



NEWLY
SINGLE,
NOW LIVING
WITH THE
DEMON
PRINCE

The Saint's Belated Happiness

AUTHOR **Hari Garasumachi**

ARTIST **Yotsuba Hanada**

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The Saint's Belated Happiness: Newly Single, Now Living with the Demon
Prince Hari Garasumachi

Illustration by Yotsuba Hanada

Title Design by Arbash Mughal

Editing by Charis Messier

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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SIRIUS

LOST CHILD,
ACTUALLY A
DEMON PRINCE.

"OH, WOW! WHAT LOVELY HORNS!"

MARIALITE

27-YEAR-OLD SAINT





"HELLOOOO?
ARE YOU EVEN
LISTENING?!"

CORNELIA

A NOBLE HELLCAT.
THE EMOTIONAL TYPE.

"EEEEEEK!"

RAVEN

SIRIUS' ATTENDANT.
DEADPAN STRAIGHT MAN

...CAT EARS...





"...WHAT'RE
YOU ACTUALLY
LOOKING FOR?"

"HOW TO MAKE
A WEDDING CAKE
WITH LOTS OF FRUIT.
WHY DO YOU ASK?"

Prologue

IT had been a month since the two of them last met.

The slightly fruity fragrance of a sophisticated black tea perfumed the air, and a sweet berry tart sat on the table between them. The tea leaves were of the highest quality, and the berries used to make the tart were a rare variety that could only be harvested in extremely small quantities. Marialite eagerly sipped at her tea, but the man sitting opposite her showed no interest in any of it.

Even then, Marialite thought he was acting strange; usually, he was enthusiastic about afternoon tea. She was quickly drawn away from her thoughts once he began to speak.

“I shall be holding a ball in the royal palace soon. It’ll be the talk of the town, I suppose. I plan to invite beautiful ladies from all over the country to join.”

“Oh, really? That sounds marvelous,” she grinned.

“...Marialite,” he addressed her gravely. Her smile fell when she saw the apprehensive look on his face. “I shall seize this opportunity to find myself a worthy partner among them.”

“What...?” Marialite uttered in a quiet voice, her eyes widening in shock.

But... I’m his fiancée. How could he forget? I’m sitting right in front of him!

“But, what about me? I’m your...” she trailed off, exasperated. His eyebrows knitted together.

“Well, what did you expect? You’re twenty-seven years old now. The people would wholly reject me marrying a woman well past the prime age for marriage.”

Marialite’s mouth hung open in bewilderment. However, under the intense pressure of his contemptuous gaze and cruel words, she decided her only course of action was to agree.

“I suppose you’re right...” she conceded awkwardly. In all honesty, she’d had a vague feeling things might end up this way for a while.

In this country, many people considered twenty-four to be the cut-off age for marriage. Marialite was three whole years too late. A smug, satisfied smile sat on her ex-fiancé’s lips; apparently, he was appeased by her quick admission of defeat.



“I assure you, Marialite: I am very grateful to you. Thanks to your efforts as a saint, our country has come alive with thousands of luscious trees and plants. However, that is all. I do not see any appeal in you as a member of the opposite sex,” he declared in a detached tone.

She couldn't believe her ears. What she was hearing completely invalidated all of her future plans.

Once, years ago, she had been engaged to another man. However, a few days before she was supposed to get married, the fact that she was a saint came to light, and a member of the palace suddenly showed up at her house.

All saints had to completely give themselves up to the state. As they were not permitted to marry commoners, Marialite had her previous engagement annulled by force. Of course, there were numerous citizens who voiced their criticism over Marialite's treatment, but the king was so overjoyed to have a saint in his country that he couldn't care less.

That was when she became engaged to the crown prince, Rufus, who was twenty-three years old at the time. They were set to get married five years after their engagement. However, years after, when there had still been no preparations to speak of for said wedding, Marialite began to grow suspicious.

Even so, she never imagined that Rufus had actually been looking for a new fiancée without consulting her.

“I understand how you feel, but...can you really just decide that out of the blue? Does His Majesty know about this?” Marialite hedged.

That was the thing she was most worried about. The king had no concern for whether she was “proper wife material” for his son; her being a saint was enough to appoint her as the crown princess without a second thought.

I doubt he'd accept age as a justifiable reason to call off the wedding.

Rufus simply snorted at her in reply, his nose wrinkled in a displeased grimace.

“I understand that you may be dissatisfied with another woman becoming my princess,” he huffed. “And, do spare me the whole ‘but I'm a saint!’ talk as well.

Rest assured, the matter is all taken care of. We have arranged for a large shipment of magic items to be delivered from another country. With those, we shan't need your holy powers any longer."

"No, really, that's not what's bothering me," she shook her head. "Tell me: has the king been informed, or...?"

"What I'm trying to say is that thanks to the technology of magic implements, the crown princess no longer needs to be a saint. Therefore, I may as well search for a young, beautiful woman to wed. Besides, such a woman would carry far more favor with the people. *You*, however, are going on thirty, and are undeniably plain in appearance. With one look at *you* standing next to *me*, I'm sure my father will understand my decision."

"Uh, right..."

Although Marialite was not at all impressed by Rufus' justification, she didn't bother to argue back. If they no longer needed a saint, then there was no reason for her to stay in the palace. As his son, Rufus could probably manage to convince the king eventually. There was nothing Marialite could say to change his mind.

"Marialite Harty... You must leave the palace at once," Rufus demanded in a low tone.

"Of course," she accepted. "But, would you at least let me say goodbye to His Majesty and all the servants who looked after m—"

"Leave! Immediately!" he shouted, his cheeks turning red. "Now that you are no longer my fiancée, you are nothing more than a commoner. Do you really think it appropriate for someone with no royal standing to simply waltz about our sacred abode?"

Faced with his harsh words, Marialite suddenly thought of her parents. They had passed away a few years ago, believing that their daughter would go on to become royalty.

They'd be so sad if they found out about this.

That was the worst part. She felt like a disappointment to them.

Chapter 1: The First Step to Happiness

“IT’S been quite some time since I last went out by myself like this...” Marialite mused to herself as she sauntered down the road with a spring in her step, her plain white dress and wide-brim hat fluttering in the breeze. Looking at her, no one would guess that she’d just been dumped—and for a ridiculous reason, no less.

However, that didn’t bother her one bit. She wasn’t sad or angry about the fact that Rufus had never seen her as attractive, especially when she felt pretty much the same way about him.

She had never once seen him as a potential romantic partner. The main reason was that she had been far too busy to think about seriously pursuing romance. Whenever she wasn’t undergoing strict training for her royal future, she was carrying out her duties as a saint of the nation. She rarely had time to see him.

When the two of them did meet, it was only once or twice a month. It wasn’t exactly the sort of timescale that could nurture a budding romance.

She did her very best to fall in love with him, but in the end, she just couldn’t. Attraction wasn’t something that could be forced. She secretly used to worry about how she would cope with having a physically intimate relationship with a man she didn’t love.

In many ways, it was a relief to be free of him. Despite her initial disappointment, her shoulders felt a lot lighter now. She couldn’t deny that wasting five years of her life bothered her a little, but that feeling of regret was only a very faint one.

From Marialite’s point of view, this was a good thing. As break-ups went, she thought theirs had been relatively amicable. Others, however, wouldn’t see it like that.

She left the palace with only her own belongings and a small sum of money

she received as a parting gift. Now, she was heading back to her old home, where she once lived with her parents. Ever since their deaths, the house had been empty and unoccupied.

Although she had once been engaged before becoming a saint, she harbored no lingering feelings of affection for her ex-fiancé. It was true that they had once genuinely loved each other, but he wasn't interested in a monogamous relationship. He was born and raised in a different country, where it was typical for husbands to take lovers outside of their marriage. That revelation was devastating for Marialite; she simply couldn't wrap her head around it.

"What will I do now...?" she muttered to herself.

There were a lot of things she wanted to do with her life. She especially wanted to try out new things using her holy powers.

There's no need to rush it, though. I've got plenty of time.

Marialite's hometown was located a short distance away from the palace. On the outskirts of the town, next to the forest, there stood an old house. Once upon a time, the building had been surrounded by a sea of beautiful flowers, but now, the garden was wild and overgrown. Much of the space between each plant was decorated with intricate spider webs.

Marialite was fond of gardening, but even to her, the state of it was alarming.

I'll need to take care of that as soon as possible.

With that thought in her mind, she fished her key out of her bag and put a hand on the doorknob.

"Huh?"

That was when she noticed the door was slightly ajar. Her first thought was that the house had been burgled—but as far as she knew, there was nothing of value in there.

Maybe there actually was something worth stealing...

If there was, it couldn't have been much. Unruffled by the potential break-in, Marialite simply walked inside. Clouds of dust irritated her lungs, sending her into a coughing fit as she made her way further in. Aside from the thick layer of

dust covering the place, the furniture was just as it had been left. If she wiped it down, it would be as good as new.

Marialite nodded to herself, pleased with what she saw. Next, she went to check her bedroom. However, as soon as she stepped inside, she noticed something.

There was a child kneeling on the floor, huddled up in some bed sheets.



“Oh, my...” she remarked, looking down at the boy.

He stared back up at her with big, round, jade-green eyes. They were tinged with a hint of fear, and his small body seemed to be trembling slightly beneath the sheets.

“Well, hello there. It’s nice to meet you,” Marialite greeted with a smile, remembering her manners. “My name’s Marialite. I actually used to live here.”

“...Is this your abode?” he asked hesitantly. In stark contrast to his appearance, his manner of speech was not at all childlike.

“Yes, I suppose. But, to be honest, I haven’t visited in a long time,” she explained. “How long have you been here?”

“...Since yesterday,” he said plainly.

