which enjoyed a close relationship with Parnacorta. Their lineage had produced many saints; as I recalled, all four sisters were already saints.

As a distinguished family of saints, they must have become aware of the threat posed by the Demon Realm’s approach. They wanted to learn Lady Philia’s Great Purification Circle so they could cast it over their own kingdom.

A cousin of Elizabeth’s coming over? My own feelings aside, how would Reichardt deal with this? And what about Philia?

I had a feeling that something major was being set in motion.

Philia

“**L**ADY PHILIA,” said Leonardo, “are you sure you want to teach your signature purification magic to the Mattilas girl?”

Leonardo was incredulous that I would share the secrets of my Great Purification Circle with a saint from Bolmern. The Mattilas family, like the Adenauers, had produced saints for generations. They seemed to have close ties to the Bolmern royal family, so they held more power in their kingdom than my family did. And today, Grace, the fourth Mattilas daughter, was to arrive at my mansion to learn how to cast a Great Purification Circle.

“While it requires knowledge of ancient rituals, making it a bit of a challenge, it’s not exactly a secret,” I explained. The Great Purification Circle itself didn’t require any special abilities. I’d just happened to work it out while I was researching ancient rituals.

My younger sister Mia was unable to cast one, but only because she lacked knowledge of archaic languages. Thinking back, I regretted not teaching Mia more. Had I done so, she could've been able to invoke the ritual, too.

Basic knowledge of archaic languages was part of the Mattilas family's education, however. Depending on Grace's skill level, it might take her no time at all to learn how to cast a Great Purification Circle.

"Ah! Lady Philia, she's here!"

At Lena's voice, I looked toward the gate, where a large carriage was pulling up.

I could sense that multiple barriers had been cast over the carriage. Unsurprisingly, the Mattilas's security measures were impeccable.

Escorted by a dark-haired man in a butler uniform, a girl with curly brown hair alighted from the carriage. It could only be Grace. She looked about fifteen years old, around Lena's age.

"Lady Philia! Lady Philia Adenauer!" The girl beamed innocently at me, trembling with excitement. "It's such an honor to meet you! My name is Grace Mattilas. It's a dream come true for me to have my idol, the greatest saint of all time, as my teacher!"

"I-is that so...?"

I'd had no idea what Grace thought of me. Having her heap such high praise on me was quite embarrassing.

The butler bowed. "We apologize for the disturbance. Lady Grace is an avid fan of Lady Philia's. Day and night, she devotes herself to studying and honing her magic skills to become as great a saint as yourself."

"Arnold! Didn't I say I wanted to tell Lady Philia that I'm her biggest fan all by myself?"

"My apologies. Lady Philia seemed overwhelmed by the Young Miss's intensity."

This young lady was a fan of mine? Saints from other kingdoms might know

me from the published collections of my research. I'd heard that my books were distributed all over the world. By the time I was engaged to Prince Julius, I was working on the third volume. That was around the time I began to hear people were referring to me with the heavy title of "greatest saint of all time."

"Well," I said, "as long as we've broken the ice, why don't we have some tea? Leonardo, Lena, could you help our visitors?"

"Yes, my lady!"

Entertaining guests always made me nervous. Lately, Prince Reichardt and Prince Osvalt had been visiting more often, and I was getting used to the heart-pounding feeling of having them over. Thinking back, I realized that I'd never before spent so much time at home. My home. To my surprise, asking for tea came naturally now.

Seeing Grace smile as she happily talked about her ideals as a saint, I was reminded of Mia. If we'd been able to spend more time together when I was around Grace's age, I could've been more of an older sister to her. I should've cherished the little time we spent together.

Grace and Arnold ended up staying at the mansion for some time. All of a sudden, things were getting lively.

"This is hard."

Grace had come to me to learn how to cast the Great Purification Circle. To start her education in arcane magic, I taught her a basic ancient ritual.

It seemed that, regardless of individual differences in ability, all children in the Mattilas family received a uniform education, with a curriculum that focused alternately on theory and practice.

And the Adenauer family? Girls like me, who struggled to learn, received harsh training. Natural prodigies like Mia, on the other hand, had as much knowledge as possible stuffed into them via their education.

As a result, Mia was adept in a broad range of techniques, from contemporary magic to casting barriers. With a little more knowledge under her belt, I was

sure she'd become a saint of such unparalleled skill that I would never match her—assuming, of course, that she put in the work.

It took me very little time to tell that though Grace might not be as skilled as I was, she was certainly well-educated. She told me that after being taught basic archaic languages, she'd continued to study on her own. Outside of her formal lessons, she'd acquired quite the vocabulary. She easily met the minimum conditions for learning to invoke ancient rituals.

But spellcasting wasn't just a matter of knowing the language.

“Lady Philia, does mana really exist? I just can't sense it...”

Grace was struggling with the first step in invoking an ancient ritual: sensing the presence of mana.

Ancient rituals tended to involve techniques that used up a great deal of magic, making it difficult to invoke them by drawing on one's own power alone. However, it was possible to sustain the ritual by absorbing an alternative power source known as mana: particles of natural magic.

The great bounties of nature kept us alive, but many found it difficult to connect to the source of that power. Grace, too, was struggling with that.

“Shall we go to the garden, Grace?”

“The garden?”

I took Grace out to the garden, which was lush with trees and flowers and abuzz with the sound of insects. The sun was high up in the sky, and its warmth mixed with a cool breeze. In a place like this, if you paid enough attention to your surroundings, you were sure to feel a sense of oneness with the vast natural world.

“I do understand the power of nature,” said Grace, “but I still can't sense mana.”

“That's good enough. That awe you feel at the greatness of nature? That feeling inside you is exactly the sensation of mana. Focus on it, and in no time, perceiving the mana around you will come naturally.”

I cast a basic ancient spell to show Grace the mana flowing around her. Small

white particles, more delicate than snow, flowed from my body, emitting a sparkling light. This was a form of defensive magic called the Robe of Light. It acted as armor against the forces of evil and was handy against monster attacks if cast quickly.

“Lady Philia, you look so beautiful! You’re like an angel.”

“Now, now, Grace, don’t exaggerate.”

“I’m just being honest! The more I spend time with you, the more I admire you!”

I’d only cast the spell to help Grace visualize mana. Now I was the one in a tough spot, because I didn’t know how to respond to her praise. I certainly didn’t think I was worthy of her hero-worship.

“I’ll do my best to be a saint just like you someday!”

Well, at least she was motivated. A saint just like me... Mia had said something along those lines. Reminded that others were watching and learning from my example, I resolved to do even better.

By evening, Grace had accomplished a splendid feat: after several hours of meditation, she managed to sense the mana around her. Practice really did make perfect. By keeping at it, she’d be able to reach her true potential.

I asked Lena to brew a second serving of tea so that we could enjoy some downtime. That was when Grace said there was a place nearby that she wanted to visit.



“Certainly. Where is it?”

“It’s my cousin Liz...er, Elizabeth’s grave.” Grace explained that Elizabeth had lived in Parnacorta before her death. I wasn’t too surprised. Parnacorta and Bolmern were on good terms, so people immigrating between the two countries wasn’t uncommon.

“If you knew her,” I said, “you must have visited Parnacorta before.”

“That’s right. Elizabeth was a saint from another branch of the Mattilas family. She was born with a frail constitution, so my uncle often worried about her.”

“A saint? You mean...?”

“As you might have guessed,” Leonardo interrupted, “Lady Elizabeth was our previous saint. Lady Grace, let me take you to her grave.”

Parnacorta’s previous saint, Elizabeth Mattilas, died about three months before my arrival. I hadn’t heard much about her other than the fact that she passed away from illness, so I’d had no idea Grace was related to her.

Leonardo led us to Elizabeth’s grave. After a few minutes of walking, we stopped in front of a large memorial. There were fresh flowers on it.

Were those the same type of flowers Prince Reichardt had given me?

“Miss Philia? L-Liz...no, Grace?”

Prince Reichardt, flanked by his soldiers, was approaching with another bouquet in hand.

Etched on his face was a sadness that I’d never seen on him before.

“Has His Highness also come to visit Miss Elizabeth’s grave?”

Who would’ve thought that I would run into Prince Reichardt here? What’s more, the flowers on the grave were still fresh, which meant he visited often. Had His Highness been close to the late Saint Elizabeth?

“Yes, she was my fiancée,” His Highness said in a lower tone of voice than

usual.

“Oh...is that so?”

His Highness's former fiancée had been a saint. When he proposed to me, did he imagine that I would take Elizabeth's place?

As he laid the new bouquet before Elizabeth's grave, Prince Reichardt reminisced about her. “She loved yellow freesia. I wanted to give her more lavish gifts, but she said that the scent of this flower suited me perfectly. At the time, I didn't know what to say.”

Like me, Prince Reichardt seemed to have trouble expressing his feelings, but his earnest words made it clear that he truly loved Elizabeth.

“I want you to know why I gave you those flowers,” he added. “It's because, before I realized it, I'd grown to love them, too.”

I was at a loss for words. It was just like the moment when he suddenly proposed to me. I couldn't grasp the sentiments behind Prince Reichardt's words.

Funny how saints were praised for their competence, when yet I couldn't decipher simple human feelings.

His Highness turned to Grace. “Miss Grace, have you run into any trouble since you arrived?”

“My apologies, Your Highness. Lady Philia and the others have treated me very well, so I have no complaints.”

“That's good to hear. You can't find a saint like Lady Philia anywhere else in the world. Learn as much as you can from her, and use your newfound knowledge for the greater good of Bolmern,” said His Highness, looking fondly at Grace.

When His Highness had first seen us, he had accidentally called Grace “Liz.” She must resemble his late fiancée.

Perhaps Prince Reichardt was lonely. Prince Osvalt said that his older brother had no qualms about laying down his life for the sake of his kingdom, but it looked to me like he put up a brave front to conceal his grief.

We spent a bit more time chatting, then politely exchanged farewells and parted ways. Back at the mansion, I called it a day, leaving Grace some homework for the night. She was such a nice girl, earnest and thoughtful. If Mia were here, I was sure the two of them would have become good friends.

The next day, I joined Grace in her morning practice. Watching her work to hone her ritual-invoking skills reminded me of my own training. The person who'd been my mentor, and appraised my skills so highly, had been Saint Hildegard Adenauer—Girtonia's previous saint and my aunt.

Though my Aunt Hildegard was a strict teacher, she always praised me whenever I reached a milestone. She said that she only scolded me so that I would build up the mental strength to bounce back from the harsh education my parents put me through.

One day, after my aunt had been drinking for a while, she confessed, "I'm sorry, Philia. The way your parents treat you isn't your fault. Your parents and I never got along, and you're exactly like me when I was young, so I guess they ended up hating you, too."

Come to think of it, I resembled my aunt more than I did my parents. From their perspective, I wasn't just dull and unappealing—I was the spitting image of someone they hated. No wonder they found it practically impossible to love me.

Lately, to be honest, I was starting to think it was a good thing I had left my kingdom.

As I was lost in my reverie, a royal carriage stopped in front of the gate. Prince Osvolt stepped out.

"Whoa! Is that the training for ancient rituals?" His Highness greeted us in his usual cheery voice. He was holding a box of cake from a popular patisserie in the capital. Lena accepted the gift, wreathed in smiles.

"Yes, it is. Grace is a good student. She's eager to learn and quick to improve, so teaching her is quite rewarding."

"Good to hear. But if you ask me, it's all thanks to her teacher. Lady Philia,

you may not have noticed, but you have a gift for teaching. You've taught me so much about fertilizer and such."

"You're very knowledgeable about agriculture yourself, Your Highness, but I'm honored to receive such praise."

Prince Osvalt complimented me every time we met. I was just sharing what I knew, and yet he praised me for being a good teacher. It was awfully kind of him.

It was unusual for him to visit in the morning, though. "Pardon me," I said, "but what brings you here? Something tells me you didn't just come here to watch Grace train."

He laughed. "You sure are sharp. This won't be easy to say, but..."

"What is it...?"

"Argh...this is a tough one... Just listen to what I have to say first, okay? You see, Prince Julius of Girtonia has offered to take you back."

"Take me back?"

A chill ran down my spine.

Never would I have imagined this of Prince Julius. What was he thinking? I couldn't quell the unease raging within me.

Mia, are you all right over there?

Unable to clearly grasp the situation, I could only fear the worst.

Chapter 3:

The Sisters Make Their Move

“So, to protect all of Girtonia, we’ll have to deploy troops at each key point. I’ll need them to buy me time while I cast my barrier magic.”

I’d prepared this presentation to inform Prince Julius of the Demon Realm’s approach, the disaster that could befall Girtonia as a result, and the countermeasures we could take. My sister Philia had recommended I keep her name out of the conversation, so I did as advised and passed off her ideas as mine.

Lounging languidly on a sofa, chin in hand, Prince Julius listened to me without interrupting. But as soon as I finished speaking, he got up and snaked his arms around my waist.

“Give me a break. You’re starting to sound like your sister. Listen up: politics is a man’s job. It’d be stupid to spend money and deploy troops for something that may or may not happen once every few centuries. Not happening. Where am I supposed to get the money?”

He hadn’t paid attention to a single word I said. Worse, he laughed and insisted that women shouldn’t talk about politics. And he claimed to be broke...

“Pardon me, Your Highness, but didn’t our kingdom receive a considerable payment when my sister left for Parnacorta?” I couldn’t resist the opportunity to press him on the matter. Where was the money he’d gotten in exchange for Philia?

“Oh, that? I already spent most of it on golden statues of the royal family. They’ll be unveiled at the next Foundation Day Festival. Sooner or later, I’ll commission a statue for you, too. I bet you’ll like it!”

This kingdom really was headed for ruin.

Things had been much better when His Majesty the King was still in good health. When Prince Julius first began to assume power, I couldn’t have imagined how foolish a ruler he’d be.

A statue of me? It was like a bad joke. Selling Philia off was unforgivable to begin with, but to add insult to injury by wasting the money...

“Why, you’re trembling? Gets you that excited, does it?”

Idiot prince, I’m shaking with anger.

I was in an impossible position. Trying to get this fool to see reason was an exercise in futility. Was there anyone out there who could talk some sense into him?

As I wondered what to do, the door to the palace’s drawing room opened.

“Mia, is it true that the Demon Realm is drawing near to our world?” His Majesty the King made his entrance.

“F-Father!”

His Majesty was the last person I expected. Because of his poor health, he rarely appeared in public these days. Was it all right for him to be up and about?

“Yes, it’s true,” I said. “If no precautions are taken, our kingdom may be overrun with monsters.”

Prince Julius snorted. “So emotional. Father, that’s a woman for you. You don’t have to humor her moods.”

His Majesty turned on Prince Julius. “Silence!” he bellowed. “No one understands the threat of the Demon Realm better than a saint! Was sending Saint Philia away without consulting anyone on the matter not folly enough for you? Now you make light of Saint Mia as well?”

My suspicions were confirmed at last. Prince Julius had sold Philia for his own selfish reasons. There was no denying it. His Majesty always praised my sister’s accomplishments; he would never have agreed to such an idea.

“Now, now, Father. I didn’t ship Philia off on a whim. She didn’t have the heart to ignore a neighboring kingdom in need...”

“As her fiancé, you could have counseled her to stay. Mia, please continue...” His Majesty began to cough and double over in pain. His attendants scrambled to his assistance.

“Do you have any more of Lady Philia’s medicine?” an attendant asked.

“It’s all gone,” another answered. “I asked the royal apothecary about it, but he said the formula was thrown away.”

“But no medicine is as effective!”

Philia had developed that medication especially for His Majesty. How could the apothecary simply throw the formula away? Suddenly I saw even more sinister implications behind Prince Julius’s decision to send Philia away. Was he wicked enough to plot his father’s death to get him out of the way?

Between coughs, His Majesty continued to admonish his son. “Julius, as the king of Girtonia, I command you to listen carefully to Mia and heed her words.”

“Yes, yes, just as Father wishes,” Prince Julius replied with a look of annoyance.

I should have known it was too much to expect Prince Julius to act on the royal command he’d received. The only “countermeasures” he enacted were nothing but security theater. There were practically no troop reinforcements. Every time I asked for backup, he just laughed and insisted everything was fine.

“Mia, just trust in Girtonia’s best and brightest. They’re protecting the safest place in the world.”

Prince Julius wasn’t joking at all. That was what he seriously believed.

Fine, then. Maybe I could take advantage of his ego.

“I know, Your Highness, but I’m still so scared. As my fiancé, would you please join me on my saintly duties tomorrow?” I wrapped myself around his arm and whispered sweetly into his ear. It was humiliating to touch him like that, but I had no choice.

“A ha ha! Well, aren’t you a cutie? That’ll be a piece of cake! I’ll show you that there’s nothing to be scared of.”

What a simpleton. It didn’t take much for Prince Julius to be taken in by my words.

Your Highness, there's nothing safe about a saint's work. You'll find that out for yourself tomorrow.

“Waaah! Hurry! Hurry! This way! This way; hurry up!” Prince Julius’s screams echoed across the land.

It was hard to believe this was the smug prince who, not long ago, had brazenly marched to the edge of the wilderness to watch me cast barriers.

Lately, Philia’s warning was looking truer day by day. Throughout the wilderness, it was now common for hordes of monsters to spring out of nowhere.

Prince Julius had an arrogant demeanor when he arrived with a long line of bodyguards in tow, but seeing the ferocious monsters roaring and attacking in droves wiped the smirk off his face. Immediately losing his composure, with tears in his eyes, he hastily commanded his bodyguards to exterminate the monsters for him.

“M-m-my stomach’s starting to hurt,” Prince Julius stammered, his face deathly pale. “W-we should get going.” Not even ten minutes had passed since he showed up at the scene. Up until then, he was still insisting that Girtonia was the safest place in the world.

“Leaving so soon, Your Highness?” I resisted the urge to laugh. I couldn’t let the kingdom collapse because one man misjudged the severity of the situation. “As you can see, the situation has gotten too dangerous for me to handle on my own. Do you understand now?”

“D-d-danger? What are you talking about? You and Girtonia’s best are holding up just fine. I’m not panicking, Mia! I just wanna go home and take care of this tummyache.”

Stubborn to the very end, His Highness continued to bluff, refusing to admit that anything was his fault. Whining about going home, too—the nerve!

This person really had no place at the top. The best thing he could do for his

kingdom was to get eaten by a monster.

“Your Highness, we’re surrounded by monsters. We can’t go home until we defeat them all.”

“Wh-when did that happen?!” His Highness let out a high-pitched, ear-piercing scream as his knees buckled and he slumped to the ground.

This wasn’t good. It might already be too late.

The barriers I’d cast looked like they were about to break. I managed to fix the most critical points, but I couldn’t keep up. If only I could stay up all night without affecting my precision, like Philia, I could’ve gotten more done, but that was beyond my capabilities.

The kingdom’s defenses would crumble soon: today at the earliest, within three days at the latest.

We needed extra military power. That way, if the barriers broke and a horde of monsters attacked, the troops could keep the monsters at bay until I showed up and got my work done.

“It won’t be long until more incidents like this pop up across the kingdom, and I won’t be able to get everything under control. I can’t be everywhere at once, after all. Please, Your Highness. If this keeps up, not even the royal capital will be spared.”

“Gah! A woman is better seen and not heard. You don’t have to be like Philia, you know. Just smile! That’s what gives everyone hope.”

Even after all this, no matter how thoroughly and nicely I tried to explain the direness of the situation to His Highness, he’d just give me his usual line: “I don’t want to hear a woman’s opinion.” How could someone be such a blockhead? Worse, he wouldn’t keep Philia’s name out of his mouth, constantly mentioning how much of a disgrace she was to him.

“Or do you want to embarrass me like Philia did?”

“Embarrass you...?”

“Forget about it.”

Did something happen between him and Philia? I’d been wondering about it

for a while, but he really seemed to have a bone to pick with my sister.