It was hard to tell through the bundle of sheets, but he looked awfully thin, and his face was covered in dirt. Marialite thought about wiping his face with her handkerchief before realizing that it probably wouldn’t do any good without some water to lift it.

“Hmm... I know!” she smiled. “I’ll be just a moment, okay?”

She dashed out of the room and picked up an old knife from the kitchen before heading out to the garden. She took out a drawstring pouch from her bag, then stuck her thumb and forefinger inside before pulling out a tiny seed.

She dug a shallow hole in the soil beneath her, then buried the small seed there. After saying a short prayer in front of it, the area where the seed was buried began to shimmer a pale green color.

Not a moment later, the sound of loud rustling and wood creaking rang out through the air as a large, thick-stemmed plant suddenly sprouted from the earth, growing taller and taller until huge red flowers bloomed at the tips of the leaves.

That was Marialite’s power as a saint. Others could control the weather or produce fire at will, but in her case, she was able to accelerate the growth of any type of plant. This country was once a very dry land that suffered long periods of drought, but thanks to Marialite’s power, the desolate landscape had

been transformed into green, grassy plains.

“I’m sorry about this, but I’d really appreciate some water right now,” she apologized gently before cutting the plant’s thick stem in half with the knife. Clear, fresh water gushed from the opening, and Marialite pressed her handkerchief against it.

When she returned to the bedroom, she found the child with his nose pressed up against the window, still clutching the bundle of sheets. Apparently, he’d been intently watching her do it.

“Are you a saint?” he asked curiously.

“I can only make flowers and trees grow, but...yes, I am,” she nodded. “Right! Now we can wipe that dirt off your face.”

She crouched down and rubbed the damp handkerchief against his cheek. The fabric quickly became dirty, but in return, the boy’s face was clean. He’d still need a bath later, though.

More importantly, she needed to get some food in him. She remembered the cookies that a maid at the palace had secretly slipped her on her way out. They should be perfect for someone with a lack of energy. She rummaged for them in her bag and took one out to show to the boy.

“You must be hungry. How about one of these?” she suggested.

“...What is it?” He eyed it suspiciously.

“A cookie. They’re very sweet and tasty!” she beamed.

“I don’t want it,” he refused. Perhaps he didn’t like sweets.

Just as Marialite began to mull over what she could feed him, he suddenly strode over towards the door as though he wanted to leave.

“I’m sorry for being so inconsiderate. I assumed the house was abandoned. I’ll leave, so don’t worry,” he announced.

“Do you have somewhere to go, though?” Marialite worried. The boy simply stood still, giving no answer. “You can stay here as long as you like.”

“I couldn’t possibly...”

“But—”

“Do you really want someone like me in your home?” he frowned, deliberately pulling the sheets down to reveal his head.

A messy tuft of silver hair appeared, along with...

Two horns?!

They were deep crimson in color, and the tips were slightly curled. Marialite stared at them fixedly, her mouth agape. To avoid her gaze, the boy awkwardly reached for the sheet again with a pained look on his face.

Marialite’s next words stopped him.

“Oh, wow! What lovely horns!” she exclaimed. She had no idea why he had horns, neither did she care. All she knew was that they were her absolute favorite color—the same color as her favorite fruit.

At this point, it would take a *lot* to surprise Marialite. Her first fiancé had an affair, then she found out she was a saint, then she got engaged to the crown prince, then got *unengaged* to the crown prince...so who knew what the future held? After going through several major incidents in her life, her heart was not easily shaken. In a way, she’d become numb to sudden revelations.

“You think these are...*lovely*?” he asked in disbelief.

“Of course. Red’s my favorite color! Plus, they remind me of apples,” she grinned.

“They remind you of...*apples*?” he said hesitantly, his tone mixed with a hint of both unease and optimism.

Then, a bright, cheerful laugh escaped him.



THE boy wouldn’t answer any of Marialite’s questions—not where he came from, nor why he was in her house in the first place. In fact, he wouldn’t reveal any information about himself whatsoever...other than his name: Sirius. Although, perhaps it wasn’t a case of simply refusing to tell her anything. It seemed more like he *couldn’t* tell her.

Each time she asked something, he bowed his head in apology and replied: “I can’t answer that.”

“Oh, no, don’t feel like you need to apologize,” Marialite insisted. “You have your reasons. I understand that.”

“...Thank you,” he said in a small voice, nibbling at the cookie she’d given him. One way or another, Marialite wanted to help.

Most likely, Sirius was an orphan. If he had nowhere to go, he might have taken refuge in her house to protect himself from the cold. For a moment, she wondered if she should take him to the orphanage, but there was no telling how a child with horns might be treated there. It was unpleasantly easy to imagine how he might end up.

As far as Marialite could tell, Sirius was half human, and possibly half *monster*. In this country, such creatures were thought to bring disaster to the land, thus they were relentlessly persecuted. That was why she decided to take him in herself. And, if she wanted to earn enough to support two people, she needed to find work. Fast.

“What’re you doing?” Sirius asked inquisitively, blinking at her.

At first, he thought she was just doing some weeding, then quickly realized it was something more intensive when she brought out some farming tools that had been lying in storage.

She hastily tilled the soil, creating a large patch of fertile land.

“I’m making it easier for new flowers and trees to grow here,” she explained.

With her powers, she could make any kind of plant grow. However, if she did so in an inadequate environment, the plant ended up looking a little sad. On the other hand, as long as she placed the seeds in rich, nutritious soil, her creations grew up to be happy and healthy.

She’d explained that fact to people a couple of times, but back in the palace, no one truly seemed to take an interest in her work.

“Nature, please give these seeds the gift of life.”

She offered up a prayer to the multitude of seeds she had just planted, and

within moments, greenery began to stretch into the air. There were apple trees, strawberry plants, a variety of citrus trees...and a sea of beautiful flowers.

Swiftly, Marialite got to work on harvesting them. She'd specifically regulated the trees' growth so that they wouldn't grow too tall, which made it much easier to pick the fruit than usual.

"How beautiful..." Sirius whispered in amazement, staring in admiration.

"Isn't it just?" Marialite smiled. "I'm a big fan of these flowers, too."

"No, that's not what I meant," he shook his head. "The flowers also look wonderful, but...I was calling *you* beautiful, Lady Marialite."

"Oh! Why, thank you, Sirius," she beamed.

To be honest, she was a little suspicious of his definition of beautiful—her entire body was covered in dirt and sweat. Nevertheless, seeing the gentle smile tugging at Sirius' lips, she decided to simply accept his compliment.

From Marialite's point of view, Sirius had a far more charming appearance than she did. Unfortunately, he was still covering his head with sheets so that no one would see his horns, but she'd already witnessed just how gorgeous his dazzling silver hair was. Plus, he had a dainty, feminine face, which only added to his charm.

He was nothing like Marialite, who had once been told that her appearance was "okay, but nothing special."



MARIALITE went into the town a few times to sell the fruit and flowers she had harvested from the garden. However, the most anyone ever did was have a quick look at her selection as they were passing by. She couldn't sell a single thing.

...Until she started putting out samples, that was.

She peeled the fruit and cut them into bite-sized pieces, then offered them to the public to try.

"O, saints...! It's delicious! Where on earth did you get these?!"

“It’s sweet and juicy... I could eat it for the rest of my life!”

“Honestly, I’m speechless. I didn’t even know fruit could be *this* sweet at this time of year.”

Each person who sampled the fruit applauded its juicy, ripe flavor and fresh texture. Before she knew it, people were begging to buy her produce. Just as one of her customers said, it was difficult to find sweet fruit during early summer; all the fruit in the marketplace was very sour at the moment.

That must have been why everyone ignored her at first; they just assumed it would be as bad as all the other fruit. However, once word of their sweet taste got around, everyone wanted some. Plus, once people started to take a closer look at her shop, they also noticed that the flowers she sold were even better quality than at the florist’s stall.

“I ain’t seen your face ’round ’ere before. Where d’ya come from?”

“Are you married? ...What? You’re single?”

Even after taking a proper look at her, no one noticed that she was Prince Rufus’ ex-fiancée. In fact, the people rarely even spoke about the crown princess in general. Having said that, nor did they notice that she used to live in the area as a regular citizen.

Even when she used to be a regular citizen, she was an unassuming woman that people never paid much attention to.



“I was thinking we could have stew for dinner tonight. How does that sound to you, Sirius?” Marialite asked politely.

“Stoo? What’s that...?” he asked with a furrowed brow.

“You make it by cooking vegetables in a milky soup. The vegetables go soft and create a warm, comforting flavor. I think you’d like it,” she encouraged.

“Yes, I’ll be able to eat that.”

Apparently, there were a lot of things halflings physically couldn’t eat.

For example, vampire-human halflings felt nauseous when they ate onions or

garlic, and werewolf halflings would grow weak if they didn't eat enough meat at mealtimes.

As such, Marialite tried to ask Sirius whether he could eat something before she made it. Gradually, she was building up a list of his diet in her mind. It was lucky that out of the things he *could* eat, there didn't seem to be anything he was fussy about. It wasn't that he was just being polite because Marialite was kind enough to feed him, either; when he ate, he genuinely seemed to enjoy it, and he all but licked his plate clean.

Marialite had been expecting to live a solitary, lonely life after leaving the palace. However, Sirius changed everything.



“THERE! Here's your afternoon snack for today,” Marialite sang, offering Sirius a plate of peeled apple slices. They were just the right size for him to pop into his small mouth. As she set the plate down, his jade-green eyes sparkled like a cave of glittering jewels.

“Thank you very much, Lady Marialite.” He eagerly slid one between his lips and began to chew in small motions.

Marialite wanted to make Sirius all sorts of new dishes and show him the variety of the culinary world, but ultimately, he always went back to asking for more of the fruit she grew using her powers. Because he seemed to enjoy it so much, she started to grow more and more different types of fruit, such as different strawberry and grape varieties. She could also sell the excess fruit in town, so she was actually earning quite a lot of money. Thanks to her newfound income, she could make plenty of delicious food for Sirius and also buy a lot of clothes.

When they first met, Sirius was nothing but skin and bones—but now, he'd put on weight, and his cheeks were round and soft like little marshmallows. His way of speaking had also become a little less awkward.

“...Lady Marialite?” he piped up. “Could I ask... Is there anything you want? Something you've thought about buying, for example.”

“Huh? I don't think so,” she replied.

“Then, what about something you’d like to do?”

“Hmm, let me think...”

Looking after Sirius was no trouble to her, and it wasn’t as though she was a greedy or materialistic person in the first place. She was quite content with their current situation. She loved gardening, and it was a blessing that she got to make a living doing it. Of course, she still wanted to find ways to grow as many different plants as she could, but for now, she was happy enough just making sure Sirius was happy and healthy.

“Right now, I think I’d just like to watch over you as you grow up,” she smiled.

“...All right.”

“I wonder what kind of person you’ll become,” she commented aloud.

Once Sirius became an adult, Marialite had no doubt that he’d have to move to a different country. As things stood, he wasn’t even free to walk around town, let alone meet new people.

Most likely, he’d grow into a brave, dignified young man. Then, he’d move to a country that treated halflings well, and meet a woman who was just as lovely as he was.



“**ARE** you going shopping, Lady Marialite? I’d like to come.”

“Thank you, Sirius, but...are you sure?” she replied, her eyebrows knitting together in concern. “Don’t you want to finish reading your book?”

“No, I want to help you,” he said firmly. In the next moment, he marched over to Marialite, took the basket from her hand, and grinned. Marialite returned his smile, overjoyed to see how polite he’d become as he grew up.

He was now far taller than Marialite, and his marshmallow-like cheeks had lost their baby fat to reveal a strong, handsome bone structure. He was still rather thin in build, but there was no missing the solid muscle that stood out under his skin. His voice had also broken, and it now commanded a low, sonorous tone.

One day, his scarlet horns suddenly disappeared. When Marialite asked what

happened to them, he simply said, “I thought things would be easier for you this way.”

At first, she worried that he’d cut them off, but thankfully, that didn’t seem to be the case. He claimed that as he grew, he gained control over growing and shrinking them.

It was fortunate since he could walk around town without attracting any untoward attention, but Marialite thought it was a shame. When she told him that, his entire body went rigid, for some reason.

“Still, you really have grown,” she added softly, the words falling out of her mouth of their own accord.

It had only been half a year since they had met.

The reason for his extraordinarily fast growth had to be something to do with being a halfling. Although, she could hardly complain. He’d grown to be such a sensible young man, after all. Most people would probably be scared of the sheer speed of his growth, but Marialite simply took it in stride.

“That’s all thanks to you,” he murmured gently.

“Me?” she blinked.

“The fruits you grow are full of strong magical properties. Thanks to that, I managed to absorb all the magic I needed to develop into an adult,” he explained.

“What?”

This was the first she’d heard of this.

“My kind grows faster than humans by nature, but from here on out, our aging process slows down dramatically.”

“I had a suspicion that your kind grew faster,” Marialite nodded. “But I have to say, that *is* a relief. I thought I would have an old man on my hands in a couple of years or so.”

“Lady Marialite... Thank you for caring for me,” Sirius murmured in earnest, meeting her gaze as he tightly grasped both of her hands. She blinked in surprise.

His appearance might have changed beyond recognition, but inside, he was almost exactly the same.

Looking up at him with an affectionate fondness, Marialite stroked his silvery hair. A few months ago, she did it with no effort whatsoever, but now, she had to stretch just to reach the top of his head.

She was certain he'd be able to find a partner who was just as gorgeous as him.

She reached up to place both her hands on his cheeks. For a split second, his jade-green eyes seemed to flash red—but Marialite quickly shook herself and forgot about it. She must have been seeing things.



JUST as Sirius claimed, his rapid growth soon came to a stop. Now, he spent his days helping Marialite in all sorts of ways. He assisted her when she went to sell her produce in town and accompanied her on their regular shopping trip with no complaints. He was a huge help.

Even when he was still small, he'd helped out as much as he could. In fact, it was probably *more* than he should have done. Back then, he tried to carry baskets that were heavier than his own body weight, and Marialite was always worried he'd get abducted by some ill-natured stranger when he was out in public.

Since Sirius started helping out, Marialite had a feeling her number of female customers had increased. Sirius wasn't all too sociable when it came to people other than Marialite, though; he was cold when they spoke to him, and he always swiftly turned down women's advances, no matter how beautiful they were. Even so, that was part of why they liked him, apparently. There were also others that came not only to see Sirius, but Marialite, too.

"I wonder why they bother with me when you're right there," she commented casually one day. They were out in the garden, picking apples for the apple pie that Marialite planned to make for their afternoon snack.

"What makes you say that?" Sirius blinked.

"Well, I'm...*me*," she replied with a chuckle.

While the man helping her was young, gorgeous, and fit, she was pushing thirty. She couldn't help but feel remarkably plain next to Sirius.

"I thought people would find it weird to ask a man out when his mother's standing next to him," she wondered.

"Those ladies don't seem to think you're my mother, though," Sirius replied with a frown.

"Maybe they think we're siblings, then."

Now that the age gap between them had become much smaller, that made more sense. Not that they looked anything alike...

"In that case, maybe they have a thing for that. Maybe they..." he trailed off. "No. You know what? Never mind."

He shook his head and instead walked over to an apple tree. With one light touch of his palm to the trunk, a shiny round fruit tumbled down from the branches. As it fell, he moved his fingers again, and the apple floated through the air before landing in Marialite's palm.

Looking on in astonishment, a huge smile lit up her face.

"Sirius! I never knew you had holy powers, too."

"No, these aren't holy powers—it's sorcery. Saints find their power if God decides to bless them with it. In the demon clan, though, anyone can use magic," Sirius replied with an awkward smile.

"Wait..." Marialite hesitated. "Does that mean you're a demon...?"

Demons were a completely different race from monsters, humans, *or* halflings.

For one thing, their level of knowledge and magic was far superior. They had enough power to take over the world, if they felt like it. Marialite had even heard that a particularly strong demon could overthrow a country on their own.

"He's even more powerful than I thought. Wow..." she murmured to herself as they walked back into the house. Sirius froze in absolute shock.

"...Don't you fear me?" he asked in a muted tone.

“No? Why would I?”

“I’m a demon. In general, humans fear us.”

“Does that matter? You’ve never done anything to hurt either me or the townspeople. You’re a very kind and considerate young man—demon or not.”

There was absolutely no reason to be scared of Sirius. Marialite would proudly say that without a second thought.

Sirius remained in thoughtful silence for a few moments before giving a small sigh.

“...I never did tell you about why I was in your house that day, did I?”

“Nope. But, if you’d rather not talk about it, then please don’t force yourself t—”

“It’s all right. I want to tell you more about my life,” he insisted. “...Recently, there has been a power struggle among us demons. Unfortunately, I got caught up in that. The enemy forces killed my entire family, and I almost met my end... but I managed to escape the palace. I ran and ran with my pursuers not far behind, until I eventually arrived in this town.”

“That must’ve been terrible for you...” she remarked sorrowfully.

There was a particular word in his story that made her raise an eyebrow, but she was far more concerned by how much pain he must’ve been through.

He must’ve been awfully lonely.

When she remembered what he used to be like half a year ago, tears began to form in her pale blue eyes. Sirius watched in shock as tears tumbled down her cheeks, and she moved forward to wrap him up in a tight embrace.

“M-Marialite? Um, what’re you doi—?”

“I can’t help it. You had it so tough...” she said tearfully.

“I’m sorry, but I’d really appreciate it if you took a step back,” he suggested in a strained voice.

“What? Oh, whoops. I wasn’t thinking. Did I squeeze you too tight?” she worried.

“Not in the slightest. In fact, I’d love it if you squeezed me even tighter! I just wasn’t mentally prepared...” he chuckled awkwardly.

That time, there was no mistaking it.

Marialite definitely saw his irises darken into a deep crimson. She knew because she blinked several times, only to be met with that same scarlet gaze. She was absolutely transfixed by it.

“I don’t mean to alarm you, but your eyes have gone red. Is that bad? Is it a sign of sickness?”

“...Listen to me, Lady Marialite,” he said seriously, ignoring her questions. He drew closer and closer to her—so close, that she thought he might kiss her. She automatically backed away, but he caught her hands and pulled her close again.

“You’ve always doted on me as though I were your son or a brother. However, I don’t feel the same way. Ever since the day I met you, I’ve always—”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

“Oh, we have a guest!” Marialite exclaimed, shaken.

Just as Sirius began to whisper in a low, smooth tone, the sound of someone knocking at the front door sent them flying apart. Marialite rushed to answer it, but Sirius followed right on her heel.

“Sirius? What is it?”

“I’ll go,” he said firmly.

“Why? Were you expecting someone?” she asked, before suddenly freezing in her tracks. “Oh no! I forgot about the apple pie. I need to make a start on it if we are serving guests...”

“Don’t worry about that. He isn’t worthy of even one bite of your apple pie, Lady Marialite.”

With that bitter comment, Sirius proceeded to open the door. On the other side, Marialite saw a boy with black hair and a heartbreaking look of exhaustion on his face.

“F-Finally... Lord Sirius... I’ve found you,” he panted.

“Raven. Why are you here?” Sirius scowled.

“Why am I h—...?! You’re so rude!” the boy, Raven, scoffed in disbelief. “Obviously, I’m here to take you back! Why else?! Do you have any idea...how much I’ve been through...to...”