We were interrupted by a growl. A pack of werewolves made their way toward us. I didn't have much of a choice. I'd have to put off casting a replacement barrier to finish the beasts off.

The werewolves howled in agony.

As I prepared to fight, Prince Julius struck my back with tremendous force, shoving me toward the monsters. I shrieked in surprise. "Your Highness?!"

He could have killed me! He'd say that women complained too much, but I'd never met such a whining coward.

I quickly activated an offensive spell that purged the monsters in a clean sweep while His Highness crouched down, trembling all over. Then he said something unbelievable.

"This is all Philia's fault for turning her back on her kingdom and leaving. We should drag her back, hold her responsible for the monsters, and put her in charge of eliminating all of them."

I thought that if I gave this rotten man the fright of his life by giving him an up-close look at the monsters we dealt with, the shock would jolt him into rethinking his ways. But instead, here he was, talking nonsense.

What are you saying? Philia isn't here because you sold her!

"That's right...I could make Marquess Adenauer cough up the money. It's his fault we got into this mess, anyway. The man could hardly wait to sell his daughter off. He was beside himself at the prospect of getting good money for Philia..." In his rambling, Prince Julius let slip that Father was very enthusiastic about selling Philia.

So Father was also in on it, after all. I'd had an inkling, but I hadn't wanted to believe it.

Philia, I'm so sorry I didn't notice this at the time. I'll make up for it. I swear I'll protect this kingdom.

And whatever happens, I'll make sure everyone who wronged you gets their just deserts.

“Take my sister back? But, Your Highness, hasn’t the gold from Parnacorta all been spent?”

Terrified by the monsters, Prince Julius suddenly wanted my sister back. I thought he finally grasped the urgency of the situation, but it seemed more that his train of thought had derailed. Parnacorta had paid a fortune because they recognized my sister’s worth. Even if Prince Julius could come up with a reimbursement, I doubted they’d be keen to return her.

Besides, my sister had cast a Great Purification Circle over Parnacorta, and she was needed there to maintain it. She couldn’t just break that barrier and abandon the kingdom she’d promised to protect. His Highness would never understand, but at this point, Parnacorta’s fate was tied to Philia. If I were the ruler of that kingdom, I might even put her under a light form of house arrest.

His Highness continued to ramble. “If it’s money they need, we can pay in installments. I could raise taxes. Oh, and I should get your father on board, too; I’ll seize his assets if I have to. We’re gonna be in-laws soon, and family should help out, right? It’s his fault, anyway. You should’ve seen the look in his eyes when he heard that Philia would fetch a high price! He was practically drooling! That incompetent fool didn’t even think for a moment that selling her would be a bad idea.”

Amazing. He didn’t think twice about insulting my father right in front of me. Then again, I was still reeling from the confirmation that Father had been keen on selling Philia, so I wasn’t too offended on his behalf.

“Parnacorta won’t hand my sister back,” I said. “I’m sure of it. Not even if we pay double the price. She’s become an important figure over there. If you’re going to raise money, please use it instead to reinforce our monster-slaying troops. We can’t completely prevent the attacks, but we can at least keep them under control.” I was almost too disgusted to speak to him, but the kingdom’s fate was in his hands.

“Twice the price still wouldn’t be enough?” His Highness laughed sarcastically. “Philia’s not worth that much. So what if she’s got a knack for casting barriers? That’s all there is to her. Mia, what’s with you these days? There’s no need for

someone as cute as yourself to act like your sister. You're my future wife. Know your place."

Sigh. Everything I say goes over his head...

I never thought His Highness could be this much of a buffoon. No wonder he hadn't been able to get along with someone as wise as my sister. How stupid of me to not see it at the time.

"In that case," I said, trying to stay calm, "could you at least reinstate the previous saint, my aunt Hildegard Adenauer? She's also gifted at barrier magic."

"The previous saint, huh? Fine, I'll make it happen. It'll take a while to get Philia back, anyway."

Our Aunt Hilda retired from duty after Philia and I became saints. But as far as I knew, she didn't have any health problems, so she ought to be able to return to active duty.

Even so, this measure was just a drop in the bucket.

At the end of the day, Prince Julius stood in the way of the kingdom's best interests. So long as he continued to call the shots, Girtonia's downward spiral into ruin would drag on. He had to be unseated from power.

But for that to happen, we'd need His Majesty back. And the medicine Philia made for him had already run out...

"Anyway, why don't we talk about this kingdom's future in bed? We're already engaged, so it can't hurt to get to know each other a little better..."

"What are you saying?" I gasped. "We aren't even married yet. If you really cherish me, please don't get ahead of yourself."

Lewd thoughts at a time like this—really? He was even lower than an animal!

I'll never let you lay a finger on me, so wipe that dirty smile off your face.

Dashing out of the palace, I returned home to find Father pale. His Highness must have asked for the gold back. Father's visions of a huge mansion were crumbling before him.

“Mia,” he snapped, “why is His Highness suddenly asking for Philia? Do you know anything about this? Do you know he wants to seize our assets?”

“I’m the one who should be asking the questions. Now, Father, answer me, and I’ll give you an answer in return: How could you sell your own daughter?”

“Sell Philia? What gave you that idea? I would never... Anyway, we’re done for! If our money runs out, our family will...”

Father went back to panicking. All he could think about was money. I couldn’t be more disappointed than I already was. Thinking of how badly these people must have treated my sister, and how foolish I’d been not to see through them, made my heart hurt so much I felt sick.

I’ve been a massive idiot.

Philia had never shared her deeper feelings, and I’d assumed she was raised as kindly as I was. In hindsight, she didn’t live away from us because she had lofty ideals. It was because Father and Mother didn’t want her around.

Why hadn’t I noticed until it was too late?

Now Philia’s skills were needed to save the kingdom. To start with, I had to learn the formula she’d come up with for His Majesty’s medicine, so the king could get well enough to take action.

“Should I send another letter?” I mused aloud. “Inspections have gotten tighter lately, but maybe I can slip something through...”

“Do you wish me to deliver it for you?”

“H-Himari? Wha...?”

“Please be quiet.”

Just as I was wondering how to get out of this sticky situation, Himari, my sister’s ninja bodyguard, showed up once more. That settled it.

My plan to overthrow Prince Julius begins now.

I explained to Himari that His Majesty had fallen ill, and that Prince Julius’s

incompetence was destroying the kingdom. She listened calmly. “I see. Do you wish for me to send Prince Julius to his grave?”

“Send him to his grave? Himari, you say such terrifying things!”

When I told Himari that His Majesty had fallen ill, and that having Prince Julius in charge would lead to our kingdom’s downfall, she suggested assassinating His Highness without missing a beat. Even for a bodyguard, she could be terrifying.

Himari told me that on my sister’s orders, she’d been at my side for the last few days, but I hadn’t noticed her presence at all. I could easily believe she was capable of assassination.

“I recommend poison. If one of these darts pierces a blood vessel, he’ll depart quickly and peacefully as his soul slips away to the underworld...”

“Wait just a minute!” I stopped Himari from going into any more gruesome detail. “That’s going too far. For the time being, I just want to strip him of his political power—you know, neutralize him.”

Not that it wasn’t tempting. Assassination would indeed be a quick way to get the job done. There wasn’t much time left to lose, and if His Highness’s death would save his subjects’ lives, maybe it was worth it.

But that man was still royalty. If he were assassinated, His Majesty the King would spare no effort to hunt the culprit down. Himari was certainly stealthy, but if it ever came to light that someone working for Parnacorta had killed a Girtonian prince, war would break out.

The best possible solution was to make an ally out of His Majesty, then convince him to denounce and dethrone Prince Julius.

“As Lady Mia wishes,” said Himari. “Shall I ask Lady Philia for the formulation for His Majesty’s medicine? Then the royal apothecary may recreate and administer the medicine to His Majesty, under threat if need be.”

“Yes, that’s the plan. His Highness’s circle is filled with incompetent sycophants. They’re half of the reason His Highness started pulling away from my sister.”

The first step was to secure His Majesty’s medicine. Himari assured me that

she could help me contact Philia, so that was one weight off my mind.

As for His Highness's cronies, maybe we could use them to expose His Highness's misdeeds. Prince Julius had already revealed enough to convince me that his circle was up to something shady behind the scenes.

"After that," I declared, "we win over the pro-crown prince faction—the supporters of His Highness, Prince Fernand."

"Crown Prince Fernand? I am given to understand he seldom makes public appearances, due to his poor constitution."

"He does have health problems, but that's only half the reason he's rarely seen in public."

As the firstborn, Crown Prince Fernand was supposed to be next in line to the throne, but he was essentially under house arrest. Because he was born sickly, a faction of supporters formed around Prince Julius, asserting that Prince Fernand was unfit to be king.

They believed that the rightful heir to the throne was Prince Julius, and he'd colluded with them to have Prince Fernand locked up in the palace on the pretext of protecting his weak constitution. *I swear, that scoundrel...*

Back when this political upheaval began, I thought it was just a logical outcome of public concern over Prince Fernand's poor health. Many people thought it'd be better for the kingdom's stability to have a future king who was hale and hearty.

Prince Fernand hadn't objected to his confinement, so he probably thought the same way. Even when His Majesty, who had been furious when he learned about the confinement, offered to release Prince Fernand, he declined. And thus, Prince Julius was able to do as he pleased after His Majesty fell ill.

"What's the pro-crown prince faction like, then?"

"Basically, all the people who still believe the crown prince is the rightful heir to the throne. But the pro-Julius faction is stronger, so they've been backed into a corner."

"And because you wish to oust Prince Julius, your interests and those of this

faction align?”

“Yes. As a saint, I can bring together the pro-Fernand faction and lead them in denouncing Prince Julius. Then together, Prince Fernand and I will protect the kingdom.”

I couldn't convince His Majesty to act all by myself. There's strength in numbers, and I needed the public behind me. That was why I thought of using the crown prince. If the movement of people denouncing Prince Julius and demanding the return of the crown prince grew, His Majesty might be persuaded to listen to what they had to say.

“I believe I see the outline of your strategy,” said Himari. “But while it seems impressive, I fear there are flaws.”

“I'm glad it makes sense to you. You're right. Prince Fernand is crucial to this plan, but he doesn't concern himself with politics or factional disputes. He seems completely indifferent to it all.”

The man was a career shut-in who wouldn't leave his room, even at His Majesty's command. Dragging him into the limelight would be an arduous challenge.

“Unfortunately, I don't have a better idea, so I'll have to do whatever I can to make this work. Healing people's hearts is part of a saint's job...at least, it's supposed to be. As a saint, I'll do what I can to tear down the walls around Prince Fernand's apathetic heart.”

And so I set out to restore His Majesty to health and win over the pro-Fernand faction.

But I still had no idea what to do about Julius's efforts to get Philia back. Girtonia was teetering on the edge of disaster. And with the Demon Realm rising, monster attacks were only going to get worse.

The chaos would only deepen from here.

“We never dared imagine Saint Mia would work with us.”

With Himari's help, I found a member of the pro-Fernand faction among my

bodyguards. Pierre, as it turned out, was the leader of the faction. He was also the new captain of my bodyguard regiment; Prince Julius had fired the previous captain, blaming the poor man for scaring and embarrassing him in front of me. The previous captain wasn't the only casualty, either. After I gave His Highness a taste of life on the front lines, he'd completely reshuffled my guards.

Fearing that he'd plunge Girtonia into ruin, more people were growing uneasy with the way Prince Julius was running the kingdom. In particular, dissent was growing within the military. As a result, supporters of the crown prince were gradually gaining influence.

I'd thought the first hurdle I had to clear would be sneaking past my bodyguards to reach out to the pro-Fernand faction. It was a lucky break that the new captain of the guard happened to be one of the crown prince's supporters. Pierre said he was secretly gathering people who opposed Prince Julius, even though it was tough doing so while working under His Highness. To me, that proved that Prince Julius's approval rating had reached a new low.

"Frankly," said Pierre, "His Highness is a terrible ruler. He thinks of us soldiers as expendable. If these monster attacks keep increasing, things will spin out of control across the kingdom. And yet he still won't send reinforcements."

"That's not all," I said. "He reduced the size of our troops so he could afford to commission golden statues of the royal family."

"If this keeps up, our numbers will continue to shrink. Even with your best efforts to reinforce the barriers, we won't be able to properly protect the kingdom."

The royal ground troops were in an even more desperate position than my personal guard. I prioritized assisting areas where barriers were completely destroyed, but lately, monsters had been springing up like weeds, destroying my barriers almost as quickly as I could raise them. I was kept constantly busy. Weakened barriers meant more monsters, but there simply weren't enough soldiers to exterminate them.

The soldiers knew all too well what happened in areas I couldn't attend to, while Prince Julius had no clue. As their sense of urgency grew, so did their dissatisfaction with His Highness.

But for all that, Prince Julius was powerful as ever, since he continued to enjoy the support of the elites. The only way to defy him was for His Majesty to return to power and for Prince Fernand to rise up and unite his supporters.

“You want to meet Prince Fernand? He wouldn’t even emerge for His Majesty, but maybe for you, Saint Mia...”

Frail in constitution and averse to taking center stage, Crown Prince Fernand, older brother of Prince Julius, had kept himself secluded in his chambers for years. He was what you’d call a recluse. It wasn’t just that he didn’t involve himself in politics—he also insisted that he didn’t want or need anyone to pay any attention to him. His health issues and personality were exactly why so many came to believe that Prince Julius was better suited to take the throne. And now, just as they’d hoped, the kingdom was now in Prince Julius’s hands.

Regardless, I had no option but to meet and talk to Prince Fernand. I needed to coax him to step out of the shadows and condemn Prince Julius.

“That’s right. I have to try to convince His Highness somehow. But how can I meet him?” While casting barriers, I took the chance to discuss my plans with Pierre and my other bodyguards who belonged to the pro-Fernand faction. There were few other opportunities to talk freely about the plan, so we had to work out the details whenever we could.

“Lady Mia, you’re engaged to Prince Julius. If you asked to introduce yourself to the crown prince on that pretext, I’m sure Prince Julius wouldn’t be able to say no. Lady Philia must have done the same.”

“Did my sister meet Prince Fernand?” That was news to me, but of course Philia would have wanted to introduce herself to her future brother-in-law.

“I heard that his health greatly improved after taking some medicine Lady Philia made, but later on, His Highness stopped taking it.”

“Why? If my sister’s medicine was working, he should’ve continued.”

“My guess is that when His Highness found himself approaching full health once more, he grew too terrified to continue.”

“Is there such a thing as fear of being healthy?”

“Until that point, he’d used his poor health as a reason not to go outside. But with a healthy body, he had no excuse to stay cooped up. I think he decided things were better off the way they were.”

He stopped taking the medicine Philia had developed especially for him, just so he could go on lying to himself? What a pathetic reason.

How sad. But if that were the case...

“If he’s self-aware enough to realize that he’s been making excuses all this time, then deep down inside, he must know he can’t go on like this forever. That means there’s still hope.”

That settled it for me—I had to meet Prince Fernand.

I resolved to awaken the fighting spirit within him. As a saint, it was up to me to help everyone in my kingdom, even if I had to do it one person at a time.

“Well then, Lady Mia, I wish you luck in reaching out to His Highness... What the...?!”

Pierre was the middle of a bow when, the next instant, he drew his sword and charged toward a tree behind me.

“Leave it to me, Lady Mia,” said Himari, who seemed caught by surprise for once.

I was impressed Pierre had sensed Himari, who was hiding close to me. Until now, Himari had managed to evade my guards’ notice. His sword met her dagger. I’d heard that Pierre was our kingdom’s finest swordsman, and he lived up to his reputation.

Finally, I had a bodyguard that I could count on.

“Pierre, please put your sword away. Himari is a spy working for me.”

“A spy?”

“My deepest apologies, Lady Mia. Through a personal failing, I have been detected.”

At my insistence, Pierre lowered his sword. That was a close call. If a

supporter of Prince Julius had found Himari, we'd have been in deep trouble.

"Sorry for charging at you. I thought you were some scoundrel attempting to assault Lady Mia."

"Not at all," Himari replied in a low voice. "Your duty is to serve, as is mine. My lack of stealth reflected a failure on my part." With a final look of shame, she vanished.

As a consummate professional, Himari must have found it humiliating for Pierre to notice her lurking close by.

Lately, I'd been making the rounds of the locations most plagued by monsters. More and more often, I had to fight off monsters while casting barriers.

I could tell that if I kept going like this, I was going to burn out. But whenever I warned Prince Julius, he would still say in a carefree tone, "Take it easy. Philia will be back soon."

At least I'd managed to convince Prince Julius to call my aunt Hilda back to duty as a saint. All I could do was hope she'd be up to the task.

When I told my parents about Aunt Hilda coming out of retirement, it had soured their moods. It seemed there was bad blood between them. Did it have something to do with her retiring the moment my sister and I became saints?

With those thoughts in mind, after wrapping up the day's duties, I told Prince Julius that I wanted to meet Prince Fernand. Surprisingly, it went more smoothly than I expected.

"Personally, I don't think you need to waste your time on him, but, fine. When he sees what a gorgeous fiancée I have, I bet he'll be jealous!" His Highness laughed smugly.

I still couldn't believe how Prince Julius acted like his engagement to Philia never happened. It didn't even occur to him that Prince Fernand might have questions when an entirely new fiancée showed up at his door.

In any case, I had permission to visit the crown prince. The next day, I was

shown to Prince Fernand's room.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I am Mia Adenauer, Prince Julius's fiancée."

I introduced myself to the thin young man with light brown hair who sat on a bed. Though he had a handsome face, his pallid complexion and hollow eyes made him look sickly. Such was my first impression of Prince Fernand, Crown Prince of Girtonia.

At first, Prince Julius planned to accompany me, but I put a stop to that by asking Pierre to create a distraction. And so, as we were about to leave for the crown prince's quarters, Pierre approached Prince Julius for His Highness's opinion on the designs of the golden statues. Prince Julius still intended to join me, but at least he'd been delayed. I had to act fast, before he showed up.

"Mia?" Prince Fernand tilted his head in confusion. "That's strange; I could've sworn Julius's fiancée was named Philia." He seemed to have no idea that Philia had been sold to another kingdom.

"My sister Philia Adenauer's engagement with His Highness Prince Julius was called off," I said. "She had to go serve as a saint in Parnacorta."

"He let her go, did he? Remarkable that Father let him do that. I only met Philia once, but I agree with those who believe she's the greatest saint in Girtonian history."

I was pleasantly surprised that Prince Fernand had such a high opinion of Philia. "His Majesty has been in poor condition, so His Highness Prince Julius has been ruling the kingdom in his stead," I said. If Prince Fernand didn't know Philia was gone, he probably hadn't heard about His Majesty's dire health, either.

"I see. So he's acting like he's king now, eh? I suppose that means he's finally going to get rid of me, too. I'm the only one left in the way of his ambitions."

Whether he'd lost all sense of self-preservation or resigned himself to despair, I didn't know, but Prince Fernand spoke quite frankly. Even though he knew that Prince Julius would cast him out in his quest to be king, he still wouldn't lift

a finger.

“Some people would like Your Highness to inherit the throne,” I said.

“They’re just old-fashioned—preoccupied with formalities, caught up in the presumption that the firstborn son should be heir to the throne.”

“It’s nothing like that! If Prince Julius remains in power, our kingdom is done for.”

Maybe if Girtonia wasn’t in crisis, I could accept Prince Fernand’s resigned words. But things were different now. With the situation this dire, I wouldn’t stand for Prince Fernand’s refusal to rise to the call.

Staring at me fixedly with hollow eyes, Prince Fernand said, “That’s no way to speak about your own fiancé. Do you hate my brother?”

I could’ve said otherwise to smooth things over, but I wasn’t going to lie just to save my own skin. “Yes, I hate him. But it doesn’t just boil down to that. I stand by what I said not as Prince Julius’s fiancée, but as this kingdom’s saint.”

Making sure to clarify that this had nothing to do with my personal hatred for Prince Julius, I told Prince Fernand about the imminent threat to our kingdom.