He couldn’t quite finish his sentence before his eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed onto the floor right in front of them.

GRRRRRG.

His stomach emitted an extraordinarily loud gurgle. He was fast asleep, but began to grumble and mumble wearily—and Marialite definitely caught the word “hungry.”

Sirius swiftly reached down and hooked his arms under Raven’s body before easily hauling him up. He carried him over to the sofa and carefully laid him there.

Without another moment’s hesitation, Marialite began drafting up a meal plan in her head.



SOON after Raven collapsed, Marialite went shopping for food.

According to Sirius, much like him, Raven ate just about anything. However, he did have a slight preference for meat, so Marialite bought some steak especially for him. When she got home, though, Sirius didn’t seem all too pleased about her purchases.

“You don’t need to go so far for *him*,” he complained in a huff.

“But, isn’t he your friend?” Marialite replied. “I’d feel terrible if I didn’t cook him a proper meal.”

“He’s not my *friend*...” Sirius sighed.

“Either way, he seems to be important to you. Am I wrong?”

Even though Sirius had done pretty much nothing but complain about Raven since he showed up, he was very quick to carry him inside the house and lay him down somewhere more comfortable after he passed out.

...Although he did suggest dumping him in the garden if Marialite was opposed to lending him the sofa (which, of course, she wasn't).

Sirius' jade-green gaze shifted to give Marialite a dubious look before he answered her. "He used to be my guard. His command of magic is hilariously bad, but he's a magnificent sprinter. So, he was tasked with aiding my escape."

"Does that mean he was with you when you ran away?" she asked.

"Indeed. However, we were eventually separated. I thought he was dead," he added solemnly.

"Thank goodness he found you."

Marialite had no doubt that Raven had a harrowing story to tell, too. He looked just as weak and malnourished as Sirius did when she first met him.

Apparently, Raven was also fond of apples, so Marialite decided to make some apple compote—a simple dessert made by dicing some apples, then mixing them with sugar, lemon juice, and water in a saucepan.

The sugary scent of apples and lemons wafted through the kitchen, and it seemed to stir Raven from his deep sleep. He opened his eyes, but they were still completely rolled back, as though he were only half-conscious.

"Mmm... Somethin' smells really good..." he mumbled sleepily.

"Oh, Raven. You fainted, but...are you all right?" Marialite fretted, looking over her shoulder from the kitchen. "In fact, is he even awake?"

"I don't think so," Sirius sighed. "*Hey, Raven!* WAKE UP! You're embarrassing yourself in front of Lady Marialite!"

In the next moment, something truly astounding occurred.

Before Marialite could even get a word in edgewise, Sirius grabbed the top of Raven's head and violently clutched a fistful of hair. Raven's eyes immediately snapped wide open, and a terrified tremble seized his limbs as he shook Sirius off.

Then, he backed away so fast, that he ended up plastering himself to the ceiling. Marialite blinked.

“Eeeeeeeek!” he screamed. “I don’t know what happened, but please spare me! I’ll do anything! Just don’t kill me!”

“Who said anything about killing you? Although, if you don’t pull yourself together, I just might,” Sirius growled.

“Noooo! I don’t want to di—” Raven suddenly froze, his wide eyes fixed on Sirius. “Wait... Lord Sirius? Is that you? And...why am I clinging to the ceiling like some kinda spider?”

Apparently, he’d finally found his way back to reality. He was clearly in shock, but even so, he landed on his feet without so much as a wobble. Then, when he met Marialite’s gaze, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“...Who are you?”

“My name’s Marialite. I bought you some steak earlier. Would you like some?” she asked, quickly brushing his suspicion aside.

“Really?! Steak?!” His eyes shone with excitement, and the word “please” was written all over his face.

“Yup!” Marialite grinned. “Sirius told me you love meat, so I thought it might cheer you up. For dessert, I’m making some apple compote, too.”

“Comport? What’s that?”

“Compote. You make it by cooking fruit in a sugary syrup. You can eat it just like that, or bake it in a fruit pie,” she explained.

“It sounds amazing...” Raven marveled. She could almost imagine drool hanging from his mouth. “But...is it really okay for me to eat something that fancy?”

“I thought the same thing, but apparently, Lady Marialite wants to treat you. You should be grateful for her kindness,” Sirius demanded bluntly.

“Maybe you should just be kinder yourself!” he snapped back with a pout on his lips. Raven must’ve been around fifteen or sixteen. His voice had broken, but his face still had a round sort of youth to it.

“By the way, Lord Sirius...when did you get so big?” Raven continued, scanning him from head to toe. “You’re taller than me now, and you’re actually

really scary when you're angry..."

"I have Lady Marialite to thank for that. Thinking I was an orphan, she took raising me into her own hands," Sirius said, his tone much softer than a few moments ago.

He gently took Marialite's hand and squeezed it. The look he gave her was about the furthest thing from familial love, although Marialite didn't seem to realize it. Raven's jaw twitched.

"...I never pegged you for the affectionate type," Raven remarked, bemused.

"What do you mean? Sirius is always like this," Marialite said, her voice colored with surprise.

"Whaaaat?" Raven frowned. "I mean, he's never been an outright *bully*, but... let's just say he was never soft on anyone."

"When I first met him, he was certainly very wary," she conceded. "Still, I sort of wish I could have met him back then." It was more of an offhand comment to herself—because she was genuinely curious as to how Raven remembered him.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Raven muttered with a strained smile, hanging his head.



TEARS rolled down Raven's cheeks when he took the first bite of his freshly grilled steak.

"I've never eaten meat this good before!" he sobbed. "I'm so happy I could die right this second."

As he ate, he kept repeating those same phrases, as well as other words to that effect. He chewed each bite furiously, chasing after the most flavor each mouthful could offer. The vegetable soup and the soft, fluffy bread were awarded the same sort of praise—and he kept asking for more. Although Marialite was touched by his reaction, she was beginning to worry about him.

"Don't eat too fast, all right? At that rate, you'll give yourself a terrible tummy ache."

"You don't need to worry about him, Lady Marialite. His stomach's far

stronger than you might think. He can ingest poison with no trouble, after all,” Sirius smiled.

“...Well, that’s a relief,” she replied after a moment. She wasn’t entirely sure how she was supposed to react to that.

“Anyway, Raven—how did you know I was here?” Sirius asked, curious.

“Mmmf,” Raven began, stuffing his cheeks full of bread. “I followed traces of your magic. With a big, strong demon like you, you’re pretty easy to detect.”

Marialite wasn’t sure how it was done, but apparently, using magic to seek people out was easy among demons.

I bet that comes in handy.

“Children have less magical energy, though, so they’re harder to find,” Raven continued. In other words, Sirius was now brimming with strong magical energy. “You’ve been taking care of Lord Sirius while I struggled to find him, right, Marialite? I can’t thank you enough.” He bowed his head low in gratitude.

“Oh, please, you don’t have to bow or anything. It’s been a pleasure looking after him. Every day with him has been great fun—and I mean that. If I didn’t have him, I would’ve been very alone.”

If anything, I’m the one who should be thanking them.

The house would’ve felt extremely empty had she been there alone with the absence of her parents more apparent than ever. She still probably would have kept on living as usual, though; she would have pushed through the loneliness and found a way to make her day-to-day life fulfilling one way or another.

Even so, it would have been far gloomier than the happy, joyful life she was now living with Sirius.

“Are you single then, Marialite? I sorta just assumed you were married,” Raven admitted.

“Ha, the townspeople say the same thing every now and again,” she laughed dryly. “They ask if my husband’s doing all right back at home.”

“Exactly! I’d think the same thing,” Raven nodded enthusiastically. Sirius immediately shot a wrathful glare at him.

“What do you mean by that? Depending on how you answer, your life may be at stake...” he threatened.

“Well, she’s so calm and collected, y’know? She’s got that wifely aura about her.”

Sirius fell completely silent.

“Lord Sirius... I bet you just thought ‘that’s hot,’ didn’t you?” Raven teased with a sly grin.

“I never thought such a thing.”

“The faster you deny it, the more suspicious you are!” he jeered.

“No. I was just thinking of how I’d get rid of her husband,” he said seriously, his tone dark. Raven’s smile froze in place.

“Yeesh, you’re terrifying.”

However, Marialite’s next words possessed the power to freeze the air of the room itself.

“It’s actually a little bit true, though.”

“*What?*”

“Huh?”

The two of them looked like their very reality had just been shaken.

“Don’t you remember, Sirius? I must’ve told you before. I was engaged to Prince Rufus, and—”

“*What in the blue blazes?!* You’ve never told me that! *Never!*” Sirius hollered, putting his hands over both of Marialite’s shoulders. She could feel his fingers shaking.

This might be the first time I’ve ever heard him raise his voice like that.

Now that she thought back on it, indeed—she couldn’t recall ever discussing it with him.

“Oh. Sorry! I forgot,” she admitted with a bashful laugh.

“H-How could something that important slip your mind?!” Sirius despaired.

“We broke off the engagement after both Prince Rufus and I came to a mutual understanding, so I wasn’t all too bothered by it.”

Engagement wasn’t exactly the kind of thing people discussed with children, so she decided not to tell him. Then, by the time Sirius grew up, she didn’t think about it much anymore. Apparently, it came as a much bigger shock to him than she would’ve expected.

“Lady Marialite...” he began, deadly serious. “You should’ve told me earlier. If I’d have known, I would have hunted down this ‘Rufus,’ and—”

“Whoa, there!” Raven interrupted him with a shout before he could say anything that would get him imprisoned for treason. He then turned to Marialite. “You must have been through a lot, Lady Marialite. That’s tough!”

Seeing the warm, gentle woman before them, no one would have thought that she’d once been engaged to the nation’s crown prince. Not even for a second.