Yes, I definitely held a grudge against Prince Julius, but my personal feelings were a different matter. It really was Prince Julius’s fault that our kingdom was in such a bad state.

“You truly are a saint, just like Philia. She had the same look in her eyes...like she had to help everyone around her, no matter the cost. So what did you really come to see me for?”

“Your Highness, I’d like to ask you to rise up and help us overthrow His Highness Prince Julius. Please, for the sake of our kingdom, I beg you!”

I put all my heart and soul into those words, hoping fervently that I could get him on our side.

But Prince Fernand replied, without missing a beat, “No way.”

He then rolled over and covered himself with his blanket.

I’d known this wouldn’t be easy, but the crown prince had turned out to be

more of a pain than I expected. All the same, I had no intention of accepting his answer and backing down.

Fernand

“**Y**OUR HIGHNESS, I ask once more. For the future of this kingdom, please rise up and condemn His Highness Prince Julius.”

Ugh, what an annoying conversation. I was already disturbed when I got word that Julius’s fiancée would be visiting me—but then a different woman showed up, not Philia. She said she was Philia’s sister, Mia Adenauer. Frankly speaking, she was attractive. There wasn’t a hint of gloom in her eyes. You could tell right away that she was raised full of love. She was the polar opposite of Philia, who was highly capable but stiff and dull.

But Mia then began to speak in a way that reminded me of Philia. As it turned out, she wanted me to rise up and help her overthrow Julius. Did she get engaged to my brother to destroy him? Such incredible drive.

Sorry to disappoint you after you took the trouble to visit, but I have no fighting spirit at all.

Naturally, I refused to help. This didn’t discourage Mia in the least.

“Leave me alone,” I said. “I’m weak; I was born sickly. You should know that. No doubt Father, too, wants Julius to succeed him. I mean, look at me.”

That’s right. I’m weak.

Me overthrowing Julius, uplifting the people, and saving the kingdom? Ridiculous.

I knew Father secretly thought of me as useless; he was just too kind to show it.

Mia pressed on. “I heard the medicine my sister Philia made for you was working. Why did you stop taking it?”

“Oh, that medicine? That brew your sister concocted for me was terrifying. Listen, if I got better, it would only create further conflict. Julius would be more

than happy to kill me. In fact, I hear he has plans in place if I cause trouble. If I were cured, it would quite literally be the death of me.”

I’d always felt small next to the quick-witted Philia Adenauer. It would have been enough for her to stick to casting barriers and other saintly duties, but she involved herself in all sorts of other endeavors, from medicine to agriculture to design. It was kind of her to spare a thought for her fiancé’s older brother. But it was a mistake for me to have ever accepted her well-intended gift.

I couldn’t stop shuddering at the thought of what would happen if I became hale and hearty. If I were in full health, the matter of succession would persist, and Julius would have to take steps to eliminate me.

“If we could guarantee your safety,” said Mia, “would you be amenable to taking the medicine again?”

“...I-I don’t know. Even then...”

Mia, you’re just like Philia. Calm and logical, the type who thinks things through.

Yes—if it were possible to grant me complete protection from my brother, my misgivings would be eased.

But human nature wasn’t that straightforward.

“The truth is, I used to hate this sickly body of mine so much I wanted to die. But eventually, it became a part of me. Now I cling to my illness for dear life. I tell myself that I’m too weak to do anything, but I’m holding myself back.”

I was disgusted at myself for blurting out something so spineless. What kind of fool was I? I’d spent my whole life accepting that I was powerless because I was weak. If I lost that excuse, I’d have to take full accountability for myself. I was born the crown prince, after all. I had a responsibility to this kingdom.

“Your Highness, do you intend to live your entire life in fear? When my sister’s engagement was suddenly called off, and she found out that she was to be sold to another kingdom, she faced her fate head-on. Ever since then, she’s used her abilities to protect the kingdom she was sold to.”

“Well, of course. Your sister is strong. She’s a hard-working woman with many

talents. I'm not like that at all. All I can do is try to go on living with my failures."

Even though I'd only met her once, I knew Philia was a formidable woman. Hearing news of all her exploits, day in and day out, I could tell she had unwavering resolve and the fortitude to match. She probably didn't even resent Julius or her parents for selling her.

It was impressive that Mia would go the extra mile to try to save our kingdom, but even with her using Philia as an example, I wasn't going to budge.

I was born a failure. Only the life of a failure awaited me.

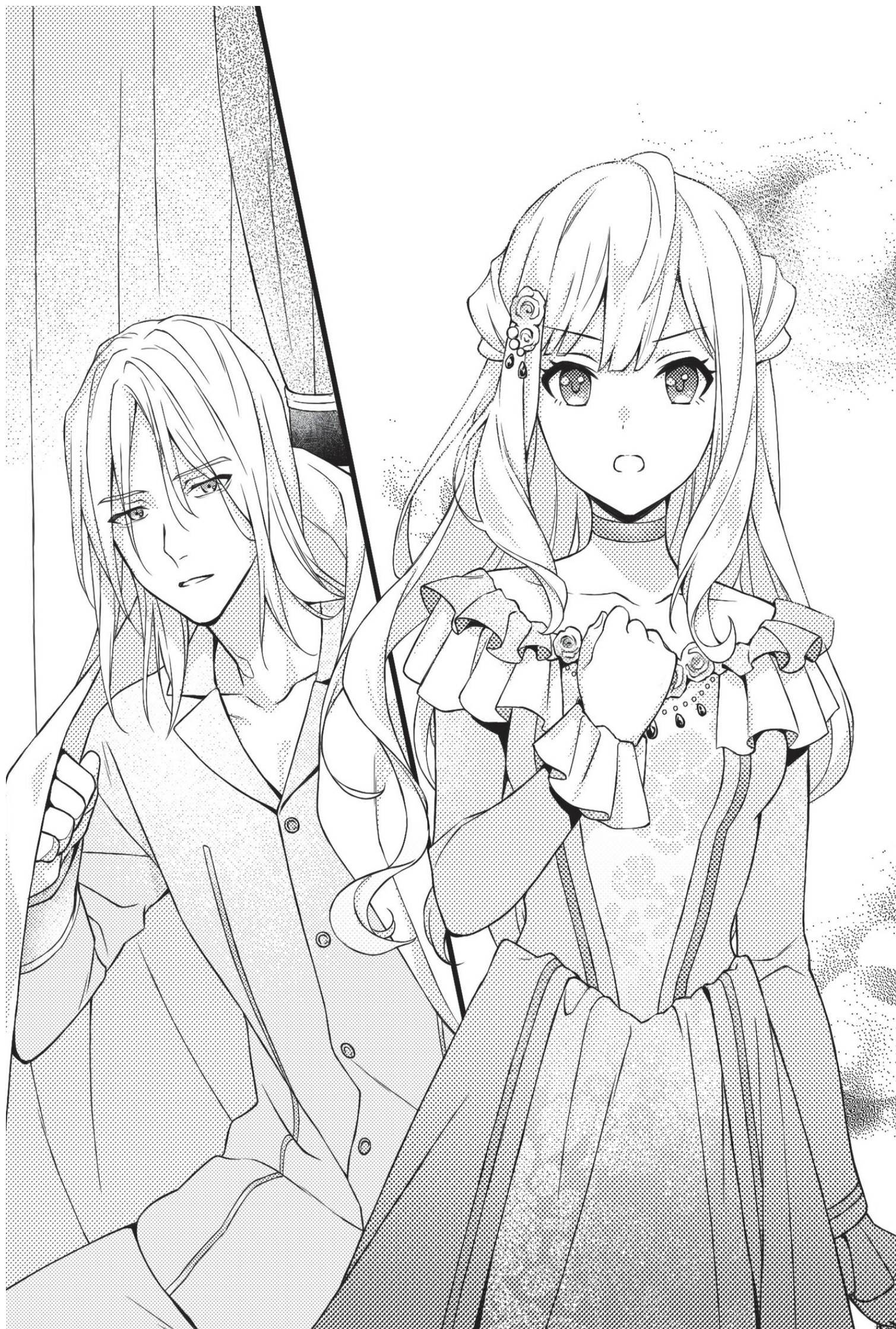
"Your Highness, if you go on like this, you can't even be called a failure. Failing would imply that you made an *effort*. Don't you think it's sad to live your life constantly running away and making excuses? You don't qualify as a loser if you never even tried."

What did she mean by that? And why was she trying so hard to motivate me?

Peering out of my blanket, I found myself staring into Mia's eyes. As usual, her gaze was steady. I couldn't look away from those clear eyes.

"Even if you lose, you can take pride in the fact that you stood and fought. Isn't that better? At least, that's what I'd prefer!"

That's what she'd prefer, huh? I didn't think anyone had ever spoken to me so frankly.



For some unknown reason, a warmth began to spread through my chest.

Maybe Mia had succeeded in reaching into my heart and coaxing out the feelings that lay buried there. Only someone who actually made an attempt to fight got to be called a loser. If Mia would still like me even if I fought and lost, I thought, my life wouldn't be so bad.

"I haven't lost yet..."

I left the refuge of my blanket and stood up. Damn, my body felt heavy.

Still, I stretched my back. As my kingdom's crown prince, I had to at least try to look decent in front of Mia from now on. Straightening my posture, I stood before her.

"Mia Adenauer, I used to think nothing mattered. Whatever my brother did, as long as I didn't get in his way, everything would be fine. That's what I thought. If I could stay alive that was good enough for me. But now I know I was just moving through life half-dead."

"Your Highness..."

"What you said earlier made me want to try losing. Before this, I wasn't living my life. I want to try to live the way you do."

Light shone through, filling the void in me.

Mia, you are the sun, bringing brightness and warmth to my heart. Even if my impertinent brother and I die at each other's hands, I'll make sure you don't lose.

Whatever I can do, I'll do it. No, wait, that's not right. Even if all my efforts are in vain, I'll do everything I have to do...and everything I couldn't do until now.

Philia

"The situation in Girtonia is even worse than I imagined. Father and Reichardt absolutely refuse to comply with Prince Julius's demands, but I thought I should tell you just in case." Averting his gaze, Prince Osvalt apologetically told me about Prince Julius's request to take me back.

If things at home were that desperate, Prince Julius must have rejected the proposal I drew up for Mia.

I never would've expected him to demand me back. But I couldn't break the Great Purification Circle without leaving Parnacorta vulnerable to hordes of monsters. As a saint, I could never let such a thing happen, so there was no way I'd agree to leave.

It wasn't that I felt nothing for my homeland. I did my utmost to support Mia and share my knowledge with her because I never wished for Girtonia to suffer. But I couldn't protect both countries at once. I was at a loss for what to do.

"Lady Philia, this must be a terrible decision for you." His Highness spoke slowly, as if cautiously finding the right words to say. "We may have not known each other for long, but I know that your sense of responsibility is stronger than anyone's."

He was right. I was worried because I couldn't come up with a clear solution. I was concerned for Girtonia, especially with my sister there, but I couldn't leave Parnacorta.

"As a compromise," said Prince Osvalt, "I proposed deploying the Knights of Parnacorta to Girtonia as reinforcements. Some members of parliament weren't too happy about it, but I think I can win them over. I'll do my best to hold firm."

"The Knights of Parnacorta?"

"Well...not to brag, but they say this kingdom has the finest knights in the world. I'm sure they can help your sister out. So don't worry! Trust me!"

So Prince Osvalt had kept his promise from the other day. He was working to send aid to Girtonia.

I knew the Knights of Parnacorta were known and feared for their bravery. Even outside the knights, many people in the kingdom seemed to excel in martial arts, like my bodyguards Lena, Leonardo, and Himari. If such reliable people could serve as reinforcements for Girtonia, the crisis back home might be averted.

"Thank you for your consideration, Your Highness."

“No need to thank me; we’re the ones who should be thanking you. It’s not just me, Father, and my brother—everyone in the kingdom agrees that you, Lady Philia, are Parnacorta’s hero.”

“Hero? That’s a bit much...”

I just wanted to thank Prince Osvalt for his kindness, but instead he claimed that he and everyone else should be grateful to me. I didn’t accomplish anything great, though; I was just doing my job as a saint.

“Anyway, we still have to wait for Girtonia’s reply. I’ve sent word that while we can’t hand you back, we can send our knights as reinforcements. Surely Prince Julius will accept that.”

Would he? I had my doubts.

Normally, I wouldn’t second-guess such a well-intentioned gesture, but somehow, I had a bad feeling about things to come.

“Well, Lady Philia, I’m sorry for letting you worry. Once things are peaceful again, what do you say we find time to visit your sister back home?”

“Thank you for your kindness, but I can’t take you up on that. As a saint, there’s no way I can leave my kingdom.”

Prince Osvalt laughed. “Always so serious and dedicated! You should learn to relax once in a while.”

“I apologize. My parents also say that I’m too serious, but I’m afraid that’s just how I am.”

Unfortunate as it was that I couldn’t take up such a kind offer, working hard as a saint was all I could do for others. It would be nice if I could find a way to be more charming, but surely that was impossible.

“Oh, well. That’s one of the things that makes you adorable.”

“A-adorable? Er, no one’s ever said that about me...”

I was flustered. I was certain that that was the first time in my life that anyone had called me adorable.

“Never? Really? I have a hard time believing that. I mean, I can’t stop thinking about how cute you are when you’re so focused.” Prince Osvalt laughed again.



After that, His Highness took his leave, evidently in high spirits. I remained frozen to the spot. Something pounded in my ears.

“Lady Philia, your face looks red. Did you catch a cold?”

I jumped. “G-Grace? No, I’m perfectly fine. I never get sick.”

“You’ve never gotten sick, not even once? Saints are really something, huh? I guess a saint’s body is her greatest resource. I learned something new today!”

“Young lady,” said Leonardo, “you have a habit of leaping to the oddest conclusions.”

I think my harsh education had toughened my body—not that I’d given it much thought. My explanations didn’t seem to get through to Grace, though.

In any case, with Prince Osvalt taking action to support Girtonia, I hoped the situation would improve. That night, however, I received a letter that Himari had written on Mia’s behalf. It said that Mia needed my formula for His Majesty’s medicine as part of her plan to overthrow Prince Julius.

Mia, what are you thinking? What exactly is happening over there?

“I’d heard that the king of Girtonia had health issues, but it didn’t occur to me that you’d been helping to treat him...”

“Lady Philia, you’re amazing! Not just as a saint, but as a well-rounded person who’s really involved with the world around her!”

“Do you think they lost the formula for your medicine on purpose?”

My companions in the mansion had much to say about Mia’s letter. Lena’s speculation implied a great deal of ill will—to put things simply, she suspected Prince Julius of plotting to kill His Majesty, the King of Girtonia.

Mia seemed convinced of the same thing. Even beyond that, she was fed up with Prince Julius’s poor leadership. His Highness couldn’t be bothered to take his duty as protector of the kingdom seriously. As a result, Mia was planning to strip him of his political power.

What could’ve driven someone as kind and agreeable as my sister into such a

fury? I guessed it had something to do with Prince Julius trying to summon me back, but I was still perplexed.

“Here’s the formula,” I told Himari. “I’ve refined it many times, and I think this version will allow His Majesty to make a full recovery. Also, please remind Mia not to push herself.”

His Majesty had fallen victim to an epidemic and never fully recovered. The medicine I’d created back in Girtonia was the best I could do to alleviate his symptoms.

But in Parnacorta, while casting barriers, I happened to come across a plant whose extracts increased the medicine’s efficacy. Several patients with the same symptoms as His Majesty had already made a full recovery. Mia’s request couldn’t have come at a better time.

“If what this letter says is true,” said Lena, “Lady Mia is in serious trouble.”

“I know. If I could, I’d put a stop to her plans. But...”

Mia was resolute. Regardless of the dangers ahead, she was determined to do whatever she could as Girtonia’s saint.

At least she had a clear sense of her duties. After all, a saint’s first responsibility is not to the royal family.

Grace spoke up. “Lady Philia, a saint is supposed to protect her kingdom above all, right?” I was fairly sure she was quoting something I’d written in a book.

Before I could say anything, Lena repeated Grace’s words. “A saint is supposed to protect her kingdom?”

Grace explained. “It’s from Lady Philia’s book, *Treatises on Sainthood*. She wrote, ‘It is not the royal family who makes a kingdom, but the people. The fate of a kingdom without its people is doom.’ That book is like my bible, and that passage always stayed with me.”

“I still stand by that,” I said. “One can have a kingdom without a king, but not a kingdom without people. Prince Reichardt says the same thing.”

“A saint’s job is to protect her kingdom to the very end,” said Grace. “Lady

Philia has consistently lived by this principle.”

I’d only intended to write down my thoughts on sainthood, but that book had angered Prince Julius like nothing else. “How dare you disrespect the royal family?” he said. “What nonsense to say that royalty owes its existence to the people!”

In hindsight, I might have written something too radical.

I didn’t know whether she was acting on my influence, but Mia was now following my thoughts to their logical conclusion. Even if I thought it was the right thing to do, would I have had the courage to make such an audacious move?

Mia was noble and strong—all the more reason for me to try to protect her. I hoped that her determination would pay off.

As if reading my mind, Lena reassured me, “It’ll be okay, Lady Philia! The Knights of Parnacorta are strong. I’m sure they can help Lady Mia defend Girtonia!”

With the Knights of Parnacorta lending us their strength, we might still be able to save Girtonia, despite the delay. But after reading Mia’s letter, I began to doubt whether Prince Julius would allow in troops from another kingdom.

My companions continued to weigh in on the situation.

“In any case,” said Lena, “Girtonia’s existence now hinges on Lady Mia.”

“With Lady Philia’s medicine, the king of Girtonia will surely recover and support her,” Grace said confidently.

“Miss Himari will be able to lend her help, too.”

Lately, I couldn’t help but wear my heart on my sleeve. This worried me. In the past, I never would have bothered others by sharing the radical, upsetting content of this letter.

I’m becoming soft.

A saint must be strong in both mind and body...no, her mental fortitude must far surpass her physical strength.

Magic is deeply linked to the spellcaster's inner state. To become adept at purification and casting barriers, I'd undergone intense training to strengthen my mind. But now, I'd been touched by the warmth of people's hearts. I'd started to grow comfortable enough to lean on others.

I had to strengthen my mind once more. Otherwise, I might not be able to protect my kingdom, let alone help Mia protect hers.

Mia was about to walk a thorny path as Girtonia's saint. As her older sister, I had to think of more ways to assist her.

"I made some progress compared to yesterday, but I'm still having a hard time..."

Grace had returned to her training in ancient rituals, but she still struggled with the activation process. I couldn't help thinking that, as with the Great Purification Circle, this situation could've been easily prevented if more people knew archaic languages and how to use them. It was precisely because the Mattilas family studied archaic languages that Grace had been able to quickly progress to the point where she could almost activate a ritual.

Wait a minute. Speaking of ancient rituals...

Before I knew it, I was unfurling an ancient text that I'd read many times over.

"Lady Philia... Lady Philia... Pardon me, Lady Philia!"

"...Lena? How long have you been here?"

"Um, about half an hour, I guess."

I was engrossed in poring over every inch of an ancient tome. The sun had set without my notice, and Lena was calling out to me.

I had a bad habit of forgetting my surroundings when I was concentrating on something. I was at my worst whenever I was reading for research. Often I lost track of time, not realizing I'd been reading for days.

"It looks like tonight's dinner will be a cooking showdown between Mr. Leonardo and Lady Grace's butler, Mr. Arnold," Lena said.

"A c-cooking showdown? Do you mean fighting with food?"

"Well, sort of. They're competing to see who can cook the tastiest dish."

I see. No, wait, I don't. What's the point? Neither of them are professional chefs.

"It's just to show off their skills—you know, for fun. You look like you've been feeling down lately, so we thought it'd cheer you up."

I laughed. "So that's what people here do for fun?"

At Lena's urging, I headed to the dining room. A mouth-watering aroma greeted me.

Standing imposingly before the table were Leonardo and Arnold, both dressed in chef's uniforms, complete with hats. Grace was already seated.

"When it comes to culinary skills, Arnold is on par with a chef from a first-rate restaurant in Bolmern. I feel bad for Leonardo, but I think the outcome's already decided," Grace declared cheerfully, clearly enjoying the entertainment.

"Is that so?" said Lena. "I'll have you know Leonardo is pretty skilled in his own right."

"Leonardo, would you mind if I served my creations first?" Arnold asked.

"Not at all. Why don't you show us what you have to offer?"

I sat down to sample Arnold's cooking.

What could this be? It must be...

Arnold explained, "It's white liver, marinated Bolmern-style. I was lucky enough to come across this rare cut while shopping for ingredients. I hope it suits your palate."

White liver? He must mean fatty chicken liver. I'd read about it in books, but I'd never tried it before. What could it taste like?

"I-it's delicious," I remarked. "It has the characteristic taste of liver, but none of the odor. What's more, the plumpness of the texture is more satisfying. The

seasoning is quite refined, too.”

“A concise and well-reasoned critique—as expected of Lady Philia! Yes, this is very good! It’s a win for Arnold, isn’t it?” Grace puffed out her chest.

Arnold’s culinary skills were unmistakably on a professional level. His food was comparable to the dishes served at palace parties.

“With respect, Lady Grace, I suggest you try my cooking before you declare certain victory for Arnold.” Clearly still full of fighting spirit, Leonardo laid out plates. “I present to you, salmon *mi cuit* accompanied by rillettes. For this dish, I used salmon caught from Parnacorta’s nearby waters. Kindly dig in!”

From what I knew, “*mi cuit*” was a culinary term that meant “half-cooked.” The technique required fine-tuned heat. Rilette, meanwhile, was a meat-based preparation similar to *pâté*. Had Leonardo managed to pair these two dishes harmoniously?

I took a bite. “The *mi cuit* has a delightfully distinctive texture that comes from perfect application of the right amount of heat. The rillettes enhance the salmon’s flavor, elevating the entire dish.”

Grace tried a forkful. Her face softened. “Oh, my. You also did quite well too, Leonardo.”

But now I was in trouble, for Lena asked me to judge both butlers’ dishes. I had no experience with such things. How could I choose?

I pondered. After a while, Lena ventured, “Lady Philia? Er...Lady Philia?”

“Oh! Sorry about that. I just can’t decide which dish was better.”

I gave it serious thought, but really couldn’t decide who to declare the winner, so I gave up. It might have been the most difficult challenge I’d faced. If there was a solution here, I’d sure like to know it.

“Why not declare a tie?” Grace suggested. “That’s what I’d say if it were up to me.”

“A tie? But isn’t a competition about judging people’s merits?”

“Sure, for exams and such, but this is just for fun. The whole point was for you to enjoy yourself, Lady Philia. Sometimes, ambiguity can be good.”

Ambiguity could be good? I'd never thought of it that way before.

Whenever I tackled a proposition, I did my best to arrive at the sole correct answer. I thought that was the right thing to do. The idea that some questions didn't need an answer was very new to me. There were also some propositions for which there was no single objectively correct answer—an obvious truth I hadn't realized before.

And so the cooking showdown between Arnold and Leonardo ended in a tie. After our meal, we drank tea brewed by Lena.

"By the way, Lady Philia, do you cook?" Grace asked.

Cook? *Well...*

"I'm ashamed to admit this, but cooking is one thing I can't seem to get right. Whatever I make ends up a charred mess."

Frankly, I was terrible. I'd look at a recipe and do my best to follow it, but whatever I made always ended up unrecognizable.

"That's surprising to hear," said Grace. "I thought Lady Philia was capable of anything."

"But it's sort of reassuring," Lena added. "Not even Lady Philia is perfect, and that actually makes her easier to relate to."

For some reason, Grace and Lena seemed happy to hear about my awful cooking skills.

Now feeling refreshed, I resumed my task of going through books in archaic languages. Eventually, I found what I was looking for: a way to help Girtonia and Mia.

I had no idea whether it was possible, but I'd managed to find a sliver of hope.

"Sorry to call you so suddenly. Father wants to meet you."

I was summoned to Parnacorta's palace, and Prince Osvalt arrived at my door to pick me up. Why would His Majesty, King Eigelstein of Parnacorta, ask to

meet me? What business did he have with me?

“Am I in trouble? I’m sorry my movements are restricted due to the Great Purification Circle...”

Perhaps His Majesty was angry because, in addition to the drastic decrease in my workload as a saint, Prince Julius was causing trouble over me. And on top of it all, I’d been preoccupied with worry for my homeland of late. If I were accused of neglecting my duties, I wouldn’t be able to argue.

“No, not at all. If Father dares complain about you, I’ll pull out his tongue myself.”

“Is that how liars are treated here?”

“That was a joke! I don’t think Father would say a word against you, but if he did, I’d tell him off. Hurting your feelings is the one thing I absolutely won’t stand for. It gets me all worked up sometimes, to be honest.” Prince Osvalt went on to add that my feelings were important to him.

He mentioned getting worked up. Did the urge to help Mia stem from that same feeling? Until now, I’d never felt driven to act by a fire in my heart.

“As for me,” I said, “I couldn’t bear to see Your Highness lose your temper, especially if you might lose your standing because of me. That’s why, before you even began, I’d stop you.”

“Are you saying that based on your emotions, Lady Philia? Or because it’s rational?”

“I’m not sure. But logically, it’d be out of line for anyone to yell at His Majesty, even his son, so I suppose it’s the latter.”

“That answer is so like you.”

Laughing merrily, Prince Osvalt led me to the throne room. Seated on the throne before me was an older man with an imposing face. It was the first time I’d met King Eigelstein in person.

“Welcome, Saint Philia! I apologize for not meeting you sooner. I am Eigelstein Parnacorta, ruler of this kingdom. As the country’s representative, I would like to express my gratitude to an extraordinary saint like yourself for

coming to our kingdom.”

His Majesty smiled. I was a little surprised to see his intimidating demeanor replaced by a friendly expression. In that moment, I couldn’t help but notice his resemblance to Prince Osvalt.

“I’ve heard about you from my sons,” His Majesty continued. “You deduced the likelihood of a catastrophic situation and wasted no time warning us about it and implementing the best possible countermeasure. Now kingdoms across the continent are making preparations of their own. Saint Philia, your achievements will be spoken of in this kingdom for all eternity.”

I couldn’t believe His Majesty would heap such high praise on me. His words humbled me. I’d only done what was right—I’d never expect to be this highly honored for it.

“I’d be a laughingstock of a king if I didn’t repay you for your accomplishments. So, late as this may be: Lady Philia, to the extent of my abilities, I’d like to grant whatever you desire.”

It was a staggering offer. What I wished had nothing to do with his kingdom, though.

“You want to help the sister you left behind in Girtonia, don’t you?”

I was stunned into silence. How did His Majesty know about Mia? He must have heard from Prince Osvalt.

Since he asked, I might as well answer.

“Yes, I want to help her. She is doing her best to carry out her duties as a saint as well, fighting with all her might. However, the situation in Girtonia is so dire I can’t bear to imagine the worst.”

Oh, no... Why did I say such things to His Majesty? There was no denying that I wanted to help Mia. I wanted to save her no matter what.

But to speak so frankly to the ruler of a kingdom...

“My humblest apologies! It was unbecoming of a saint like myself to express my personal desires. What I said earlier was—”

His Majesty stopped me with a booming voice. “There’s no need to take your

words back! I heard your true feelings, loud and clear!”



“Huh?” The force of his voice almost made me stagger back.

“You are here because our kingdom needed a saint. The Parnacorta royal family is duty bound to reward you for coming to our aid. Rest assured that we’ll make arrangements to grant your wish to the best of our efforts.”

“What do you know? Father’s capable of saying nice things at times.”

“Silence, my wayward son. You should be thinking about how to support Lady Philia. I’ll tell Reichardt to do the same.”

It dawned on me that perhaps Prince Osvalt had been comfortable making that joke earlier because he trusted that his father would try to help me. I hadn’t dared hope it would come to this.

“There’s just one problem,” said Prince Osvalt. “The prince of Girtonia refused aid from the Knights of Parnacorta.”

“Hmm...I see. Does Prince Julius consider our forces a threat to Girtonia? It’s a shame we haven’t built a better relationship between our kingdoms.”

So Prince Julius turned down assistance from Parnacorta, as I’d feared he would. He was taking advantage of the current turmoil to seize power over Girtonia, so it wasn’t surprising that he’d consider the Knights of Parnacorta a hindrance to his ambitions.

But what about Mia?

“Your Highness, if I may be so selfish, would it be possible to station the Knights of Parnacorta near Girtonia’s borders?”

“Of course, Lady Philia. That won’t be a problem.”

“The state of affairs in Girtonia is bound to change in the near future. I believe Prince Julius will be dethroned and the king of Girtonia restored to power. And when that happens, he is highly likely to take in Parnacorta’s knights.”

Mia had resolved to oust Prince Julius. She was brilliant—and I wasn’t just saying this because she was my sister—so I was confident she could make it happen. All I had to do was have faith in her and support her every step of the way.

Facing me with a cheerful smile, Prince Osvalt replied, “You seem sure of that. Well, leave it to me. I’ll have the knights stationed at a fort near Girtonia.”

For some reason, seeing the confident look on his face put me at ease. “Thank you. This may save my homeland.”

But his expression grew serious. “Lady Philia, I’m sure you know better when it comes to monsters, but if the attacks in Girtonia continue to increase, their numbers may soon become uncontrollable—even with the help of our knights.”

His estimates were right. Girtonia’s monster population was growing exponentially, and the kingdom was running out of time. And Prince Julius and his associates were probably still shrugging off the situation and ignoring Mia.

“There is another option,” I said, “assuming I can get Grace’s help.”

I’d discovered this method after poring over every text I could find about ancient rituals. At this point, it would be a last-ditch effort, but if Grace could help me, we could save everyone.

There were only a few days left until Girtonia was destroyed.

The race against time had begun.

“Lady Philia! Oh—and Your Highness! How may I help you?”

We found Grace practicing ancient rituals in the mansion’s garden. I wanted to discuss my plan with her, because she was essential to it.

Prince Osvalt said, “I don’t know what’s going on either. Lady Philia, would you do the honor of explaining?”

All I’d told His Highness was that it’d be easier to explain with Grace around.

The solution I’d found was quite straightforward. If the Great Purification Circle covering Parnacorta was the best countermeasure against the Demon Realm’s approach...

“All we have to do is expand the circle to cover the entire continent,” I explained.

“That sounds ideal!” Prince Osvalt was about to clap his hands, but he

stopped and shook his head. “But knowing you, if it were possible, you’d have done it from the start.”

He was right. I would’ve done that, if I had the power.

“Your Highness,” said Grace, “as extraordinary a saint as Lady Philia is, she’s still human. No one has enough magic to cast a barrier over the entire continent.” As a fellow saint, she understood the difficulty of this ritual all too well.

A single saint could never cast a barrier that covered the entire continent. So what was there to do? The answer was simple.

“That’s why, Grace, I was hoping you’d lend me your magic.”

“Me, lend my magic to Lady Philia?”

If you didn’t have enough magic for a spell, you could borrow it from elsewhere. That was the solution I’d arrived at.

Multiple people ought to be able to cast a purification circle on a scale that would be impossible for just one. Since Grace had come to Parnacorta in the first place to learn to cast the Great Purification Circle over her kingdom, this solution would accomplish the same goal, making it a win-win for everyone.

“There’s an ancient technique called a magic-convergence spell, which allows the spellcaster to gather and accumulate magic. My theory is that I can use this spell to significantly enlarge my purification circle.”

“Wow, the ancients knew all kinds of amazing things. Makes you wonder why they died out.” Prince Osvolt expressed his admiration for those long-gone magical civilizations.

Why did they die out? It was almost certainly through misuse of their great magical power. There were surviving accounts of an entire continent being wiped out by a single ritual.

At any rate, I’d found a way to save Girtonia, even though I wouldn’t be able to do it without help. The magic-convergence spell was nowhere as difficult as casting a Great Purification Circle, so Grace, who understood archaic languages, could master it in no time.

“That’s impossible,” Grace stammered. “I couldn’t possibly have enough magic to protect the entire continent.”

“Sure, Grace was born into a distinguished family, and her powers far exceed those of ordinary people,” Prince Osvalt agreed. “But she’s still not on your level, so this seems like too much to demand of her. I’m no pro in these things, but I don’t think the calculations add up.”

Grace and Prince Osvalt were doubtful that Grace’s and my magic combined would be enough to expand the Great Purification Circle.

They were right. Together, Grace and I still wouldn’t have enough magic to cover the continent. But...

“Grace, how much more magic do your sisters have compared to you?” I asked.

“My sisters’ magic? I just recently became a saint, so I’m the least powerful in the family. Of course, I intend to surpass them someday, but...”

“This magic-convergence spell shouldn’t be difficult for anyone who understands archaic languages. I will teach you the spell, so can you pass it on to your sisters?”

“I get it. With my three sisters also lending their powers, we’d have the magic of five saints. We just might be able to expand the Great Purification Circle over the entire continent.”

I was glad Grace understood me. My strategy was to also enlist the help of her three older sisters, all of whom were saints. With our combined magical power, a massive-scale purification circle was feasible.

“Grace, you said that you came here to learn to cast a Great Purification Circle. But as I said, it’s an advanced ritual, so you’ve had trouble mastering it. However, expanding the Great Purification Circle I’ve already cast will protect the kingdom of Bolmern.”

“Yes,” Grace agreed, “my sisters wouldn’t turn down a proposal that would be good for the nation. I think it’s a wonderful solution. Isn’t that right, Arnold?”

“Indeed. Lady Emily might have her objections, but I’m sure that Master

would happily agree. His Majesty, too, would surely be keen to trade favors with neighboring kingdoms.”

It seemed we stood a good chance of having them accept my proposal. I’d feared it might be too brazen, but given the lives it would save, hopefully people would understand.

“Lady Philia, I’m just so happy to be able to help! Let’s start intensive training for the spell as soon as possible! As your number one apprentice, I’ll carry out my duty to the very end.”

I was a bit surprised to see Grace so motivated, but her thoughtfulness made me happy.

There wasn’t much time left. But once the ritual was invoked, no matter how many monsters broke through the barrier, they’d be neutralized. I had high hopes for this plan.

When Grace called herself my apprentice, I couldn’t help but be reminded of my aunt and mentor, Hildegard. I remembered her being strict but kind. She taught me everything she knew so that no matter what hardships I faced in the future, my spirit wouldn’t be crushed. Thanks to her, I could now teach others how to help.

Grace, let’s work together to save not only Girtonia and Bolmern, but the entire continent.

In the mansion’s garden, Grace trained to cast the magic-convergence spell. She panted and gasped for breath. “Almost there... Have to help Lady Philia...”

Having mastered the fundamentals of ancient rituals, she was one step away from success. At this rate, I estimated she would master the spell by nighttime.

Well then. I, too, had important work to do.

Grace called out to me. “Lady Philia, what have you been writing so fervently?”

I was working on a report for her to show to her family upon her return home.

As for its contents...

“I’ve compiled a number of points, including observations from your training and techniques for learning ancient rituals. You will be teaching your sisters, so I hope you’ll find it useful when the time comes.”

Essentially, I was writing an abridged training manual. I’d come up with the idea after considering how Grace could share her new knowledge with her sisters. While watching Grace train, I took note of mistakes that were easy to make and points that were easy to misunderstand. Hopefully, this would help Grace’s sisters learn the spell as quickly as possible. Anyone who read this manual ought to be able to exceed Grace’s performance.

“May I see?” Grace asked.

I handed the manual-in-progress to her. I wanted Grace to take it home and use it, so her eyes would be useful. Had I written out the necessary information in a clear, easy-to-understand way?

“Lady Philia, have you ever taught anyone before?” Grace asked.

“No, you’re the first saint I’ve trained directly. I’ve written several books, though.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have believed it, because this is so easy to understand! Once again, you’re amazing!” Looking suddenly excited, Grace flipped through the pages.

If she found the manual easy to read, that was a good thing. But why did it perk her up so much? I was a little concerned.

“With this,” Grace declared, “even I can manage to teach magic. The manual Lady Philia composed by hand for me will become a family heirloom!”

“It’s not that valuable, but I’m glad you think it’s okay,” I said.

Watching Grace, I began to feel hopeful that somehow, everything would work out.

After reading through the manual, Grace resumed her training. She took an earnest and enthusiastic approach to everything, and I couldn’t thank her enough for that.

“Is Grace training for the magic-convergence spell?”

Prince Reichardt entered. He must have heard about the spell from Prince Osvalt.

“Indeed. She’s just one step away from mastering it,” I informed His Highness.

What did he think of this plan? I’d heard that he wasn’t too happy about deploying the Knights of Parnacorta.

But Prince Reichardt smiled. “I think this was an inspired idea, Lady Philia.”

“I-it’s an honor to receive praise from His Highness.”

Turning to watch Grace, he continued, “The plan requires no sacrifices on our end, yet the other kingdoms will owe us a debt of gratitude. As Parnacorta’s saint, you could not have come up with a better plan.”

So Prince Reichardt was commending me from a statesman’s perspective? *I see...* He was saying that having Grace, a saint from Bolmern, help with my plan had been a calculated move.

“Watching Grace makes me remember how our previous saint also trained tirelessly, all for the sake of protecting Parnacorta.”

As Prince Reichardt reminisced, his face showed a hint of boyish innocence. It was surprising to see. I always thought of him as someone who never faltered, nor let the kingdom slip from his thoughts.

Prince Reichardt’s face reverted to its usual determined expression. He turned to me and said, “I’m only human, but I was born with a divine mandate to serve this kingdom. A saint works to ensure her kingdom’s prosperity too—and you, Philia, embody that ideal more than any saint I know.”

I wasn’t sure if that were true, but I did try my best.

“You left your homeland. Given no time to adjust to your new circumstances, you still sprang into action to carry out your duties as a saint. I admire you for that. Your resolve was clear from the moment you cast that purification circle.”

“I’m now a saint of Parnacorta, so it’s only natural that I act for this kingdom’s sake.”

Of course, I still had some lingering affection for my homeland, and I worried about my sister. But when I asked myself where my duty lay, I concluded that I had to stay in Parnacorta and cast the Great Purification Circle.

“Those aren’t things anyone can do. You have a strong will, Saint Philia. Do you remember that day in the cathedral, when your resolve was already firm, and you were preparing for the ritual? I fell in love with the look on your face at that moment.”

“Your Highness...?”

“I might have led you to misunderstand my intentions, so I thought I’d clear things up. I asked for your hand in marriage because of who you are. I would never do something so malicious as treating you as a replacement for someone else. That’s all I wanted to say.”

He was explaining why he’d proposed to me. No one had ever expressed their feelings for me this directly. I was at a loss for words. There was no denying it: I was happy about his feelings for me. Even so...

“I’m afraid that right now, I’m in a position where I can barely keep up with everything on my mind. I’m very happy to know Your Highness’s feelings. And, undeserving of praise as I may be, I’m grateful, but...”

“I understand. Until Grace’s efforts begin to yield clear results, you will not feel at ease. I’m in no rush. Take your time thinking it over.”

With those parting words, His Highness left the mansion.

As always, I couldn’t seem to find the right words to say to him. I was beginning to realize I might be afraid of accepting kindness from others. I’d thought my mental fortitude adequate to the task...but maybe I still needed training on that front.

Hours passed, and the sun began to set.

“Lady Philia! What do you think?” Grace peered into my eyes with a nervous look on her face.

It’s okay, Grace. Please relax.

“That’s perfect. Thank you, Grace.”

“I did it! Arnold! Lady Philia praised me!”

“Congratulations, Lady Grace. I’ve already arranged for a carriage to take us home. It’s a bit rushed, but time is of the essence.”