Raven glanced around the room, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“But, Lady Marialite... You’re not a noble, are you? How did you manage to catch the prince’s eye?” he asked.

“I thought the same thing at first,” she laughed. “However, it turns out that His Majesty arranged our engagement purely based on me being a saint.”

“Hold up... You’re a *saint*?” Raven gasped. He’d long abandoned his steak and was now fixedly staring at her in amazement. Sirius, meanwhile, was completely absorbed in his plans to overthrow the prince.

Marialite decided to tell them her story from beginning to end. They listened with the same gobsmailed look on their faces, and when it finally got to the crucial point...

“But, why did he break off the engagement in the first place?” Raven asked, incredulous.

“Oh—he said I’m too old now.”

More stunned silence.

“Right. That’s it,” Sirius announced, standing from the table and slamming his

palms down on the wood. "Let's kill the prince! At once! You know what they say: 'strike while the iron is hot'!" A huge, menacing grin spread across his face as he said it.

On the other hand, Raven clapped a hand over his mouth, frozen in disbelief. Question marks were written all over Marialite's face as she studied their reactions.

"Umm... What's bothering you both so much?" she hedged.

"What's *bothering* us? Everything! The whole thing is just plain nasty!" Raven frowned.

"I have to say I agree. Lady Marialite... Do you honestly believe that was an 'amicable' break-up?" Sirius asked lowly, his voice strained.

Marialite nodded firmly. All in all, she was glad she managed to avoid marrying a man she didn't love. She didn't think that marriages made for political or financial security were necessarily a bad thing, but personally, she would much rather spend the rest of her life happily in love.

That was why she was relieved it was all over.

"Don't get me wrong; I'm glad you broke up. It would've been awful if that scumbag of a prince stole you away. However, his reasoning for breaking the engagement off is abhorrent. He deserves to die a thousand deaths," Sirius enunciated clearly.

"Exactly!" Raven piped up. "They made you become Rufus' fiancée against your will, and then cut you off because of your *age*?! Who cares if they're royalty? That's messed up!"

"O-Oh," Marialite wavered. Sirius was one thing, but she was surprised to hear a boy she'd only just met in such an outrage. He seemed to truly resent the royal family for what they did to her.

Raven sighed, his eyes swimming with angry tears.

"Seriously..." he huffed. "They think that if they have magic items, they won't need any help from the saints anymore? The arrogance is unbelievable!"

"I heard that the devices allow anyone to use the same powers as a saint,

but..." Marialite recalled.

"Yeah, but they *need* magic devices to do anything! There's a big difference between them and you. You can use holy power without any help at all! You're amazingly talented!" Raven insisted.

"...You really think so?" Her sky-blue eyes shone with hesitation.

Although she had been proclaimed the crown princess when they found out she was a saint, no one had ever given her such high praise before—even when using her powers for the sake of the nation. It was a given that she would give herself up and use the holy energy bestowed upon her for the people and the king.

She was there to fulfill her duty—that was all. It was nothing worthy of praise.

...That was what she'd always been told back at the palace, anyway.

Raven, though, claimed that the exact opposite was true.

"I heard a rumor about a saint in this country working really hard to increase the amount of fertile land and greenery over the past few years, but...that was you, right? Just tossing a saint aside once they're done with their powers is like picking a fight with God!" Raven said, shaking his head in frustration.

"Not if I get to them first..." Sirius threatened in a low growl, his anger still ablaze. "The nerve! I simply cannot understand why they would cast aside such a beautiful, loving woman such as yourself. And for such a self-serving reason! Those people are probably why you have such a distorted view of your own experiences."

"It doesn't feel at all distorted to me, though... Have I lost sight of the situation?" Marialite began to wonder.

"...To be frank, yes. Very much so."

"Oh dear..."

"Uh-oh. I'm starting to worry this saint's a lost cause!" Raven said, his eyes glazing over as he devoured the remainder of his now-cold steak in one mouthful. He chomped away eagerly and gulped it down before continuing. "How about you come back with us, Marialite?"

“What do you mean?” she blinked.

“I’m officially inviting you to our home country. Not because you’re a saint or anything; as Lord Sirius’ savior, you’ll be very welcome at the palace. Plus, you can live your days in luxury! We can provide anything you’d ever want!” Raven suggested excitably.

“But, what if I don’t want luxury?” she mused. She was entirely content with her current daily life, and she had no desire to be worshiped or treated as royalty. Raven was only trying to be nice, so she felt bad refusing him, but his proposal wasn’t appealing to her at all.

Sirius turned to his servant and peered into his eyes searchingly.

“Does that mean...the civil war’s over?” he asked, his voice slightly shaky.

“Do you really think I’d be so casual about inviting her if it wasn’t?” Raven huffed. “Yup, it’s over! My familiar told me the news. We successfully managed to subdue the rebel forces, and all the ringleaders are due to be executed. It sounds like His Majesty is eagerly awaiting your return, Lord Sirius.”

“All right,” Sirius nodded before turning to Marialite, his eyes trained solely on her. “Lady Marialite—I don’t believe you can ever be truly happy in this country. Won’t you come back to my homeland with me?”

“Hmm... I’m not sure what to say. Of course, I wish I could stay with you longer, Sirius. You’re a lovely young man. But...”

She smiled brightly, and gently reached to stroke his hair. However, before her fingertips met his silvery locks, Sirius grabbed hold of her hand. He tenderly brought it down, then pressed his lips to the back of her hand.

“I’m not as lovely as you think I am. I only act that way for *you*, and you alone...because I love you. From the bottom of my heart.”

Marialite froze, her eyes wide as she stared blankly at him. A bitter smile tugged at Sirius’ lips.

“I knew it. You had no idea...” he chuckled sadly. “If you’d realized, I expect you would’ve been less touchy-feely with me.”

“I... I’m sorry...?” she stuttered unsurely.

“No, don’t apologize,” he shook his head. “I’m the one who went and fell in love with you—it’s completely my own fault. In fact, it’s shameful. You were just doing your best to take care of me while I had ulterior motives.”

“Wait, Sirius—please don’t look so sad. I don’t think it’s shameful at all,” Marialite said with pleading eyes. Sirius returned her gaze in surprise, his jade-green irises shining with a sudden hope.

“What? You...don’t think it’s weird?” he blinked.

“Of course not. I’m really happy you feel that way.”

“But...” His brow furrowed. “Do you understand that I absolutely intend on making you my wife?”

“Huh?”

Now, it was Marialite’s turn to blink vacantly.

As soon as Sirius saw that expression on her face, he realized that she thought he was professing a deep, *platonic* affection. The glimmer of hope in his eyes instantly vanished.

“But...surely we’re too far apart in age for that,” Marialite pointed out. Rather than how either of them felt, that was the first problem that occurred to her. Age was the reason her engagement broke down, after all. Worst of all, it was something Marialite could never fix, no matter how hard she tried.

Even if Sirius had no problem with it right now, it was possible that one day, he would grow tired of her and lose whatever feelings he had for her.

“I think you’re probably just mistaking platonic love for romantic love, no?” she said gently. “Once you snap out of it, you’ll only regret choosing me.”

This was for both of their sakes. It was best to correct him now, before his love turned to resentment.

She smiled slightly as she tried to shake her hand free from Sirius’. However, he managed to keep a tight enough grip to hold her in place, but not tight enough to hurt her.

“Lady Marialite... From my point of view, our ages make no difference,” he said seriously.

“I’m not sure that’s true...”

“Oh...” His eyes suddenly turned sad. “Could it be that you have a distaste for older men?”

“What?”

Something wasn’t right here.

With confusion clear on her face, Marialite turned the question back on him.

“Why would that matter?”

“I must’ve forgotten to mention it,” he sighed. “I’m sorry. I’ll be turning eighty years old this year.”

“You’ll... What...?” She frowned, her head spinning.

Sirius had lived more than twice as long as her.

As she stood there, speechless, Raven awkwardly cleared his throat.

“It varies from person to person, but in general, demons have a very long lifespan. I might look young to you, but I’m over fifty years old,” Raven explained. “I actually grew faster than Lord Sirius. My voice broke first, too.”

Sirius’ eyes narrowed slightly at that last part. “Is that really something worth boasting about?” he grumbled.

“Well, when I’m up against a big, tough guy like you, I gotta take all the wins I can get,” he grinned.

“...Anyway, Lady Marialite,” Sirius began, brushing Raven off completely. “Now that your concerns have been addressed, there’s something I’d like to make very clear.” He cleared his throat and spoke in the clearest voice he could muster. “I do not care what age you are, nor—”

“He won’t go for you if you look *too* young, though,” Raven piped up.

“Raven. Shut up. Please.”

“Gotcha.”

Sirius rolled his eyes and looked back to Marialite before continuing. “Nor do I care whether you’re a saint, or simply a normal woman. Do you understand?”

His voice was soft and warm. Marialite nodded slowly. The things he was saying had a dreamlike quality to them; after all she'd been through, could she really believe him? It was all she ever wanted to hear, but now that it was really happening, she wasn't sure what to do. Not once had Rufus said anything like that to her—not even as flattery. Something warm and fuzzy spread through the inside of her chest as she listened to him.

“...I love you. I love you so much. For you, I'd burn this godforsaken country to the ground. Just say the word.”

“Oh, no, I don't think that's a good idea...” she tried to deter him.

“Are you sure? But, if you have any lingering feelings for that awful prince, I won't hesitate to obliterate him,” he declared with a sly smirk.

Raven paled as he looked on from the side, realizing the full extent of Sirius' possessive nature.

“It was going so well up until that point,” Raven said in a strained voice. “Why'd you have to make that last part so scary?”

“Scary? How so?” Sirius snarled.