Arnold had made preparations for Grace to head for Bolmern immediately and begin training her sisters.

“Naturally!” Grace replied to Arnold. She turned to me. “Lady Philia! I swear I’ll come back one day. Please trust in me!”

“Of course I trust you, Grace. Take care.”

With that, Grace left the mansion.

The fate of this continent hinged upon her efforts. But when I saw that smile, as radiant as the sun, I couldn’t picture a future in which Grace failed.

Everything was going to be okay. She would get things done—I was sure of that.

“It looks like everything is unfolding as you predicted.”

The morning after Grace’s departure, Prince Osvolt summoned me to the palace to discuss the situation in Girtonia.

“Based on intel from Himari,” he told me, “Girtonia will be holding a large festival soon.”

“A party? With the kingdom in crisis?”

“It’s probably more like a rally to boost morale. Things over there are too dire for us to comprehend.”

Holding a rally at this time wasn’t rational at all. Presumably Prince Julius had decided the real problem was his waning popularity.

“But it’s as you said. If the festival’s only purpose was to boost morale, Prince Julius probably wouldn’t have bothered. His real motive is something else.”

“His real motive?” What other purpose could there be?

With the backing of the faction that supported Crown Prince Fernand, Mia was plotting to overthrow Prince Julius. Now Prince Julius was throwing a party at a time like this... What was he thinking?

“Don’t tell me... You think the party is cover for assassinating Prince Fernand? I never thought Prince Julius would make such a daring move.”

“Sharp as ever, Lady Philia. Yes, that’s what Himari wrote in her latest letter to me. To make things worse, she and Lady Mia believe he’s planning to assassinate the ailing king of Girtonia at the same time. Do you understand what this means?”

I did. Prince Julius planned to take advantage of these troubled times to become king and gain total power over Girtonia.

However, this could also be an opportunity for Mia. Prince Julius could be exposed as a traitor to the king and Prince Fernand—if Mia had the evidence, that is.

I estimated her chances to be quite good. If word of Prince Julius’s plans had made it all the way to another country, he must be surrounded by spies and dissidents. In other words, his plan was already bound to fail.

But that wasn’t the only concern.

“As far as we know, this is all hearsay,” I said. “It would be imprudent to act rashly on this information.”

“That’s right. If Lady Mia and the pro-Fernand faction condemn Prince Julius, but he turns out to be innocent, the tables would turn against them. Lady Mia and the crown prince must keep a watchful eye on Prince Julius until the very last moment.”

I was inclined to believe the assassination plot was real, but Prince Julius had a habit of spreading rumors, so Mia and her allies had to be careful.

“In any case,” Prince Osvalt continued, “whatever happens, we should prepare ourselves. That’s why I gathered the cream of the crop: the Knights of Parnacorta.”

“Yes, they’re famous for their prowess...” I trailed off mid-speech. As Prince

Osvalt and I stepped into the palace courtyard, an assembly of brawny men bowed in unison.

From their disciplined movements and the sheer aura of vigor that emanated from them, it was clear that each and every knight was a master of martial arts.

A tall, well-built, dark-haired man who stood out even in this impressive group approached me, adjusted his posture, and bowed.

“Saint Philia, it’s an honor to meet you. I am Philip Delon, commander of the Knights of Parnacorta.” Though his powerful build made him look ferocious, he spoke and moved with decorum. “If I may speak freely, I was deeply moved by your concern for your sister. Love truly is a splendid thing! A prayer for your sister’s safety that transcends national borders—Isn’t that beautiful? Ah, such wonderful sisterly love!”

“Sir Philip?”

Prince Osvalt grinned. “That’s the kind of guy Philip is. The other day, he cried while reading a children’s picture book.”

Though I was a little taken aback by Philip’s sudden change in demeanor, Prince Osvalt seemed simply amused. Apparently, Philip was quite the empathetic person.

Flexing his biceps, Philip pledged, “Lady Philia, I, Philip Delon, swear I will defend your sister, Lady Mia. You can rest assured of that.”

I found myself smiling, too. I was glad that the Knights of Parnacorta seemed so kind and reliable.

“Don’t let Philip’s goofiness fool you,” said Prince Osvalt. “No one in this world can outdo him with a spear. He’s a master of the Delon school of spear fighting.”

As Prince Osvalt introduced Philip, I couldn’t help but notice how easily he held his spear, which was far taller than he was. I’d never seen one so thick and long before.

“How impressive, to wield such a weapon like it’s nothing.”

“After our previous saint passed away, I relied heavily on Philip’s spear until

you came to us. He taught me to wield one, too,” Prince Osvalt explained.

Naturally, when Parnacorta had been without a saint, it was up to the military alone to protect the kingdom from monsters. It seemed that Philip had fought as well.

“Can Your Highness wield a spear?”

“He can,” Philip answered. “His Highness’s skill is on par with most of the knights.”

“I didn’t get to see much action, though,” Prince Osvalt said.

I certainly thought Prince Osvalt had an athletic physique for a royal, but was he really a master spear wielder? I wasn’t surprised that he wasn’t allowed to fight much, though. After all, what kingdom would risk losing a prince to monsters?

Sir Philip bowed again. “Well then, Your Highness, Lady Philia—we shall set off.”

With Philip taking the lead, the knights began to depart for a fort near the Girtonian border. It was up to Mia to take care of the rest.

I prayed that the painstaking efforts of my sister in Girtonia would pay off.

“There’s still one more concern,” I ventured. “Grace needs to successfully teach her sisters.”

“I have faith in her. So does my brother, believe it or not.”

Prince Osvalt and Prince Reichardt reassuringly affirmed their belief that Grace would pass down her knowledge to her sisters in her homeland of Bolmern, where she would be arriving soon.

All I could do now was pray for everyone’s safety.

Grace

“**W**ELCOME HOME, LADY GRACE. You’re back earlier than expected,” our maid,

Anna, greeted me.

“Anna, there’s been a slight change in plans. Where is Father?”

“I believe the master is in his study.”

I’d made it back to my home in Bolmern, but I couldn’t dawdle. I had to update my parents on the situation and teach what I had learned to my sisters.

“Oh, Grace, you’re back! Did you cut your training short because you missed your daddy?” Father was all ears as he asked if I returned early because I was homesick, which I denied.

“No, that’s not the case.”

“Oh...I see...” Father couldn’t hide his disappointment. I hated to hurt his feelings, but this was serious.

“Well, have a seat,” Father said as I fretted. “Tell me what Philia Adenauer, the greatest saint of all time, is like. I know her Great Purification Circle yielded marvelous results, but I’m curious as to what she’s like as a person.”

Right—maybe it was better to explain things in order. I started by letting Father know that Saint Philia was as wonderful as I’d hoped. Then I explained that she’d been researching ancient rituals to save the entire continent, and she was planning to use her findings to expand her Great Purification Circle.

And, to make that possible, she needed our family’s help.

“...so Lady Philia came up with a strategy to collect my sisters’ and my magic, then use our combined power to expand the Great Purification Circle all at once.”

“Is that so?”

That was more or less the whole story. I checked Father’s face for his reaction.

Touching his beard, he paused to think for a few seconds. All of a sudden, he stood up and hollered, “So the Mattilas family has to go whole hog, huh? The greatest saint of all time must be testing us. Ha ha ha! How interesting! Let’s take up the challenge!”

“Um...Father?”

I didn't think Lady Philia intended this as some kind of contest, but at least Father was up for it.

“In that case, I have to teach my sisters the spell. I'll need His Majesty's approval as soon as possible.”

“Leave it to me. His Majesty is an ally of mine. Besides, he'd trade his whole fortune and the shirt off his back for our kingdom to get the protection of a Great Purification Circle. Grace, with our contributions to this worthy cause, the Mattilas family name will be known all over the world!”

Bighearted as my father seemed, he was quite the shrewd lord. He was probably already getting ahead of himself, imagining how he could get neighboring kingdoms in his debt.

Of course, Lady Philia had probably anticipated this, which was why her plan was to save not only Bolmern and Girtonia, but the entire continent.

Bolmern had three saints, aside from myself, who studied the Demon Realm and defended the kingdom. As a result, we hadn't suffered as much as other kingdoms from the sudden rise in monster attacks.

Even so, the damage was on a scale too large to ignore. Girtonia and its neighbors were in serious danger. The historical records warning that the rise of the Demon Realm led to widespread societal breakdowns were being proven correct.

In other words, the fate of nations rested on the success or failure of Lady Philia's plan.

Father stood tall. “It's time we had a family meeting. Grace, get changed and get ready.”

“Understood!”

Now it was a matter of whether my sisters would listen to me. Amanda and Jane were one thing, but my eldest sister Emily could be rather difficult.

Although I felt a little anxious, I got changed and waited for my sisters to arrive.

“What’s wrong with you, Father? Taking Philia Adenauer’s measly leftovers... Don’t you have any pride?”

To no one’s surprise, my eldest sister Emily balked at the plan. She ardently considered Lady Philia a rival, and had subjected herself to rigorous special training in the hope of someday outshining her.

Emily was the most skilled and powerful of my sisters. Unfortunately, she had an ego to match her talents, and she wasn’t keen on helping Lady Philia.

“We’ve been able to protect Bolmern from monsters with our powers alone,” she said. “That’s my call as the eldest daughter of the family.”

“Okay, stop right there.” My second-eldest sister, Amanda, intervened. “Emily, you’re smarter than I am. Surely you know the monster attacks are likely to increase from here on out.”

“Well...”

Amanda was right. Both Lady Philia’s predictions and our own assessments in Bolmern agreed that monsters would only become more numerous and ferocious. We couldn’t pretend things would be okay.

My sister Jane giggled. “Emily’s jealous of Lady Philia! Is that any way for a saint to behave?”

“Shut up, Jane! It’s not unbecoming to have pride! Well, fine. If everyone’s against me, I might as well give in.”

In the end, Emily relented. She wasn’t self-centered enough to go against Father’s wishes.

With that settled, it was up to me to teach my sisters the magic-convergence spell. With Lady Philia’s handwritten manual in one hand, I taught them the fundamentals of performing ancient rituals.

Emily, of course, absorbed all this new information faster than anyone else. I gave part of the credit to Lady Philia’s well-written manual, though.

“Grace, can you show me what Philia wrote?”

I handed Emily the manual, surprised by her sudden interest. She flipped rapidly through it. “What? Oh! That explains it!”

With that, Emily tossed the manual roughly back to me. Her entire body was bathed in white light.

That was the first step of the ritual, a defensive spell called Robe of Light. Emily had mastered it just by scanning the manual once.

“The manual? It’s nothing. I’m just that talented.” Emily tossed her head. “Philia Adenauer, I will surpass you! Just you wait!”

“Are you admitting she’s still ahead of you?”

“Jane! I told you to shut up!”

Aflame with fighting spirit, Emily mastered the ancient rituals and the magic-convergence spell faster than anyone. Amanda and Jane were also progressing smoothly. They were well on the way to mastering the basic rituals, and I was sure they’d be able to learn the magic-convergence spell, as Lady Philia predicted. If we kept going at this rate, we’d make it in time.

Lady Philia, please wait. I, Grace, will return to Parnacorta.

Everything would be all right. No matter what, Lady Philia’s plan would succeed.

Chapter 4:

Endings and Beginnings

Mia

“F-FERNAND?! What are you doing here?”

When Prince Fernand suddenly showed up at a national defense policy meeting, Prince Julius turned pale in shock.

These gatherings were meetings only in name. In reality, they were solo performances by Prince Julius. In attendance this time were sycophants and officials who’d earned their positions by sucking up to him, and myself—present in my capacity as both saint and Prince Julius’s fiancée. The room was filled with useless yes-men.

Even the officials were blatantly confused by the crown prince’s intention to participate in this pointless meeting.

“Watch your mouth, Julius,” said Prince Fernand. “Have you forgotten your manners toward your older brother?”

“Tsk. Well, I’m happy to see my brother looking in good health. Are you sure you don’t need some sleep? You don’t want to overexert yourself...”

“Thank you for your concern, but thankfully, I’m in excellent condition. Now that Father is sick and bedridden, I must do my best as heir to the throne.”

Now you’re pushing it, Your Highness...

At the crown prince’s provocative statement, Prince Julius and his hangers-on looked flabbergasted. Now that the matter of succession had been brought up, Prince Julius was sure to go through with his plans.

“Don’t fret, Mia,” Prince Fernand whispered as he passed by me. “I said that on purpose to get him to react.”

Was he trying to force Prince Julius's hand? In that case, he was more determined than I could have hoped.

Timid people who finally learn to fight back are so strong. I must learn from Prince Fernand's example.

"At any rate, Julius, I heard from Saint Mia that you declined an offer of assistance from the Knights of Parnacorta. Parnacorta's king is an old ally of Father's, and our treaties with them include assistance in case of emergency. Do you have some reason not to trust them?"

"You're suddenly chatty, aren't you, dear brother? Listen, I asked Parnacorta not for knights, but for the return of Saint Philia. I even offered to buy her back, but they refused."

I was pleased that Prince Fernand immediately brought up Prince Julius's indignant rejection of assistance from Parnacorta. A bad move on Julius's part, in my opinion. The monster problem had already spun out of control. Things were looking grim all over the kingdom. It was clearly too much for our kingdom's soldiers alone to handle.

"Of course," said Prince Fernand. "No one would be idiotic enough to get Philia on their side, only to let her go."

"Ngh...?! I could clearly see their ulterior motives. Obviously, they planned to seize the opportunity to take over this kingdom."

"Oh, Parnacorta's interested in a territory that's overrun with monsters? What unusual tastes."

Huh... I'd thought Prince Fernand would shrink in Prince Julius's presence, but he was holding his own. Prince Julius's face turned red as he glared at his brother. It seemed that Prince Fernand's plan was to provoke him until he broke.

"Let's not waste time nitpicking and bickering," said Prince Julius. "This is about Philia. The fact that she won't return is proof that she's now a pawn of Parnacorta. She feels nothing for her homeland in crisis. That's right: she's a traitor! We should drag her back here and try her for treason!"

I couldn't follow this man's train of thought. He was the one who'd sold Philia

off, and now he was calling her a traitor because he couldn't get her back. There was simply no way anyone would accept that kind of logic.

"Don't make me laugh. Here's some constructive criticism: there's no way Parnacorta would accept such a demand."

"Shut up, Fernand! Fine, first things first: seize all of Marquess Adenauer's assets and strip him of his title. The criminal's parents must also be punished! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Summon the Adenauers! Now, Fernand, the meeting's over, so you can go back to your room and rest!"

Prince Julius's voice rose to a scream, drowning out Prince Fernand's objections.

And just like that, my family was impoverished. To think they'd just been celebrating their windfall from selling my sister. Father would surely be horrified once the news reached him.

I let out a sigh. How far would Prince Julius's rampage go?

Although I was proud of him for ignoring Prince Julius, Prince Fernand indeed pushed himself too hard. The effects of his medicine wore off and he was forced to return to his quarters before he collapsed. It would be some time before he truly returned to full health.

Nonetheless, his resolve was clear.

After Prince Fernand left, my parents entered the conference room, as if replacing him. Father had lost weight and looked haggard.

"Your Highness, we came as soon as we heard there was an urgent matter..."

"Marquess Adenauer, you must take responsibility for the mess your daughter made."

"What? How did Mia incur Your Highness's displeasure?!"

Prince Julius's wording made Father think this was about me. I wasn't surprised. My parents pretended Philia had never existed.

"No, I meant Philia. She committed treason against this kingdom."

“Philia? But she’s in Parnacorta...”

“Exactly! Refusing to return to one’s homeland when it’s in crisis is an act of treason! As punishment, I’m seizing all your assets and taking back your title!”

“No, that can’t be! Your Highness, please see reason!”

Father fell to his knees at Prince Julius’s illogical accusation, while Mother hung her head silently. There was no justification at all for Prince Julius’s foolhardy decision, but it seemed my parents felt compelled to obey. Father was silent.

How long are you going to stay subservient? Say something back!

“Well, no need to feel so down. I do have some sympathy for parents of stupid daughters, after all. If you don’t want your assets seized, could you do one favor for me?”

Grinning, Prince Julius slowly approached my dumbfounded father and whispered fiendishly in his ear. What was he trying to get my parents to do?

“What is it?”

“We’ll do anything. Anything!”

My parents bowed deferentially to Prince Julius.

What an awful sight. To do something like this to his own fiancée’s parents... This man was not right in the head.

Prince Julius turned to me. “Don’t you have work, Mia? Go do your best for our kingdom.”

“Er...all right.”

Clearly, Prince Julius didn’t want me to know what he requested of my parents. I was concerned, but I could do my own digging and find out later. Right now, I had no choice but to play along.

Glancing at my parents, who were now clinging to Prince Julius, I set off to carry out my saintly duties.

“Whew...we’re done for. The monster population is now way more than just a

headache.”

Today was another day of visiting areas where the barriers had completely broken. We had reached the point that even the barriers cast by Philia were beginning to crack. Everywhere was the sobering reminder that Girtonia was on the verge of collapse.

At least Aunt Hilda had returned to duty. From what I’d seen on her new barriers, they were on par with Philia’s work. Philia knew this, which was why she’d written to Aunt Hilda and asked her to come out of retirement.

Even so, we could only buy ourselves a few more days. The best we could do was make the most of the time we had.

As I set up a barrier, Pierre fended off monsters. “Lady Mia, word has it that Prince Julius is on the move. Who would’ve thought Prince Fernand could ignite a fire this quickly?”

Frankly, until recently, I’d been the one protecting my bodyguards, which was frustratingly time-consuming. Pierre becoming captain of my guards was a godsend.

So Prince Julius was already plotting something. I wondered if it was connected to whatever he’d roped my parents into.

“Apparently, he got Marquess Adenauer and his wife to plan a big party. They’ve invited all the nobility, saying that it’s exactly during times like this that the elites should come together.”

“A party?”

I couldn’t understand the logic behind it. In these dire times, what was the point of throwing a party for the aristocracy—not to mention going as far as to threaten my parents into organizing it?

No, there had to be a reason behind it. Knowing Prince Julius, I had a feeling he had something heinous in store.

“Did you know, Lady Mia, that Marquess Adenauer is the head of the pro-Julius faction?”

Just as I was thinking about the faction supporting Prince Julius, Pierre told

me that Father was at the core of it.

I had no idea that Father, who had been a lower-ranking noble until recently, was in such a powerful position. As far as I knew, most Girtonian nobles aligned themselves with Prince Julius, but there were also many who were neutral.

“Your engagement and the expulsion of Lady Philia brought him close to Prince Julius. That’s also how he gained the title of marquess.”

I could guess why Pierre was telling me these things. If my father had been Prince Julius’s yes-man for a long time, and he was the head of the faction opposing Prince Fernand, then the purpose of this party could be...

“Pierre, was Prince Fernand invited to the party?”

“I knew you’d be quick on the uptake. I daresay it’s just what you’re thinking. Prince Julius and your parents intend to assassinate Prince Fernand.”

I knew Prince Julius was rattled to see Prince Fernand out and about, but I didn’t expect him to jump straight to plotting his assassination. How could my parents support such a reprehensible scheme?

“Does this come as a shock to you, Lady Mia?”

“Yes, well...they’re still my parents, after all. But Pierre, why’d you tell me these things? Aren’t you afraid that as their daughter, I might leak information to them?”

As the leader of the pro-Fernand faction, Pierre sent spies to keep tabs on Prince Julius. That was how he knew what was going on at the palace. I couldn’t help but think that it was careless of him to share his information with me so easily.

“Lady Mia, you were the one who inspired Prince Fernand to rise up. There’s no way you’d help with the assassination plot. I can’t imagine you betraying us.”

“You trust me?”

“Of course. We’re counting on you.” Pierre gave me a refreshing smile as he plainly declared his trust in me.

I won’t let you down. Don’t think I’m going to let them get away with assassinating Prince Fernand in plain sight.

“But that’s not all. It appears they’re trying to distract us with this party—while plotting to assassinate His Majesty the King at the same time,” Pierre added.

Unbelievable. The country was falling apart, and Prince Julius was preoccupied with engineering audacious moves to advance his own power. I really didn’t understand him. Did he have any plans other than ruling a kingdom overrun with monsters?

Pierre continued, “Some towns and villages have already become uninhabitable, forcing people to evacuate. Meanwhile, Prince Julius cares only about securing full power over the kingdom. He must have been itching to use this turmoil to seize opportunities for himself.”

That was probably the case. Prince Julius must have been obsessed with power for a long time. At this point, he was beyond redemption.

Suddenly, in this context, Prince Fernand’s speedy recovery threatened to become a problem. Maybe, at least this time, it was better for him to stay in his room.

“If he skips out on the party, he can at least save himself,” I suggested. “At least he wouldn’t have to go there pretending not to know about the plot...”

With such an obvious trap being laid out, the wise move was to avoid it. There was no need to play along with Prince Julius’s machinations.

“We suggested that, but His Highness said he’d rather die with honor. ‘Since my younger brother is trying to assassinate me, I might as well take this chance to bring him down,’ he said.”

Such determination! Prince Fernand seemed to have already made up his mind. He’d use himself as a decoy to expose Prince Julius’s assassination plot and have him deposed. This must be why he’d provoked him so much at the meeting: it was to get Prince Julius worked up to the point that he’d plot to kill his own brother.

“His Majesty has also been informed of the assassination plot. He listened to us, but he didn’t want to believe it.”

I could understand how, as a parent, His Majesty would prefer to see the best

in his son. On the other hand, I felt he was being naive. At least he'd been recovering since he resumed taking Philia's medicine.

In any case, there wasn't much time left. I had to resolve to throw Prince Julius and my parents behind bars.

And this party might be my last chance.

"Today's the day. If we make it through this, the Adenauer family will be secure."

"His Highnesses Prince Fernand and Prince Julius will be there. Mia, please take care not to displease Prince Julius."

Father and Mother hurriedly instructed the servants as they began preparing for the party. Though they looked frantic, they were in unusually high spirits, most likely because Prince Julius had guaranteed that Father could keep his position. How could they be so cheerful when they were plotting murder?

Meanwhile, I was a bundle of nerves. The day had finally come.

Hearing Father suddenly raise his voice, I turned.

"Hildegard? I didn't send you an invitation!"

Apparently, my aunt Hildegard had shown up despite not being invited.

I'd only met her in person a few times. She was Philia's mentor, but my parents forbade her from teaching me. Seeing her again for the first time in a while, I was struck by how much she looked like Philia. Of course, my aunt was much older, but I could easily imagine Philia looking like her as she aged.

"Such shouting from a grown man! As a saint, I'm here to discuss something important with my niece. I'll go home as soon as I'm done. You don't want to cause trouble for Mia, do you?"

"Well, do it and get out of my sight. There's nothing saintly about an uncultured old bag like you." My father didn't stop yelling, but he let her through.

What did Aunt Hilda want to discuss with me?

“It’s noisy in here. Shall we go outside for a bit?”

“Sure, Aunt Hilda.”

We left the party venue for someplace where we could talk without being overheard. Were we going to discuss confidential matters at a time and place like this? Aunt Hilda was someone Philia respected, so I’d listen to whatever she had to say.

“Aunt Hilda, thank you for coming out of retirement to work as a saint again. Thanks to you, we’ve been able to keep a monster invasion at bay thus far.”

“You can spare me the flattery. My return is just a drop in the bucket. It won’t be long before the kingdom is swarming with monsters. What a wretched situation. To think my apprentice Philia has grown up to handle situations like this all on her own...”

Aunt Hilda could sense that the situation in Girtonia was already close to too late. I, too, often felt powerless. As much as we gathered our resolve and tried to work together, our actions could only achieve so much.

But it was pointless to think about that, so I decided to ask Aunt Hilda what she wanted to talk about.

“Um, Aunt Hilda? About the thing you wanted to discuss...”

She said that she had something to tell me as a saint, but what could it be?

“The purpose of the party is to assassinate Prince Fernand,” Aunt Hilda said. “Prince Julius may have instigated it, but the planning was all done by my foolish brother. Today, he will lose everything.”

Aunt Hilda knew about the conspiracy? Did that mean...?

“That’s right. I’m part of the pro-Fernand faction. Ever since Prince Julius made a show of selling my precious apprentice, I’ve been working to unseat him. Pierre told me that you’re on our side, so I’ve been looking for an opportunity to reach out to you.”

Of course Aunt Hilda also supported Prince Fernand. Even setting aside what happened to Philia, no true saint could support Prince Julius.

“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.”

Aunt Hilda was right. Knowing Prince Julius as well as I did now, I was sure that even if the assassination plot succeeded, His Highness would pin the crime on my parents and sentence them accordingly. But to become Aunt Hilda’s adopted daughter...

“Turnabout is fair play. Your parents stole someone else’s daughter, you know.”

“Stole someone else’s daughter? What...”

In that moment, I understood what Aunt Hilda was implying. She wasn’t the type to joke around. If she was making such an accusation...it was because she meant it.

The daughter my parents stole from her... It couldn’t be...

She looked so much like Philia, to such a surprising extent.

Could it be that my parents had no qualms about selling Philia because she wasn’t their biological child...?

But that meant that Philia and I weren’t really sisters...

“Let me tell you a bit about the past. My younger brother—Marquess Adenauer, your father—was jealous that my mother focused all her attention on me and my sainthood training. He grew up to hate me. Eventually, he started spreading slanderous lies about me. After my mother died of an illness, I was kicked out of my family home and lost my standing in the Adenauer clan.”

True, Aunt Hilda had never seemed to have much power in our family. Her involvement had been limited to mentoring Philia, but she backed off when we became saints. I never knew it was because of a feud between Father and Aunt Hilda.

“Later, my brother, who was heir to the family name, got married. However, he and his wife were unable to conceive for a long time. As a family of saints,

the Adenauers were under great pressure to have a daughter. If that wasn't possible, they could adopt a child from a blood relative—but not too distant a relative, because their powers would be weaker. That's when the attention turned to Philia, whom I was carrying at the time."

Did my parents adopt Philia from Aunt Hilda? But then why would Aunt Hilda say that Philia was stolen?

"My brother came to me, the sister he hated. He pretended to humble himself, but he couldn't hide his condescending attitude. I'll never forget the look on his face when he spat, 'If you're having a girl, I'll use her.' Obviously, I refused."

But then how did Philia end up with my parents?

Aunt Hilda continued, "But my father—your grandfather—wouldn't stand for it. When he heard that I had a daughter, he took Philia from my husband and me by force and spread rumors that our child was stillborn. Your mother began to weave herself a version of reality in which she gave birth to Philia."

What was I hearing? If what Aunt Hilda said was true, my father forcibly took his sister's daughter, and my mother just went along with it.

"Couldn't you have insisted that Philia was your daughter?"

"I did, many times. But the Adenauers convinced people that I'd gone mad from grief over losing my baby. It was around that time that I lost my husband, too. He fell victim to an epidemic."

If this was all true, my parents had probably decided Philia was no longer useful to them after I was born... As their cruel logic dawned on me, I felt like cursing my own existence.

"I decided to let my daughter go. Not long after that, though, you were born. I think they've treated Philia coldly ever since. All I could do was train her to be strong enough to bounce back no matter what. I pray she never finds out the truth. I couldn't save her, so I have no right to call myself a mother."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"For my own revenge. Of course, it's fine if you don't believe me."

I could judge the truth of her words. Philia was most certainly Aunt Hilda's daughter. And my parents never loved her. They stole her, and then they sold her.

Now it was clear to me that Philia was so strong because she had to be. I'd had no idea. I just thought she was amazing, without ever bothering to think more deeply about it.

If only I could undo that mistake. I was such an idiot for not noticing what she was going through.

But this didn't change anything. For me, Philia would always be...

"She's my sister! It doesn't matter whether we're sisters by blood. She's wonderful and admirable, and she's the greatest saint in the world. But above all, she's my one and only beloved sister!"

Regardless of Philia's origins, I'd always look up to her. I admired her too-perfect saintly demeanor. I wanted to be like her, someday.

To me, she was the older sister I respected and idolized...and always would.

"I'll never forgive my brother, not for the rest of my life. But if there's one good thing that came out of all this, it's that Philia had a sister like you. She is indeed your sister. Well then, may luck be on your side, Mia Adenauer."

With those parting words, Aunt Hilda turned her back and left.

Hearing these things about Philia was a shock, but there was no time for regrets. Right now, I had something to do.

The party was about to start—and I had a score to settle with Prince Julius and my parents.

The party finally started.

Most of the guests my father invited showed up. Among them were nobles who were affiliated with neither the pro-Fernand nor the pro-Julius faction.

Prince Julius audaciously planned to kill Prince Fernand in front of all these people. It was probably meant as a warning, to show what would happen to

anyone who dared go against him. His obsession with power was mind-boggling.

Prince Julius showed up with a repulsive grin on his face. “Hello, Mia. You’re beautiful as ever. Of course, you’ll be sitting next to me, right?”

Yes, just like that. Allow me to occupy a special seat to say a requiem for you...

“Julius, you seem to be in a good mood. Are parties really that fun?”

“Well, look who’s here. Brother, what a pleasure to see you looking well. Parties are great, you know—especially parties like tonight’s, when we’re all gathered to unite for a great cause.”

Prince Julius’s mood seemed to brighten all the more when Prince Fernand showed up. The knowledge that he’d be seeing that face for the last time must have made Prince Julius ecstatic. He couldn’t even be bothered to hide his glee.

“Mia, what can I say?” said Prince Fernand. “That hair decoration suits you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. It was a gift from my sister.”

“I-is that so? Your sister has good taste. B-but you’re the one who makes it look good.”

“Your Highness...?”

Prince Fernand seemed nervous. He was having trouble getting his words out.

Well, that was understandable. After all, he hadn’t been in the public eye until recently, and his first proper party also happened to be a stage for his assassination. I couldn’t help but feel grateful that he’d decided to show up at all.

“Thank you, one and all, for taking time out of your busy schedules to attend this soiree. We are gathered here tonight to...” My father, Marquess Adenauer, began his speech.

According to our intelligence, the plan was to poison Prince Fernand’s food. As proof, during his speech, Father kept glancing anxiously toward the waitstaff, even though he couldn’t see them from where he stood.

Meanwhile, Prince Julius was sending assassins to His Majesty's sickbed. Since many of the palace guards had been temporarily transferred to attend this party, the palace was thin on security.

Only when it came to his own schemes could Prince Julius be this fast at making arrangements. It was almost impressive.

"Come to think of it, Mia, we should decide on a date for our wedding banquet soon."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful, but who knows how long this crisis will last? We should at least wait until the situation stabilizes."

Prince Julius had spent the dinner blathering on and on about inconsequential things as I halfheartedly kept up the conversation. On Prince Julius's other side sat Prince Fernand.

"To give our guests strength in these troubled times," my father announced, "we have prepared dishes with the finest ingredients."

One of the ingredients was a rare mushroom called tellicium. With a delicious taste and fragrant aroma, it was considered a Girtonian delicacy and was used in gourmet cooking.

However, there was also a highly poisonous mushroom called telliciumoid, which looked very similar to tellicium. Consuming even the tiniest amount of telliciumoid would cause a rapid fever and constricted breathing. It was invariably fatal. There were many cases of death by accidental consumption of telliciumoid, so it was crucial not to confuse the two fungi.

Prince Julius's plan was to serve the poisonous mushroom only to Prince Fernand. That way, even if the cause of death was discovered, the culprits could get away with claiming it was an accident—an honest mistake, made by a cook. That was why simply exposing the assassination plot wouldn't be enough to overthrow Prince Julius.

The one who uncovered this plot was Himari. Of course, by now, Prince Fernand had been informed.

With a look of feigned innocence, Prince Julius eyed the plate in front of him.

“Wow, Marquess Adenauer has outdone himself! This is, without a doubt, tellicium of the highest grade. I would love for my brother to savor this delicious dish!”

Taking a bite of the tellicium, Prince Julius gushed over it and unsubtly urged Prince Fernand to dig in. He really couldn't help himself.

“No, really, this taste is supreme! I've tried all sorts of gourmet cuisine, but nothing compares to this. Now, come on, Brother, won't you have a bite, too?”

Prince Julius had spent the last several minutes trying to get Prince Fernand to try the poisonous mushrooms. His voice remained jovial, but I noticed he was sweating profusely.

Prince Fernand didn't say a word the entire time.

“Brother, are you listening to me?” At last, Prince Julius lost his temper.

Ironically, even if Prince Fernand hadn't known about the poison, Prince Julius's obnoxious nagging might have convinced him not to eat anyway.

Prince Fernand finally spoke. “If you like it so much, Julius, why don't you eat my portion too? I don't have an appetite right now.”

As Prince Fernand passed his plate to his younger brother, Prince Julius's face fell. Well, of course. He didn't want to eat poisonous mushrooms.

“But Marquess Adenauer wanted you to try this, Brother. How could I claim his kindness for myself?”

No doubt about it—he was obviously nervous. The mushrooms on Prince Fernand's plate were definitely telliciumoid.

“Are these poisonous mushrooms?” said Prince Fernand.

“Huh?”

“I'm asking if these are poisonous mushrooms. I understand that there's a deadly fungus that looks very much like tellicium. Julius, can you check for poison? I know you've been thinking of murdering me.” Prince Fernand sent a piercing gaze in Prince Julius's direction.

The first time I met Prince Fernand, he struck me as frail and timid. But now

here he was—quiet, but radiating an aura of intensity. He seemed capable of anything he put his mind to.

“How dare you, Fernand? You’re my only brother! I’d never do such a thing! Even if those are poisonous mushrooms, you can’t think I put them there!”

Prince Julius was still feigning innocence, but he couldn’t hide his panic. He was already covering for himself. Even if the mushrooms *were* revealed to be telliciumoid, he’d go on asserting his innocence. Good grief. I couldn’t wrap my head around this man’s warped thinking.

But this wasn’t over yet.

“Ah, Julius, my bad. Of course there are no poisonous mushrooms on this plate.”

“Do you get it now, Brother?”

Prince Julius looked relieved, but the color drained from his face at Prince Fernand’s next line.

“Because I switched our plates.”

“Eh...?”

“I switched them—my plate for yours.”

Prince Julius began trembling all over as the implication sank in—he’d just eaten a poisonous mushroom.

He began to cough. “I’m on fire! It’s hot, hot, hot... Aieeeee!”

Prince Julius screamed and clutched at his throat, trying to force himself to throw up.

Now, Your Highness, my revenge begins.

“Aieeeee! C-call a doctor! Hurry! I ate poisonous mushrooms!” In between coughs, Prince Julius screamed in an embarrassing manner. The other attendees became agitated. A moment ago, he’d been insisting it was impossible for poisonous mushrooms to be served at this party.

Not moving an inch, my parents stared at each other with blank, pale faces.

“That’s what you get for trying to kill me. Why were you plotting my

assassination?”

“Shut up, you useless shut-in! I should be king! I’m the best person to rule over this kingdom! What’s wrong with getting rid of those in my way?” Prince Julius spat, finally admitting to trying to kill Prince Fernand.

Hearing his confession, the nobles began to chatter.

“You reap what you sow. That’s what he gets for trying to kill the crown prince.”

“I never thought His Highness would stoop to such depths.”

“Isn’t death the usual penalty for treason?”

The neutral nobles united against Prince Julius, causing him to turn red.

“What do you mean, I reap what I sow? You dare mock me? My brother’s the one in the wrong! Marquess Adenauer! Help me! Kill Fernand!”

Being criticized made Prince Julius furious. I remembered how, whenever he mouthed off at his father, His Majesty opened and closed his mouth but said nothing.

In any case, it was about time Prince Julius noticed that he was still somehow fine...despite supposedly having eaten a poisonous mushroom. Normally, someone who ingested telliciumoid would immediately have trouble breathing and speaking. This didn’t seem to have occurred to Prince Julius, so I had no choice but to spell it out for him.

“Your Highness, please relax. You haven’t eaten any poisonous mushrooms.”

Prince Julius stopped flailing around. “Mia? N-now that I think about it, that burning sensation’s gone...”

Looks like someone can’t read between the lines. Fine, let me explain.

“I used a healing spell to raise your internal temperature by a few degrees. Even a slight increase is enough to make someone feel strange.”

“Wh-when did you have time to do that?”

“Didn’t you know I hold records for spellcasting speed? I can cast spells without anyone noticing.”

The look on Prince Julius's face as I revealed the trick to him was priceless. He was completely dumbfounded, with no anger or sadness on his face—just a blank expression.

“Your Highness, you're a fiend who plotted the assassination of the crown prince, His Highness Prince Fernand. The laws of the kingdom of Girtonia entitle me to unilaterally break off our engagement.”

Prince Julius clung to me. “Break off our engagement? You...you dare betray your beloved fiancé?”

He looked genuinely surprised. Did he really think I loved him?

“How foolish of you, Your Highness. Did you really think I'd love the man who sold off my beloved sister? Don't make me retch.”

“Mia! How could you? Mia! I love you! I'm taking over the kingdom for you!”

Prince Julius sat down on the ground in a huff. At last the truth was sinking in.

Meanwhile, my parents looked astounded to see me talk back to Prince Julius. They'd spent all this time thinking I was nothing but an obedient doll.

“Mia, what are you thinking? How can you do this to us? To His Highness?”

“I can't believe you'd scheme like this! What's with that look? You've always been such a good girl! Why?”

Isn't it obvious? This is the end of the line for all of you.

“We can talk about the rest later. Mother, Father, I'm afraid you're going to prison.”

Prison was the best they could hope for. The death penalty was more likely.

Even knowing that, I'd still led my own parents into this trap. If the details of what I'd done ever got out, the public might turn against me.

As my parents despaired, Prince Julius suddenly stood and began to laugh loudly.

“Mia, you sure pulled one over us! But the one who'll be locked up is *you*, for trying to ensnare me!”

“Stop embarrassing yourself, Your Highness. The nobles are watching you

make a fool of yourself as we speak. There's no escaping your misdeeds."

"No, you're the fool! I'm a prince, the greatest of all! I'll sweep all your evidence under the rug!"

I'd made sure that wouldn't happen. It wasn't like he was the only royal in the kingdom. Prince Fernand had witnessed the whole thing. And even worse for Julius, so had someone else.

Just as that thought came to mind, a man in a waiter's uniform stepped up to Prince Julius. "Enough, Julius! Stop digging your own grave!"

"Watch how you speak to me, old man! Don't you know who I am?"

"I ought to ask you that question. Surely you recognize my voice. For shame."

The man pulled off his hat and fake beard. At this, Prince Julius's face, which had been starting to perk up, turned pale once more.

An extra guest had slipped into the party in disguise...

"It's His Majesty!"

Seeing the ailing, bedridden king of Girtonia in public, the party attendees were abuzz.

"Mia," said His Majesty, "your sister's medicine is truly amazing. Her departure for Parnacorta is an immeasurable loss to our kingdom."

Philia had developed a total cure for His Majesty's illness, and he was already almost fully recovered. He still wasn't supposed to exert himself too much, but at his request, I'd helped him attend the party. He wanted to see Prince Julius's deplorable behavior for himself.

"I carry a great shame for leaving this idiot to his own devices. I can't believe he'd try to lay a hand on Fernand..."

"F-Father, that's not true!"

"Your Majesty," said a guard, interrupting Prince Julius's excuses, "we've captured the assassin who tried to attack your body double." Apparently, the assassin Prince Julius sent had been caught, thanks to the watchful eye of the royal guards under His Majesty's direct command.



Hearing that, Prince Julius seemed to have finally run out of excuses. He went silent and fell to his knees.

“Throw Julius, Marquess Adenauer, his wife, and all their collaborators into the dungeons!” His Majesty commanded, his face resolute and his demeanor authoritative.