“What do you mean 'how'?! Saying you'll destroy her ex-fiancé along with her homeland isn't a comforting thing to hear! You're a tyrant! I mean, look at her, she's terrified— Eek?!”

Raven let out a small yelp when he glanced over at Marialite.

In the aftermath of Sirius' fiercely (and perhaps violently) passionate confession, Marialite was rooted to the spot, and her pale blue eyes were swimming with huge tears.



“L-Lady Marialite?! Are you all right?!” Sirius fussed, paling at the fact that he’d just made his beloved cry.

It was only as a result of their reactions that Marialite herself realized she was crying. She gave an embarrassed laugh and started wiping at her wet cheeks.

“How bizarre...” she sniffled. “Why would being so happy make me cry?”

“...A proposal like *that* made you happy?” Raven heaved in disbelief.

“Did you think I’d be scared?”

“Obviously! I mean...he’s gonna *destroy* the country depending on how you feel. *I’d* definitely be scared!” he exclaimed, flailing his arms.

“That just shows how much he loves me, don’t you think? Plus, I raised Sirius for more than half a year. He’s grown to be so kind and caring; he wouldn’t *actually* do it. Right, Sirius?” she sang.

Sirius said nothing. He had a blank look on his face, and Marialite had no idea what he was thinking. Then, after a long, long moment of silence, he finally answered.

“...Of course not.”



WHEN Raven finished eating, he bounced over to the window and threw it wide open (with Marialite’s permission, of course). He looked up to the vast blue sky and took a deep breath before blowing a loud whistle into the open air. Two birds suddenly came flying down from the sky, soon joined by a third one. They acted more like pets than familiars; they obediently swooped down onto his head and shoulders without making any fuss, then affectionately settled down.

“What’s he doing?” Marialite asked Sirius curiously.

“Those crows have a shared consciousness with the ones the emperor keeps back at the palace, so Raven can report to His Majesty through them,” he explained.

“Ooh, that’s handy.”

Plus, the birds were rather cute. While she admired their sweet little faces, she finally broached the subject that had been floating about her mind for a while now.

“So...” she began. “Would I be right in assuming you two are quite a big deal back in your home country?”

“I suppose so,” Sirius shrugged. “But due to that, I was always forced to do a lot of work, even though I was a child. I can’t say it’s enjoyable.”

“You had to work?”

“Yes. Originally, it fell to my older brothers, but several of them abandoned their duties, so...I had to take over.”

“Oh dear,” she said with a small chuckle. However, she noticed a slight inconsistency with her knowledge. “But...wasn’t your entire family killed?”

“Ah, yes. I was referring to the couple who raised me rather than my blood relatives. I believe my brothers are still alive, as far as I know,” he said. Somehow, he sounded detached when he spoke about them.

“Ack, stop right there,” Raven swiftly interrupted. “I forgot to tell you, but... your third eldest brother and fifth eldest brother are dead. Number three fell for a honeytrap, and number five had his wine poisoned.”

That certainly seemed like a huge piece of information to forget.

“I stand corrected,” Sirius cleared his throat. “Two of my brothers were assassinated.”

However, despite the magnitude of what he was saying, he didn’t even twitch. The matter-of-fact way he announced it suggested that even though they were related by blood, Sirius had no feelings of love or attachment towards his brothers. Even so, Marialite’s eyebrows knitted together in sorrow.

“I know you must be feeling terrible right now, but...stay strong, Sirius,” she consoled him.

“Uh. I can’t really remember their names, never mind their faces, but... Yes, it is a tragedy. I’m sure I’ll get over it one day, though,” he replied with a feigned, sad smile.

“He’s bluffing,” Raven clarified. “Those two are honestly better off dead. All they did was embezzle the palace funds for their own selfish desires and debauchery. In fact, I bet there were a lot of people who jumped for joy when they found out they were dead,” Raven spat.

“But, doesn’t it scare you that Sirius might’ve been killed in the same way?”

“Well, yeah. Although, in his case, they tried to kill him because they were worried about what’d happen to them if he was still alive after all that happened. There are quite a few people that don’t want him in power.”

Unknowingly, Raven had dropped a bombshell. Marialite’s eyes grew wide in a shock of realization.

I knew he was one of the higher-ups, but...

“When you say ‘in power,’ do you mean...?” she hinted.

“As emperor? Of course. He’s next in line to the throne,” Raven shrugged.

“Sirius is going to be the emperor...?” she gasped.

“Yup. He overtook his brothers and is now the crown prince.”

It was too much to process all at once. Her smile froze on her face.

I’ve been sheltering royalty all this time...?

The prince in question suddenly stuck his face right in front of hers and peered into her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he worried. “Of course, your face is just as lovely when clouded by unease, but I don’t want you to feel that way.”

“I’m just feeling a little shaken...” she said in a hushed tone. “I had no idea who you truly were.”

“I told you it was a ‘palace’ I escaped from. I thought you might get the picture from that,” he pointed out.

“It did strike me as odd, but I didn’t think you were *actually...*” she trailed off, still reeling. No wonder he wouldn’t tell her where he came from when they first met.

With this new information in her hands, Sirius’ profession of love suddenly

held a whole new weight to it. As she tried to shake the feeling that her life as she knew it was about to change completely, Raven finished giving his report to his familiars and turned back to Sirius.

“Lord Sirius,” he addressed him. “His Majesty has arranged for some troops to escort you back home. He has sent one hundred of his best, hand-picked soldiers, and asks that you wait two days for them to arrive.”

“One *hundred* soldiers...?” Marialite gulped.

“Did you tell him about Lady Marialite?” Sirius asked, completely unfazed by the news.

“Yup. When I told him what happened, he was worried that Lord Sirius might’ve treated her cruelly,” Raven added with a stifled laugh.

“I wouldn’t do that!” he complained. “Never! Right, Lady Mari—... Lady Marialite...?” He hedged, looking over to see her gentle features set in hard, rigid lines. It was the first time he had ever seen her look so gloomy. The sound of her name dragged her out of her thoughts, but her expression remained grave as she spoke grimly.

“A hundred people will be here...” she croaked. “How am I going to provide refreshments for a hundred people?”

“No, no,” Sirius consoled her. So many revelations had been thrown at her all at once that she was starting to get strange ideas. “You don’t need to do that, I promise. No one’s expecting anything from you. You just take some nice, big, deep breaths.”

“I guess sense really does come with age,” Raven muttered in amusement.

Chapter 2: Celaeno, the Demon Kingdom

TWO days later, a horde of one hundred soldiers wearing large, bulky armor would soon descend upon the quiet town. And if that wasn't alarming enough, every single one of them was a demonic sorcerer.

As things went, it was a pretty big deal. Even so, the townspeople went about their peaceful lives as usual—because no one knew they were coming.

"I mean, how the heck would we tell 'em all?" Raven shrugged. "We can't just go out there and shout 'Hey guys, just so you know, a swarm of elite soldiers is gonna swing by to pick up the crown prince and his potential empress,' can we?"

"By 'potential empress,' do you mean me?" Marialite asked nervously, concentrating on thinly slicing an apple.

"Who else?" he sighed.

Her gaze wandered over to where he stood next to her, chopping another apple. She didn't know what to say. Raven didn't elaborate, either; he simply carried on chopping up more apples with dexterous hands. Unlike Marialite, who always had a kitchen knife at the ready to prepare food, he used a small, thin knife. Apparently, he had experience cooking the ingredients he managed to hunt down in the mountains or rivers while taking care of Sirius during their time as fugitives.

"You've got quite a talent there," Marialite complimented him.

"I'd be killed if anyone found out I fed the prince something unsavory, y'see," he chuckled awkwardly. "That's why I trained to make sure I can handle the bare minimum, at least."

"What did you two used to eat on your travels?" she asked.

She had been lucky enough to grow up in a stable environment and had never known the struggle of foraging for raw materials in her immediate surroundings

simply to survive. Even when she had traveled to far-off lands to carry out her saintly duties, a cook always accompanied her along with plenty of pre-prepared ingredients.

She wasn't sure why they insisted on sending one, though. Perhaps they were worried she would get poisoned if she ate any food prepared by strangers. When she'd visited wastelands without any farm villages in the vicinity, the palace had gone to great lengths to ensure she had good food to eat.

Marialite's powers only stretched as far as making plants grow. If she was ever poisoned, there was nothing she could do. No plant could cure her within minutes. The soldiers that came with her for protection would sometimes eat the strange-looking foreign fruits and berries they came across, but they didn't allow Marialite herself to eat any.

That was why she was jealous of Sirius and Raven in a certain respect; of course, she knew they'd been through a lot, and it probably wasn't much fun, but she would've loved a little more adventure in her life.

"Uhhhh... I'm not sure you wanna know," Raven answered with a grimace.

"Oh no, I'm sorry... It must've been a horrible time for you. Don't answer if it makes you uncomfortable," she quickly backtracked.

"I'm not saying it because I don't *want* to," he clarified. "I just thought...it might make you feel sick."

"I think I can take it. So—tell me."

"...Grilled caterpillars. With salt." Raven gritted his teeth as he said it, concentrating very hard on the neat slices of apple in front of him. "The hairy ones won't work. But, if you get a smooth, slimy one, then you can cover it with salt and skewer it. Then, you just cook 'em."

"What do they taste like?" Marialite piped up, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

Raven flinched before continuing. Evidently, he hadn't been expecting her to take an interest. "W-Well... If you don't *know* they're bugs, then the taste isn't all that bad, but... Are you sure you really wanna know all this?"

“Huh? Why not?”

“In my experience, a lot of women are scared of bugs.”

“I don’t think there’s any reason to be scared of them,” she retorted firmly. “Bugs are a sign that nature is thriving.”

There was a little truth in Raven’s words, though; when she was younger, Marialite was so scared of insects that she would run a mile if she even saw one. However, at some point, she’d become immune to their presence. Although there were some bugs that preferred to nest in unsanitary conditions, in most cases, they were found in large numbers in healthy, green habitats. The more she came across various creepy crawlies in her daily work, her feelings of disgust towards them gradually waned.

“My mom even screams at *butterflies*, though,” Raven tacked on.

“I could never,” Marialite laughed. “They’re so beautiful when they fly. I particularly like the ones with pale yellow and white wings. I think they’re adorable.”

“Oh, I know those,” he nodded. “They’re common in spring, aren’t they?”

“That’s right. When I see them, I start to feel like spring’s truly on its way.” She always marveled at the way their softly colored wings shone as they danced through the springtime sky.

Raven nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

They turned around when Sirius suddenly appeared in the kitchen, having emerged from his room. He’d just been talking to the emperor through Raven’s crows, but he had a strangely pleased look on his face.

“Lady Marialite, did you call for me?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t... How come?” she blinked.

Sirius’ smile immediately fell and was replaced by a puzzled frown.

“I heard you saying ‘beautiful’ and ‘adorable,’ so I just assumed you were talking about me...” he pouted.

So, that’s why he was looking so cheerful.

“I’m sorry, Sirius, but we were only talking about butterflies,” she smiled apologetically.

“Butterflies, hm...?” he echoed, pursing his lips in thought. “Ah, I just remembered how Raven used to fry them with oil and—”

“Y-Yup! Now, now, Lord Sirius—would you like some of this delicious apple?” Raven swiftly interrupted him, stuffing a slice of apple right between Sirius’ lips.

“Raven? What was that for?” Marialite asked, startled by his sudden insistence.

“It’s nothing!” Raven sang with a grin before turning back to Sirius. “That’s it! Eat it aaaall up!”

They were planning to make dried fruit with all the apples they’d sliced. Since both Sirius and Raven had lauded the apples Marialite grew, the emperor requested a sample of them as well—with a special request.

“Will His Majesty really be satisfied with this?” she wondered. “I don’t think dried apples are anything fancy.”

“You might think so, but that’s just because dried fruit is common in this country. In the Demon Kingdom, all the fruit is extraordinarily sour. When you dry them, that sourness gets amplified, so generally, people only eat them covered with sugar or honey while still fresh,” Sirius explained calmly, trying to pry the small knife away from Raven as he spoke.

Raven scowled, suspicious.

“Sorry for leaving you to help Lady Marialite alone, but I’m here now, so you can take a step back,” Sirius gestured to him.

“No, no. I couldn’t make you work, my lord,” he shook his head. “Especially if I’m just lazing around behind you; it’d be discourteous.”

“Just sit down already,” he insisted.

Sirius wanted to stay close to Marialite and help her work. That much was obvious, and Raven didn’t have it in him to argue with someone with such a stubborn character.

Raven flopped down onto the sofa in the living room, and after a few

minutes, his breathing became rhythmic and relaxed. In all honesty, he was still exhausted from his long journey, and he was secretly grateful to Sirius for his suggestion.



SIRIUS and Raven were the only demons Marialite had ever seen—as far as she knew.

If they hadn't personally told her about their race, she never would have known it from their extremely human appearance. While Sirius had horns, he could magic them away at will, and Raven's body didn't seem to differ from a human's in any way. That was why she had assumed that all demons had a human-like appearance.

However, she soon found out that she was very, very wrong.

"Ah. You must be Lady Marialite—the saint who came to the aid of His Highness. What an honor to finally meet you in person."

It would be an understatement to say the townspeople were absolutely terrified of the flock of demonic soldiers crowding the streets.

The demons had a range of appearances—they had the faces of animals such as goats, wolves, and boars...and their bodies were stacked with unbelievable masses of hard, bulky muscle. And throngs of them were standing in the middle of a small, quiet town.

"The demons have finally come to invade us!" People screamed, running into their houses and watching in terror through their windows. Although, if that was true, hiding away in their houses would've been futile. Luckily, these demons had no desire to invade.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name's Marialite Harty," she greeted in return. "We were expecting you."

"Hiya!" Raven waved, clutching a burlap sack full of supplies. "It's been so long!"

"Sir Raven," a soldier bowed. "You were reported to have been killed by the Rebellion back at home. When we heard that you were safe and well with His

Highness, it was like a dream.”

“Seriously?!” Raven’s jaw dropped. “But, I was giving regular reports to His Majesty...”

The soldiers stared fixedly at Raven with emotional smiles on their faces. Some of them even had tears in their eyes.

“H-Hey, stop that,” Raven snapped. “You’re embarrassing me.” His tone of voice was sharp, but somehow, he didn’t actually seem all too bothered by the attention.

Despite their difference in appearance, the way the demons were smiling and blushing together was no different from how humans would react in the same situation.

Marialite was simply watching on in silence so as not to deter from the heartfelt moment, but she then noticed that several of the soldiers were staring at her.

“Is something the matter?” she asked them directly.

“N-No, it’s nothing!” one soldier with a boar’s head answered. Despite their lack of expression, she could tell they were panicking. “I humbly apologize if we made you feel uncomfortable in any capacity!”

The soldiers surrounding them nodded in agreement and swiftly dropped to their knees. Marialite flinched a little in shock.

“Please,” she said, flustered. “You haven’t done anything to offend me, so there’s no need for all that.”

“B-But—”

“Oh, don’t worry, guys,” Raven chipped in. “Lady Marialite is pretty different from the other saints we know. She won’t threaten to turn you into ashes just because you stared at her.”

Something about what he just said didn’t sit right with Marialite.

“Why would I...?” she trailed off, confused. A strained smile flashed over Raven’s face as he opened his mouth to explain, but...

“In our homeland, saints are revered beings,” Sirius suddenly supplied, appearing at Marialite’s side. “They are to be treated with the same respect as the imperial family.”

Today, he’d left his deep scarlet horns on full display. The sunlight made them shine and glisten so brilliantly that they almost looked like rubies.

When they noticed him appear, the horde of soldiers dropped to their knees in unison. One wolf-like soldier at the front spoke on behalf of them all.

“Prince Sirius,” he addressed him. “Thank goodness you’re safe.”

“Raise your head; I’m not worthy. I left our land and abandoned my duties for such a long time.”

“Don’t say that, Your Highness,” the wolf soldier shook his head. “We have all eagerly awaited your return, soldiers and common people alike.”

There was a certain warmth to his subdued tone. He’d probably missed Sirius just as much as Raven had—or perhaps even more so. Marialite peered deeply into Sirius’ face as he averted his gaze, an embarrassed flush tinting his cheeks.

“You can do this,” Marialite assured him. “The whole country’s counting on you.”

“...I know. I’m just not used to this anymore.”

“I’m sure you’ll get right back into the swing of things. Sirius, y—” she cut herself off. “Oh... Sorry, I just realized. I can’t keep on calling you by your name so casually, can I?”

She hadn’t really thought about it since finding out his true identity, and neither had Raven nor Sirius himself asked her to stop. However, it would be ridiculous to talk to a prince the same way she would talk to a friend.

Straightening her back and giving Sirius a serious look, she then bowed her head.

“Please forgive my discourtesy, Your Highness.”

The moment she said it, she heard a faint gasp from Raven.

Slowly, she raised her head to peek up at Sirius. His mouth was set in a cold,

hard line, and his fixated jade-green eyes seemed to lose their shine. He was completely frozen.

I don't think he's angry, but...he doesn't look pleased, either.

"Your Highness?" she fretted. "What's wrong? Your Highness?"

But no matter how much she called out to him, he remained silent. She waved a hand in front of his eyes, but he remained deadly still, completely unresponsive.

"Your Highness?" she called out again—several times—and finally, Sirius broke out of his trance-like state.

"Could you please stop calling me that?" he pleaded.

"Oh, my. Forgive me. Do you have a special title?" Marialite asked with a look of realization.

"No, no. I just... I want you to call me by my name. Like you always do," he clarified.

"I couldn't possibly do that. You're a prince!" she reiterated.

"I understand, but..." Sirius wavered with a pained look on his face. "'Your Highness' is far too much. Couldn't you make it Lord Sirius at most? Don't even think of calling me Prince Sirius, either."

He looked so desperately sad that Marialite began to regret not asking directly before she said anything. It seemed that he wasn't fond of the people he was close to calling him by such a detached title. And—now that she thought about it—while the soldiers called him 'Your Highness,' Raven always called him 'Lord Sirius,' even though he was also of a lower standing than him.

"Okay," she nodded. "From now on, I'll call you Lord Sirius."

"...All right. Thank you, Lady Marialite."

"On that note, you don't need to call me 'Lady' or anything like that," she added. It'd been bugging her for a while; it felt strange for royalty to be addressing her with such respect.

"I'm really looking forward to showing you my homeland, Lady Marialite!" he

beamed, completely ignoring her complaint.

...Evidently, he has no intention of changing that habit.

“No one will think anything of it, so don’t worry,” Raven consoled her in a murmur. “Remember what Lord Sirius said? To our people, saints are revered like royalty.”

“Oh, that’s true,” she agreed.

“...So much so, that you could call him anything you liked,” he added in a whisper, low enough that she wouldn’t hear.

He then walked over to a goat-like soldier nearby and thrust the sack he was carrying into their arms.

“*Ugh*, this thing is super heavy. Would you mind taking it? Thanks,” he smiled.

“Sir Raven... Could I ask what’s in here?” they questioned, eyeing the heavy sack in their arms dubiously.

“It’s full of apples that Marialite grew with her powers. They were all just about ripe, and it felt like a waste to just leave them behind. So, we harvested ‘em all for you guys to snack on during the journey home!” he announced proudly.

The soldier, on the other hand, froze in place—just as Sirius had a few moments ago.