It was probably tough for him to sentence his own son to prison, but he was fulfilling his duty as a king.

And that was how Prince Julius fell from grace. At last he would face judgment.

But even as this was happening, the monster threat worsened. Our fight was just getting started.

“We have to cast barriers quickly! Just two won’t be enough!”

Aunt Hilda and I traveled across Girtonia to cast barriers in areas with high monster infestation rates. But as hordes of monsters relentlessly invaded, defenses were breaking down everywhere.

It was no longer possible for Girtonia’s soldiers alone to defend the kingdom. Aunt Hilda and I were doing the best we could to handle the situation, but we could only cast so many barriers. What’s more, we had to fight off the ever-present threat of monsters who were unafraid to sink their teeth into us.

“Flame Technique!”

Himari spewed a torrent of fire from her mouth, incinerating a monster that charged at me.

I didn’t know much about ninjas, but they were amazing.

“I won’t let you lay a single finger on Lady Mia!”

Putting his famed swordplay skills to good use, Pierre slaughtered one monster after another, leaving a pile of carcasses in his wake.

Together they managed to shield me as I carefully cast barriers, one spot at a time.

Even so, monsters were spawning at a rate beyond what we could keep up with. We were sick and tired of the endless stream of monsters.

To make matters worse, powerful species from the top of the monster hierarchy were beginning to show up: deadwolves, evil grizzlies, emperor apes, and veneserpents. It was clear that the Demon Realm was fast approaching.

I was once again reminded of how amazing Philia was. She could neutralize any monsters, no matter how strong.

Now that I knew firsthand the limits of conventional barrier-casting methods, I was all the more in awe of her talent. She'd come up with the fastest possible technique.

But there was no point in wishing for her return right now. She had her own kingdom to protect. It was up to us to stop the invasion to the best of our abilities. Somehow, we had to do something...

"The Knights of Parnacorta are here!"

One of the soldiers called out the good news. They'd come much faster than I expected. It must be thanks to Philia, who trusted that I would overthrow Prince Julius.

Even though I wasn't from Parnacorta, I'd heard stories of their knights. Two key players were responsible for maintaining security and order in the kingdom: the saint and the Knights of Parnacorta. Their battle-hardened knights were said to be the strongest in the world.

"Incredible! They're slaying so many monsters in a row."

"Each has the strength of a thousand knights," Himari said proudly. "Between our previous saint's passing and Lady Philia's arrival, they protected Parnacorta from hordes of monsters. This is no more and no less than their duty."

Philia had written that her other bodyguards were just as capable as Himari and the knights. I felt at ease knowing that she had reliable help.

"All right! I think we can get through this."

"Yeah, the reinforcements from Parnacorta are sure to turn things around."

But just as hope began to rise among the Girtonian soldiers, we spotted a

huge black mass in our field of vision, right where I was planning to cast the next barrier.

The mass writhed as the ground rumbled. It was... It couldn't be...

"It's a swarm of monsters..."

Even Himari looked terrified.

There were more monsters than I'd ever seen before. Ten...no, twenty times more...? I'd never heard of anything like this. We'd be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Until that moment, I thought someday I'd be able to fall in love, get married, and live a happy life.

I'm sorry, Philia. The help you sent was for nothing.

Today, my life ends here.

Regrettable as it was, I had to give up on life. But I was determined to die a saint. Until the end, I'd be like my beloved sister.

I'll fight until my body turns to ash.

"This is impossible. No matter how you look at it, there's just too many of them."

"Escape is the only option."

"You idiot! There's nowhere to run."

The Girtonian soldiers were on the verge of giving up. Even the Knights of Parnacorta were taken aback by the sheer number of monsters.

No matter what, a saint had to offer hope. So, yes, I would fight.

Strengthen your resolve! I told myself.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

I stopped casting barriers and activated a purification spell instead.

With all the magic power in me, I conjured countless silver Purification Knives and aimed them in the monsters' direction.

The knives pierced through the monsters, annihilating them.

I concentrated all the power I could gather, including magic flowing through the barriers, into my attacks. Even though I was just one person, I was determined to protect as many people as I could.

One more time. There was still some magic left. I had to squeeze out every last bit. As long as I could move, I could fight.

I'm going to obliterate them all!

"Die! Die! Die!"

I screamed until my throat felt like it was torn to shreds. No matter how many monsters I finished off, more kept coming, but I didn't feel like my efforts were wasted.

Even if I didn't have the power to protect my kingdom, I was prepared to burn myself out trying.

"Such fighting spirit from Lady Mia!"

"We can't let her die!"

"Let's protect Lady Mia and the kingdom of Girtonia!"

"Charge!"

At least my example had roused the Girtonian soldiers to action. I was glad to do something saintly at the very end.

I drove away swarms of monsters charging from all directions. As fast a spellcaster as I was, the speed at which monsters were spawning outpaced me.

Worse, my magic supply wasn't infinite. I'd already used up my magical reserves. Now I was using a self-destructive technique that converted my life force to magic.

Even so, the monsters showed no decline in momentum. With misty eyes, I barely managed to distinguish humans from monsters.

It's no good. I'm reaching my limit.

My strength was gone...but I was glad. I'd been...a saint...to the very end.

I sank to the ground. My body gave out; I could do nothing more.

So cold...

My body felt cold as ice. I couldn't lift so much as a finger.

I did well, didn't I, Philia?

I'm sorry I couldn't protect our homeland...

Thinking of Philia, I closed my eyes.

Philia

“HIMARI REPORTS THAT the Knights of Parnacorta were permitted to enter Girtonia, and now they're busy exterminating monsters.”

As I waited in the garden for Grace's return, Prince Osvalt visited the mansion to tell me that the Knights of Parnacorta had finally entered Girtonia to provide aid.

It's much worse than I thought. If only I could somehow buy some time...

“It took longer than expected. By now, not many barriers will be left in Girtonia.”

No matter how hard Mia and Aunt Hildegard worked to keep Girtonia's defenses up, without enough soldiers to keep the monsters at bay, their barriers would be destroyed by sheer force. According to my calculations, monsters had already begun to invade Girtonia in vast numbers.

Yes, the Knights of Parnacorta were dependable, but they could only stop the damage to a certain extent.

In short, the situation in Girtonia was the worst that it had ever been.

“Lady Philia, I apologize, but time is running out,” Prince Reichardt interrupted. “Depending on how powerful the monsters are, I may have to issue an immediate order for the knights to retreat.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” said Prince Osvalt. “Isn't that rather heartless? And after they rushed in to help!”

Prince Reichardt had visited me earlier to say that he was thinking of having

the Knights of Parnacorta withdrawn immediately.

As much as I appreciated Prince Osvalt's defense, Prince Reichardt's perspective was understandable. He asked me to predict the number of monsters that were likely to appear in Girtonia as time passed. I reported my own calculations to him. As it turned out, Prince Reichardt had also determined for himself the extent to which the knights' safety could be ensured. He told me that the Knights of Parnacorta could remain in Girtonia until early the next morning.

"Along with our saint, the Knights of Parnacorta are the cornerstones of our national defense. I'm concerned for Girtonia, and we have an obligation to Lady Philia's sister. But on the other hand, it would be unwise to sacrifice our knights to another kingdom's crisis."

"Why do you have to be so rational? Lady Philia's sister has been almost single-handedly defending Girtonia!"

After that, however, Prince Osvalt made no further objections to Prince Reichardt's words. No doubt he knew that it would be a mistake to endanger Philip and the rest of the knights.

Prince Reichardt bowed his head to me. "Lady Philia, on behalf of my father, I would like to apologize for giving you hope that we could grant your wish."

But I still hadn't given up. We still had some time until Prince Reichardt's deadline, even if it wasn't much. If Grace could be ready by then, our hopes could come true.

Just then, Lena rushed up. "Lady Philia! Lady Grace's carriage is here!"

Could it be that Grace's sisters had already learned the magic-convergence spell? They were faster than I expected.

Lena greeted Grace as she entered. "Lady Grace, it's good to see you again."

Wearing a magic-stone necklace I made for her, Grace approached me. "Lady Philia, as you instructed, my sisters and I are using these stones to channel our magic."

The ancient magic-convergence spell collected the magic powers of everyone

wearing the necklaces. I'd provided Grace with three other necklaces to give to sisters in Bolmern.

"Grace, I can't thank you enough! I've already set up a Pillar of Light in the garden, so everything's ready."

"Oh, it's nothing. Now, Lady Philia, please use our combined magic power to expand the Great Purification Circle!"

At Grace's urging, I called the Mattilas sisters' magic into my own necklace. I could feel it gathering, all the way from the kingdom of Bolmern.

With this power, I would expand the Great Purification Circle.

The earth shimmered in gold. We were drawing power from the natural world at an unprecedented rate.

"Now, I shall begin!"

I invoked the ritual for the Great Purification Circle to cover the entire continent, all while praying that our efforts would succeed...

"Amazing, Lady Philia! The Great Purification Circle is expanding."

"Are you certain?"

"There's no doubt about it! I could sense the purification spreading toward Bolmern."

It seemed that Grace remembered the techniques I taught her and could now sense mana. She was right; the Great Purification Circle had indeed expanded in the direction of Bolmern. But...

"Haa...haa... I-I'm sorry. I failed. I couldn't transmit magic in the direction of Girtonia. It was more difficult than I expected. If I could just create a Pillar of Light and place it in east Girtonia..."

The Great Purification Circle had expanded to cover only about half of the continent. Its extension in the direction of Girtonia stalled. I'd failed to save Mia.

There was no other way to save my homeland short of going there myself.

"But if you leave the royal capital, won't the Great Purification Circle be

destroyed?” Prince Osvalt asked.

“No. Grace and I are currently connected by our shared magic. If she agrees to act as the circle’s center in my place, I can move freely.”

As long as Grace was using the magic-convergence spell, I could go to Girtonia.

I could help Mia.

Grace didn’t hesitate. “Lady Philia, go! Leave this place to me!”

“If you can leave the capital now,” Prince Osvalt agreed, “there’s no reason for you not to go!”

Prince Reichardt, however, vetoed the idea. “I can’t allow this. Lady Philia, you understand how dangerous the situation in Girtonia is, don’t you? It would be preposterous for a saint of Parnacorta to risk her life for another kingdom.”

“Brother, what are you talking about?” Prince Osvalt looked appalled. “If we try just a little harder, we can save Lady Philia’s sister! Don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud!”

“Lady Philia, I’m sure you take pride in being our saint. And if so, you won’t go to Girtonia.”

Prince Reichardt was right. I knew that. What I was proposing went against my duties as a saint of Parnacorta.

I had to stay.

Mia, I’m sorry...

“Lady Philia, don’t lie to yourself!”

“Your Highness? Eek!”

Prince Osvalt leapt onto his horse and scooped me into his arms. What was he thinking?

“My horse is the fastest in this kingdom. We’ll reach Girtonia in no time!”

“Wait! I must conduct myself as expected of a saint of this kingdom... I can’t go to Girtonia!”

I was Parnacorta's saint, not Girtonia's. I couldn't do as I pleased based on my personal desires.

"Listen! There are times when we have to decide with our hearts before we use our heads! Lady Philia, put your hand on your chest, feel what's right and wrong, then tell me honestly!"

My heart? I'd always used my head to decide. As a saint, all I ever thought about was how to help my kingdom.

I placed my hand on my chest. I could feel my heartbeat.

From the bottom of my heart, what I felt was...

I want to help Mia, no matter what.

A warm sensation filled my chest and began to overflow.

"I want to save Mia! I don't care what happens to me! I just want to save my sister!"

Such words were unbecoming of a saint.

Something hot trickled from the corners of my eyes, flowing down my cheeks in twin streams. This had never happened to me before. The world before me grew blurred, until I couldn't see a thing.

"Understood! Lady Philia, I heard your honest feelings loud and clear! Now, hold on tight, 'cause we'll be going at full speed!"

With that, Prince Osvalt spurred his horse on. In no time, we were headed for Girtonia at full gallop.

Mia, please hang in there a little longer. I'll save you, I swear.

"That reminds me—can you make a Pillar of Light while we're on the move?"

"As long as I'm praying, I can carry it with me until I release it. But are you sure Your Highness can hold me and the reins at the same time?"

Prince Osvalt held me with one arm while guiding his beloved horse, who was said to be Parnacorta's fastest, with the other.

I was confident that I could finish the preparations for a Pillar of Light by the time we reached the border. I'd never prayed in someone's arms before, though. For some reason, my heart began to beat faster. This was a first for me.

Please, God...I don't think what I'm doing is becoming of a saint. But just this once, please, have mercy on me.

As I felt Prince Osvalt's warmth and his reassuring arm around my back, I was somehow able to focus my energies and continue praying.

"Lady Philia, we've reached a fort. Do you need to stop and pray?"

Prince Osvalt's horse was even faster than I expected. We arrived at a fort near the border in no time.

I'd managed to pray enough to manifest a Pillar of Light. All that was left was to place it at a suitable location in Girtonia and our preparations would be complete.

"No need. Thankfully, I was able to make my preparations as we rode. I can protect myself from here. Your Highness, thank you for taking me this far."

I expected to encounter a far greater number of monsters in Girtonia than in Parnacorta. I'd have to exterminate them with purification magic as I raced to my destination.

From this point, I would proceed alone. I had to focus and get going.

"Hold it right there. You think I'd let you go alone? ...Ah, here we are. This spear will do nicely."

Prince Osvalt emerged from the fort's armory holding a spear that was longer than he was tall. He mounted his horse and urged me to climb on behind him.

"I can't put Your Highness in any further danger," I protested.

"Too late. If I head home now, all I'll get is a scolding from my brother. Besides, doesn't a saint heading to a battlefield need a bodyguard? If you think about it, there's no other option but for me to go with you."

"You can be so pushy..."

Planting his spear in the ground, Prince Osvalt lifted me into his arms again and seated me behind him in the saddle. He'd lifted me multiple times at this point, and each time he touched me, I couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

"I guess that's just the way I am. Anyway, hold on tight so you don't get thrown off!"

Prince Osvalt grabbed his spear and took the reins.

I knew for a fact that the situation in Girtonia had gotten worse since I left. The question was: How *much* worse?

At last we crossed the border into Girtonia. I gasped at the appalling sight that awaited me.

Before us, swarms of monsters writhed and rampaged, blocking our path. We couldn't move another step forward.

"This is far more than I estimated. I'll have to place the Pillar of Light close to the center of the kingdom."

"Lady Philia! Hold on tight and tell me which way to go!"

A single swing of Prince Osvalt's spear sent the heads of ten monsters flying in the wind.

I'd heard that Prince Osvalt had mastered the spear, but I never imagined that he was this capable with it.

"You! Outta my way! Lady Philia, hurry!"

"Ride that way, please! Turn right at the end of the road."

Slaying one monster after another, Prince Osvalt and I continued our advance. Soon gore was spraying in all directions and Prince Osvalt's face was spattered with blood, but his horse didn't lose an ounce of momentum. To think he was doing all this for another kingdom's sake...

Seeing the ferocious look on Prince Osvalt's face, I had the impression that he fought for Girtonia as hard as he would have fought for Parnacorta. I couldn't help but find that strange.

“Your Highness, why would you do all this for another kingdom?”

I just couldn't help but ask. Why had he come all the way here? How could he keep pushing forward so vigorously?

“Haa...haa...I don't think of it that way. This is your homeland, after all. For you, I'd do anything.”

“Huh? Th-that's...”

He was doing it for my sake? What did he mean by that?

“I could never do enough for someone who matters so much to me. I'll push myself to my limits, and beyond, if I must! It's only natural. If it's for you, I...”

A horde of monsters lunged toward us at once, but Prince Osvalt made quick work of them with his spear.

“I could keep going forward forever!”

More monsters darted into view...

Without a hint of hesitation, Prince Osvalt's horse lowered its head and charged forward Me, a person who mattered? That was the first time anyone had said that to me.

I felt my face burn as blood rushed to my head.

“How about the top of that hill?”

“Yes. That should do nicely.”

With prayer, I set the Pillar of Light in a high place where it could receive magic from Parnacorta and Bolmern. This would allow us to expand the Great Purification Circle.

As the earth shimmered gold, the entire kingdom of Girtonia...no, the entire continent was covered by the Great Purification Circle, rendering the monsters powerless at last.

“It's done!” I cried. “We expanded the Great Purification Circle!”

“I always knew you were an extraordinary saint, to be able to shut all those monsters out in an instant...”

“I couldn’t have done it without Your Highness.”

“Nah, I didn’t do much—huh?! Th-there’s a person lying there! It’s a girl...and she looks like you...”

“Mia!”

Without thinking, I leapt off the horse to run toward my sister.

Fighting those uncounted hordes of monsters, far beyond my estimates, Mia must have pushed herself beyond the limit.

I knelt beside her prone body. “She’s unnaturally cold... That’s a symptom of using up too much of your life force. She has a pulse, but just barely.”

Mia lips were pale blue, and her skin felt cold as ice as her temperature continued to drop. Light blue spots began to appear on her body. I guessed that after using up her magic, Mia continued to fight by converting her life force to magic. This girl had fought harder and further than I could ever have managed.

“Saint Heal!”

“What’s happening? Did it work?”

“I’m doing my best. This is the reason I came here, after all.”

My Saint Heal could instantly fix something like a fracture. But Mia had burned away nearly all her life force. She was on the brink of death...and if she died, there would be no bringing her back. Given the state she was in, I estimated I had less than a 50 percent chance of saving her.

I cast Saint Heal again, trying to return her blood flow to normal. The rest was up to Mia.

Wake up and fight on.

You’re the saint of Girtonia. Don’t you want to see the future you’ve made for it?

“Please wake up! Mia! You have to live!”

“Lady Philia...”

Raising my voice wouldn’t make the healing spell more effective...and yet I found myself shouting. At this point, I’d already lost track of how many times I’d

cast Saint Heals. It was doubtful casting it again would change anything, but somehow, I couldn't stop.

"Ngh..."

I gasped. "Mia?"

Mia still lay like a lifeless doll, but her brow began to twitch.

Just a little bit more. Just a little bit more, and she'd return to us.

My magical reserves were almost drained, but the thought of Mia awakening was enough to keep me invigorated.

"Warm... I feel warm again..."

"Mia, you're okay! I'm so glad..."

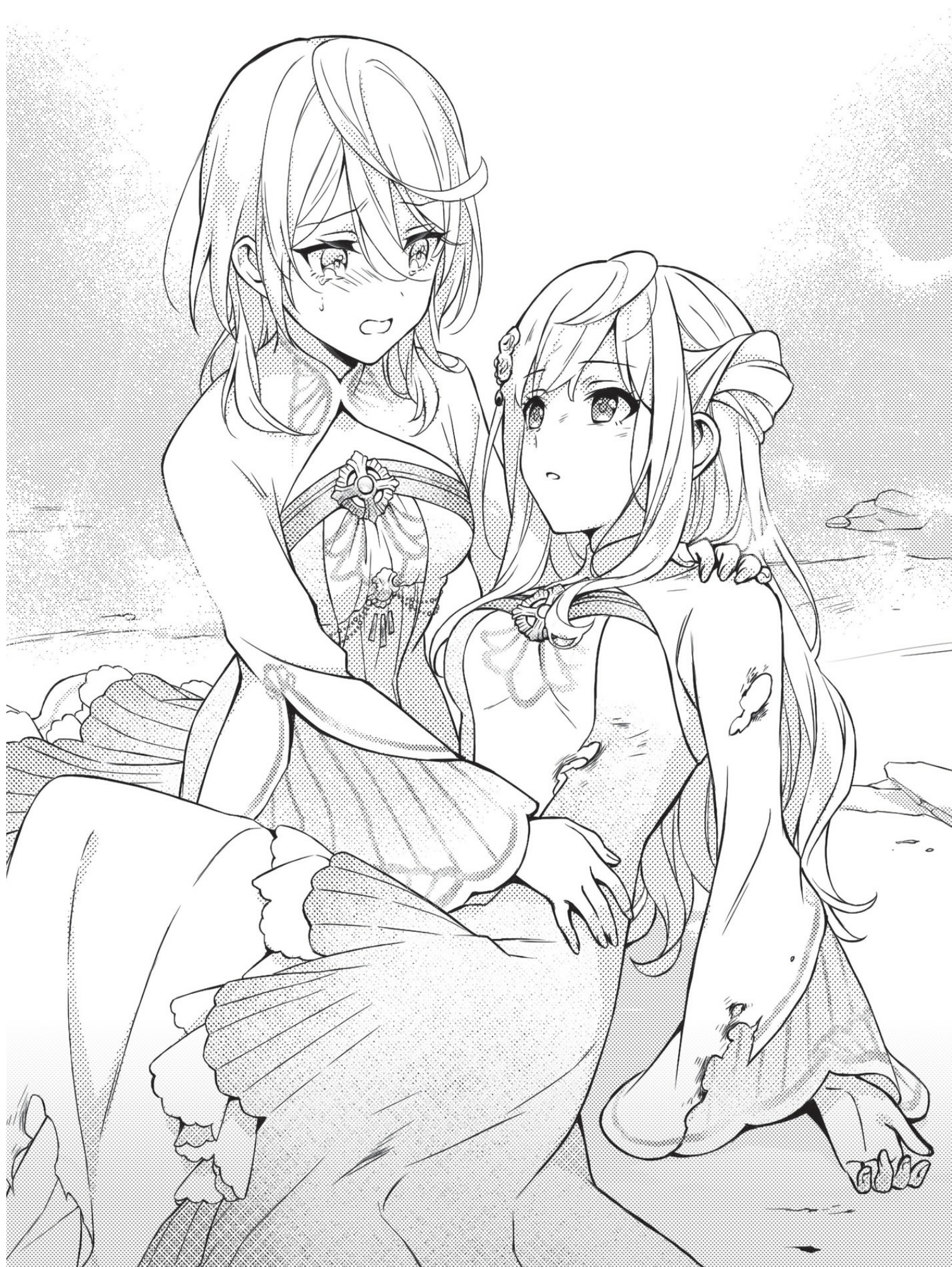
"Philia..."

I kept the healing spell going until I reached my limit, and that was when my sister opened her eyes.

As tears flowed down my cheeks, I gave her the biggest, tightest hug I could.

"Mia," I said softly, holding my sister in my arms, "is there anything that feels off?"

Mia was in tears as she firmly placed a hand on my shoulder. Her voice choked, she said, "No. Nothing...nothing at all. The healing spell worked... because you cast it. Philia... I thought I'd never see you again. After all, doing your duty as a saint is the most important thing in the world to you... I didn't think you'd come here."



It was just as Mia said. In my capacity as a saint, I would never have come here. But in this moment, I wasn't a saint.

"I came here as your big sister—as Mia Adenauer's only sister, Philia Adenauer. I had to help you no matter what, even if it meant breaking my vows. Just for you, no matter what..."

I thought I'd moved past such selfishness. I'd thought I could suppress all the desires that flowed from my heart. But the one thing I couldn't give up was Mia. There was simply no way I could cast her off.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be like you," Mia said, apologizing for the way Girtonia had been ravaged by monsters. "Girtonia is in such a sorry state... I'm really sorry. I've failed as a saint."

I couldn't deny that Girtonia had been ravaged. But Mia was the last person to blame for that.

"That's not true. If I'd been here, I couldn't have orchestrated the downfall of Prince Julius."

I never would have dared overstep my boundaries as a saint as Mia had. If I'd remained in Girtonia, the kingdom might have suffered even worse damage, because Prince Julius wouldn't have allowed me to cast the Great Purification Circle.

"Thanks, Philia, but you don't have to worry about hurting my feelings. Seeing all this destruction, how could anyone not feel pessimistic?"

"What's broken can be repaired. Mia, instead of despairing over the past, you're better off thinking about the future."

Mia and I gazed out at our battered homeland. Smoke hung over the air all the way to the royal capital, and entire villages lay in ruins. Reconstruction would take time...but much had been saved from destruction.

"I guess we still managed to avoid the worst."

"That's right, thanks to Prince Osvalt's help."

"No, no," countered Prince Osvalt. "Like I said earlier, I didn't do anything. You, Lady Philia, are the amazing one."

“That’s not true. It’s only because of Your Highness’s support that I could make it all the way here.”

Prince Osvalt gave me courage when I was paralyzed by hesitation. Without him, I might not have been able to take action. He’d also sent the Knights of Parnacorta to stave off total destruction.

As I went back and forth with Prince Osvalt, Mia, who was watching us intently, said something unexpected. “I’ve never seen you this friendly with a man before. I’m so glad you found love over there.”

“L-love?”

What exactly gave Mia the wrong idea? True, I’d never been this close to a man. Even my former fiancé, Prince Julius, rejected me.

But still...

“Mia, don’t say such strange things. You’ll embarrass His Highness.”

“No, I don’t mind at all. But given our positions...a relationship between a prince and a saint like Lady Philia...”

“Hmph,” said Mia. “He’s loads better than that idiot Prince Julius. In any case, if you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“Mia...”

Was I happy in Parnacorta?

Although I’d been worried about Mia, I’d found good people in Parnacorta. I’d learned what peace and harmony felt like. I’d never really understood what happiness was, until now. I’d always tried to set personal feelings aside.

But the relief I felt at seeing Mia alive was impossible to ignore.

As I was talking to Mia, my mentor, Aunt Hildegard, showed up. “Philia! I didn’t expect to see you here. When the monsters were all neutralized at once, I wondered if, perhaps...”

“Teacher! It’s been a while.”

Hildegard, too, looked exhausted. No doubt she’d desperately given her all for her kingdom.

“You look well,” my master said as she approached me. She stared intently into my face.

She’d always paid attention to my well-being. A saint’s body was her greatest resource, after all. We couldn’t afford to get sick. And my master’s husband had died in an epidemic, so she couldn’t help but keep a keen eye on my health.

Mia interrupted us. “Philia, Aunt Hilda is your—”

“Mia! Not another word. Philia’s already living a new life in another kingdom.”

Mia’s face showed a mix of emotions, but she said nothing else. What had she been about to say? Now I was worried...

“Philia, there’s one important thing I should tell you. I’m adopting Mia as my daughter.”

“Huh? Mia? She’s going to live with you?”

My master’s words were shocking enough to blow all my other concerns aside. She was adopting Mia? What did she mean?

“I’m sorry, Philia. You see, your parents are in prison. They were the masterminds of an assassination plot against Prince Fernand. It’s a long story, but...”

Mia told me all about our parents’ treasonous relationship with Prince Julius and how their plot had been exposed.

Looking back, I regretted not trying to communicate more. I should have spoken up to let my parents know when they were wrong. Thinking about these things, I couldn’t help but feel some responsibility. If I’d stood my ground, we might have found another path forward.

“Lady Philia, I’m sorry about your parents,” said Prince Osvolt. “I’m sure you’re also worried about all your loved ones in Girtonia. If you want to stay here and help rebuild your homeland...”

“I can’t come back here. Grace can’t be the center of the Great Purification Circle forever. Our magical connection won’t last.”

My magic power alone would be enough to maintain the expanded magic circle, and Grace needed to return to Bolmern. I wouldn’t be able to spend

much time in Girtonia.

I gripped Mia by the shoulders. “Besides, this kingdom no longer needs me. It already has a full-fledged saint.”

“Philia... I still have a long way to go, but I swear I’ll catch up to you one day! That’s right! In fact, maybe I’ll even surpass you!” Mia declared.

“And I’ll return permanently to active duty and help hone Mia’s skills,” said Aunt Hildegard. “I sense talent in her that might surpass even yours, so don’t get complacent.”

Hearing their resolve, I felt at ease. Girtonia was in good hands.

I hate to part ways, but it’s time to go home—to Parnacorta.

After saying my farewells, I joined Prince Osvalt and the knights. In that moment, I truly felt that I was the saint of Parnacorta.

And that feeling would stay with me.

Epilogue

TWO MONTHS HAD PASSED since we expanded the Great Purification Circle.

Expanding the purification circle to cover the entire continent brought much-needed relief to kingdoms hard-hit by monster invasions, so envoys from each kingdom came to Parnacorta to thank me.

Personally, I'd been driven by the desire to help my sister. However, some other kingdoms had been in even direr straits than Girtonia, so they were quite surprised when the monsters ravaging their lands were suddenly neutralized.

One day, Prince Osvalt visited the mansion. "Yesterday, we received an envoy from the great kingdom of Dalbert. As you know, that's where the head church of the Cremoux faith is located. In recognition of your achievements, their archbishop has decided to bestow upon you the title of archsaint—the only one in the world."

I couldn't hide my bewilderment. "Archsaint" was a title last given to a legendary saint who saved the world from a catastrophe centuries ago.

"Don't be modest," said Prince Osvalt. "You saved countless lives. If you ask me, that title isn't enough to honor your achievements."

Prince Osvalt often complimented me, but more often than not I dismissed it as his personal biases speaking. "Archsaint," really?

"That title is a heavy load for a fledgling like me to bear. I don't mean any disrespect, but it's more than I deserve."

"Lady Philia! Is it true that you'll be declared archsaint? Congratulations!"

Just as I was dismissing Prince Osvalt's praise, Grace, who had returned to Parnacorta to resume her training, jumped into the conversation.

When I asked her how Bolmern was doing, she said that the king and Count Mattilas were well, and that they were quite pleased with the way things were going. Apparently, Grace and her three older sisters were hailed as heroes in their kingdom.

“Wait just a minute, Grace! Aren’t you getting a little too chummy with Philia? Don’t forget she’s *my* sister!” pouted Mia, who’d been training with Grace.

With the purification circle taking a load off all saints’ shoulders, Mia had taken time off to come to Parnacorta to study under me for a little while.

While Aunt Hildegard filled in for her, Mia was staying at my mansion, studying archaic languages and training in ancient rituals. Her skillful performance made it clear to me that she’d surpass me in the future.

“Miss Mia, I’m telling you now that I’m Lady Philia’s number one apprentice! I’m not taking orders from a junior apprentice!”

“Philia! What’s wrong with this girl? She’s so annoying!”

Grace smirked, while Mia stomped her feet in frustration. Seeing Mia’s talent must have stoked Grace’s competitive spirit, but Mia seemed to take the provocation seriously.

“If you start fighting, I won’t teach either of you one more thing. Should saints be sowing seeds of conflict?”

“I’m sorry!” Mia and Grace said at once. A single warning from me was enough to set them both straight. I hoped Mia would remember to be more understanding of a younger saint like Grace.

At any rate, peace had returned to the land.

“Wow, you really can do anything! Farm work doesn’t make you break a sweat.”

At Prince Osvalt’s invitation, I was helping him out on his farm.

I had studied agriculture extensively, and I enjoyed putting my theories into practice. It was the first time I’d worked the soil with my own two hands, so it was a valuable experience for me.

“I may not look it,” I said, “but I’m fairly strong. I can do this much without getting tired. My education as a saint included endurance training...”

“Half of me wants to hear more, but the other half fears that just listening to

the details will make me want to give up. I can't believe what saints go through..."

In addition to the punishing education my parents arranged for me, my master, Aunt Hildegard, had put me through an even harsher and more demanding curriculum. Mia was enduring the same training now, and possibly having some regrets about becoming Aunt Hildegard's adopted daughter. Still, she said, she wanted to keep doing her best. She would spare no effort if it meant she could overcome the hurdles in her path and catch up to me.

She really has grown up.

"I had a tough upbringing, but I'm glad I made it through. My training allowed me to stand fast instead of breaking under the pressure."

"That's looking on the bright side. Whoops, this is a big one! Hngh—! Whoa!"

Prince Osvalt was harvesting radishes. He began to grunt and pull with all his might.

"All right, here goes!"

Prince Osvalt yanked out the radish and fell over.

Was he okay? It really was an enormous vegetable.

"Look at the size of it, Lady Philia!" Prince Osvalt sat up, covered in mud. "It's sure to be this year's champion!" He laughed as he compared the radish's size to that of his head.

Despite being an adult, he still had a childlike side to him... What an interesting person.

"Heh... Your Highness, please wipe your face. Here's a towel."

As I handed Prince Osvalt a towel, he looked at me, wide-eyed.

"Will you look at that? It's the first time I've ever seen you laugh."

"I laughed? Come to think of it, you may be right. I wonder why."

I was more surprised than Prince Osvalt was. I couldn't remember ever laughing before.

"You don't have to look so surprised. I hope laughter will be normal for you,

from now on.”

Perhaps sensing that I was troubled by the changes in myself, Prince Osvalt smiled and handed me a radish.

“When I came to this kingdom, I was afraid of change,” I confessed. “But seeing Mia become an even better person, I realized that change could be a wonderful thing.”

My adorable little sister was now a reliable and dignified lady. She had changed dramatically, but that was far from a bad thing. On the contrary, her newfound maturity made her all the more charming.

That’s why...

“I am a saint. I will always be a saint. That aspect of my life will always be the same...but who I am as a *person* is sure to change. Will Your Highness be all right with that?”

I’d come to realize it was impossible to live life without changing at all. The values, perspectives, and feelings I held now would alter little by little. I hoped that whatever happened, Prince Osvalt wouldn’t come to dislike me.

Was it naive of me to want to be validated?

“Ha ha ha ha!”

“Your Highness, I’m being serious... Oh!”

Still laughing heartily, Prince Osvalt tightly wrapped an arm around my shoulder. The sudden movement made me reflexively hug the radish I was holding.

“No need to state the obvious!” he declared. “No matter how much things change, you’ll always be you!”

As he said those words, I began to realize how silly I’d been to worry. My fear dissipated.

He’s so warm...

Deep within me, I wondered if, perhaps, the warmth I felt from Prince Osvalt’s arm around me was that thing called “happiness”—a thing I hadn’t

known before.

Was His Highness right? Would there ever be a day when happiness would feel normal for me?

When I thought about it, tomorrow seemed to glow on the horizon.



Side Story:

The Saint Sisters' First Day on the Job

“PHILIA, I’M RETIRING TODAY. I entrust our future to you.”

My mentor, Hildegard, announced this without warning. It had barely been a year since I became a saint, so I was still a novice. The prospect of conducting my saintly duties entirely on my own didn’t exactly fill me with confidence.

“Are you sure about this? I’m still inexperienced, and there’s so much for me to remember. I’m not strong enough to carry this kingdom’s future on my shoulders.”

“You’re good enough. You’ve already surpassed me in sheer power, and your technique is all but impeccable. Don’t let that go to your head, mind you—you must remain motivated to overcome your shortcomings. That’s why I can count on you.”

I didn’t really think I was more powerful than Aunt Hildegard, but I was glad to hear her acknowledge my hard work. Still, the thought of being on my own from tomorrow made me nervous.

“Oh, and another thing: you’ll be in a senior position starting tomorrow, so you need to stop being timid and set an example.”

“A senior position?” That meant I’d be taking a junior saint under my wing. “Did someone else become a saint as well? I thought there were no qualified candidates other than Mia, but she just started training last year...”

The church had recognized Mia as a potential saint, but she only had six months of training under her belt. In contrast, I’d been training for around ten years. Surely Mia needed more time? But did that mean another candidate for sainthood had been going through training?

“Tomorrow, your younger sister Mia will be making her debut as a saint.”

“Mia is now a saint?”

“She passed the church’s examination and displayed the minimum required level of power. There’s no doubt about it—she possesses great skill. She may even go on to become the greatest saint of all time.”

Mia was a year younger than I was. However, I’d been sent to live with the church for the purposes of my training at a young age, so we’d only interacted a few times—few enough to count on the fingers of both hands.

And now she was a saint. What talent she must possess! Would I be able to set a good example for her as a saint, her senior, and her older sister?

“I was so nervous, I got here over an hour early,” I muttered to myself.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, my sister and I would be alone together. What’s more, this time, I would be meeting Mia as her senior saint.

Aunt Hildegard had retired the day before, and I was trying very hard to steel myself. Even so, showing up to our meeting place this early might have been overdoing it.

Maybe I should meditate until Mia gets here.

“Uh-oh! Did I get the meeting time wrong?”

I turned. “Mia, what are you doing here so early? We still have more than an hour before our meeting time.”

“Speak for yourself, dear sister. You arrived even earlier. I don’t know why, but I was so nervous! It’s been a while, after all.”

“You don’t look nervous at all.”

Mia smiled warmly. She’d gotten even lovelier since the last time I saw her.

“I look forward to working with you, Philia! I’ll work hard and try not to drag you down.”

“Er...yes, same here. It’s a pleasure to be working with you.”

“Aren’t we being too formal? I know you’re my senior as a saint, and I your

junior, but we're sisters, too. Why don't we talk more naturally? I want to make up for lost time!" Her face beaming, Mia took my hands in hers.

Mia had a point. I wasn't acting the way most people behaved around their siblings. If that was what she wanted, I would adjust for her.

"Yes, you're right. How's this?"

"Your face is still a bit stiff, but that'll do! I want you to teach me everything there is to know about a saint's work, okay?"

"Got it. First, let's start with barrier casting..."

I gave Mia the gist of a saint's duties. She absorbed ideas at a surprisingly fast rate, and she could master a technique simply by putting it into practice once. I could see how she'd become a saint in just half a year. A mediocrity like myself would be useless to someone like her.

"What are you working on while we cast barriers?" Mia asked.

"I'm making notes on the next point on our agenda, plus some tips for you on how to cast barriers more effectively."

"You can concentrate on all that? I already have my hands full casting the spell!"

"I suppose I'm used to it. There's not enough time in a day, so I have to multitask."

A saint was expected to give everything for the sake of her kingdom. Her duties were legion. That said, I only had the one body, so to get as much done as possible, I learned to perform multiple tasks at the same time. Lately I'd begun studying architecture and medicine, among other subjects that might be valuable to the kingdom.

"You're amazing, Philia! Now I feel bad. My idea of a saint's work was pretty much casting barriers and exterminating monsters."

"Those should be enough to start with. You've got quite the set of skills, so you'll outdo me in no time."

"I can't see that happening."

Mia was kind to flatter me. In truth, she was far more remarkable than me. She had immeasurable talent, and yet she looked at me with such admiration.

What could I do for the sister who adored me? That question was on my mind for the entirety of our first day working together as saints.

“Philia, you’re the best! I always knew you were. I swear, someday, I’ll become a saint like you.”

“Mia, you...”

At that moment, it would’ve been easy to put myself down. But if I was too self-deprecating, I couldn’t inspire Mia to strive to reach her tremendous potential.

Then and there, I resolved to take great, long strides forward in front of my sister, as often as possible. I’d give everything, every day, for my one and only precious sister...

As a saint, I swore to myself that I would show her the meaning of perfection.

“The next time you’re free, let’s go to the opera together!”

With a smile as radiant as the sun, my younger sister took me by the hand and merrily led the way.

Afterword

FIRST OF ALL, thank you very much for reading this book. I'm immensely grateful to all my readers.

I'm so happy to be able to write this afterword. The first time I thought of writing a novel, I'd been in the working world for quite a while. I didn't know anything about publishing, but once I decided to try writing, I found it interesting enough that I was soon doing it daily.

And then, out of the blue, came the proposal to publish my work as a novel. I had no idea how my life could have taken such a turn. I was honestly amazed.

It's quite common for children to think about what they want to be when they grow up, right? But I could never think of anything. Instead of making a decision, I took the safe path in life: high school, university, work. I had no hopes or dreams, but was reasonably content with what was, from an outsider's perspective, a completely uninteresting life. That was why I couldn't help but find writing such fun.

And now that I have a book out, I can add this feather to my cap. I couldn't have done this without everyone's support. I wrap this up with the hope that I'll see you all again.

—FUYUTSUKI KOKI



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