“Uh. What’s wrong?” Raven asked with a prod.

“H-How could you just throw something so precious at me?! What if I’d dropped it?!” the soldier answered, their tone hysteric. “Fruit grown by a saint’s holy hand... My goodness...!”

The goat-headed soldier was on the verge of tears, as well as several soldiers around them. They exclaimed and gasped as news of the holy fruit gradually traveled further through the crowd.

“Oh dear,” Marialite remarked worriedly, watching as pandemonium erupted before her eyes.

That was when she clapped her hands to her cheeks and gasped. She had an

idea.

“In that case, how about I just grow some more?”

“What do you mean, Marialite?” Raven asked, tilting his head to one side.

“Well, if these apples are thought to be precious...” she hummed. “I can carry on making them until there’s so many, they lose their value!”

“That sure is some logic...” Raven quipped with a half-hearted laugh.

Marialite didn’t seem to understand that the low number wasn’t what gave the apples their worth.

The goat-like soldier’s eyelashes were still wet, their tears heavy with newfound responsibility. As they carefully clutched the sack to their chest, Sirius made sure to pat their shoulder and assure them, “None of that was your fault.”



CELAENO—also known as the Demonic Empire—was situated on the northernmost tip of the continent. Many knew that over 90 percent of the population was made up of demons, but other than that fact, the land was shrouded in mystery.

The Celaenic government discontinued all diplomatic relations with neighboring countries several hundred years ago, and the demon race had command of both magic and physical prowess far surpassing any human. Thus, the rumor that they were planning to take over the entire continent had been floating around for a long time.

A few countries had attempted to send in spies to collect information, but those missions eventually ended in failure. Apparently, any spies who attempted to infiltrate the empire never stepped foot in their home country ever again.

“We *did* almost conquer the continent, so I suppose you can’t really blame them for thinking that,” Sirius shrugged.

“Oh, my. Really?” Marialite blinked.

The two of them were making casual conversation among the gentle sway of

the carriage on their way to Celaeno. On Sirius' other side, Raven had his face glued to the window, watching the vast scenery pass them by. There were several other carriages filled with soldiers running alongside, surrounding them.

Isn't this all a bit much?

She couldn't help but think it was unnecessary, but she then remembered experiencing similar treatment when she headed to distant lands for work.

"Around two hundred years ago, the emperor at the time was after a large number of slaves. So, he decided to invade countries with large human populations."

"Why would he do that?" she gasped.

"Slavery doesn't exist in Celaeno. As such, he thought it would be a good idea to go to war and make the enemy soldiers they imprisoned his slaves. Apparently, he only wanted them so he could build a new palace structure faster. How idiotic," he sighed.

"Couldn't he have just waited for the building work to be finished at a usual rate?" she asked in bemusement, echoing Sirius' sigh.

Evidently, some of the country's old emperors were of a troublesome character. Sirius frowned in discomfort, seemingly ashamed of his country's dark past.

"There's a saying in Celaeno: 'those with strength must not become drunk on power.' They were the words of the country's founder," he recalled. "As far as demons are concerned, humans are weak, feeble beings. Their lifespan is short, and they can't even use magic. That's why it's considered taboo among demons to even try to overpower them. And, if anyone commits that taboo... Well, let's just say it's not pretty."

"Really? What happens to them?" Marialite asked, encouraging him to continue.

"Knowing how much you value peace and quiet, I thought you wouldn't want to talk about this, but..." A fond smile tugged at his lips. "You're surprisingly curious. I'm surprised, but...that just makes you all the more attractive."

“Oh, don’t get me wrong; I don’t *like* hearing about these things, but I just have to know the whole story,” she laughed, her usual smile bright on her face.

“All right, then,” he nodded. “I suppose you *did* spend five whole years in that disgusting palace. You must’ve built up a resistance to this sort of talk.”

“Exactly. I’ve heard people talk about war and politics many times—including things that I’m sure I can’t talk about in public.”

As a part of her education as the crown princess, she’d studied the history of the land. Among the affairs she’d studied, there was no shortage of tales that would make anyone’s hair stand on end.

As she reminisced about her days in the palace, Raven gave her a curious look.

“Sorry, but I was told never to utter a word of it to anyone, so I can’t tell you,” she reiterated.

“No, no, that’s not what I was thinking about. I don’t even *want* to know,” Raven assured her, shaking his head. “It’s just...I was taken aback by how lax your country is about their security.”

“...I thought the same thing,” Sirius said in a subdued murmur. “They just let you go unchecked after telling you confidential information about the state? Are they even sane?”

“What if you sold that information to another country? Or...did they really not think about that?” Raven added.

“That’s a good point, actually,” Marialite agreed. “His Highness never said anything about it.”

They haven’t come after me so far, but...will I be okay?

It *had* been over half a year since she left, though—if they had a problem with her living freely, surely they would’ve hunted her down by now.

“That idiot prince...” Raven mumbled, taking another look out the window. “Oh—we’re just entering the outskirts of Celaeno!” His tone brightened significantly. “You gotta look outside, Marialite. You’re gonna like this.”

She leaned forward to stick her head out the window alongside Raven and

took a look around. There was nothing but a neglected, wild-looking road without a building in sight; she had no idea what he was referring to. Then, it happened.

The whole area began to blur and warp, as though she was looking at it through a pool of water. The landscape swayed and refracted, until eventually, it morphed into something entirely different.

That day, the sky was the same pale blue as Marialite's eyes. However, within those few seconds, it was suddenly dyed a dark, shadowy black, while the ground was now littered with flecks of light.

"Wow...!" she gasped in amazement. "Why's it night all of a sudden?"

"In the Demon Kingdom, it's always night. Our sky isn't blue like yours," Sirius said. With a snap of his fingers, several orbs of light appeared above their heads. Thanks to that, the carriage was illuminated once more.

"This is the reason why those spies could never infiltrate Celaeno," he continued. "To protect us from invasion, the country's borders are hidden by a disguise. No one can enter uninvited."

"But, what about those spies who never returned to their home countries...?" Marialite wondered.

"That's no more than a myth, concocted by humans to instill the idea that demons are a cruel race."

"Long ago, it didn't used to be like this. We had soldiers placed around the borders to drive away intruders, just like any other country. But, with the development of mystical barriers, we didn't have to worry anymore. There are still a few soldiers stationed at the borders just in case, though," Raven said, poking at the globes of light hanging in the air.

"So, that means no one has to get hurt. I think it's a wonderful invention," Marialite beamed.

"You think so, Lady Marialite?" Sirius grinned. "Celestine will be pleased."

"Is that who invented them?"

"Yes. He's a little bizarre, but he's a very competent architect of magical

devices.”

“He sounds like a wonderful person. I’d love to meet him,” she suggested eagerly.

“Very well. It’s been a while since I’ve seen him, too. Let’s pay him a visit!” Sirius bellowed happily.

Meanwhile, Raven gave a wry smile as he listened to their conversation.

“‘A little bizarre’ is definitely putting it mildly...”



APPARENTLY, news of Sirius’ return had spread throughout the entire country; as soon as the carriage passed into the imperial capital, throngs of demons crowded the streets to welcome their prince back.

“Prince Sirius has returned!”

“Everyone, get the flowers ready!”

“Wow! Your Highness, you’ve grown so much!”

“Hey! Don’t go pointing your fingers at the carriage!”

“Oh, my...! His Highness is so handsome...”

Even though it was “nighttime,” the capital was very much alive.

Everywhere Marialite looked, the air was filled with the same glowing orbs Sirius had cast earlier. Men stood on the roofs of the surrounding houses and emptied bucketfuls of flower petals over the carriage as it approached, vivid colors dancing through the air.

Suddenly, a thunderous roar sounded from overhead, and Marialite poked her head out the window to look up. When she did, she saw the starless night sky glittering with multicolored fireworks. They were popular back at home, but she’d never seen them on this scale before. Reds, blues, greens, yellows, purples, whites... A shimmering spectrum of colors shot into the sky before bursting into the largest explosion of light she’d ever seen.

And still, the people’s cheers were loud enough to drown out the noise.

“It’s just like a festival,” she marveled.

“Well, it *is* one,” Raven pointed out. “They’re celebrating the prince’s return and the fact that the Rebellion didn’t manage to kill him.”

“Even though I asked His Majesty for a modest welcome...” Sirius sighed. Apparently, the actual object of all the festivities wasn’t all too enthralled. He stared down at his feet, his body stiff and rigid. “When they go all-out like this, I don’t know how to react.”

“Umm,” Raven interjected, clearing his throat. “It sounds like you’re not the only one they’re celebrating.”

Cheers resounded from outside the carriage—but a large number of them were dedicated to Marialite, not Sirius.

“Welcome, Saint!”

“We heard you saved Prince Sirius!”

“I wonder if that beautiful woman is Saint Marialite...!”

“She looks so elegant!”

“Look, Mommy! Saint Marialite just smiled at us!”

Many people, both young and old, were excitedly discussing her visit to the kingdom. Marialite had never experienced anything like this before; she could do little but stare in wonder at the dazzling scene before her eyes. That was partly because she’d never been in front of such a large crowd of people before, though.

As the carriage slowly rolled through the streets, a huge castle eventually emerged in the distance up ahead. At first, it was difficult to even see, but if Marialite strained her eyes, she could just about make out the outline of all the buildings.

“Wow... It’s painted totally black.”

“Indeed,” Sirius nodded. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen it, but...it really is dark, isn’t it?” The light of the fireworks illuminated the facade of the castle, making it barely visible in contrast to the equally shadowy skyline. “The palace was built to commemorate the founding of the kingdom, but it’s said it was designed that way so that it’s camouflaged from enemy view.”

“Oh—that’s a clever idea. I just assumed that the designer’s favorite color was black,” she laughed.

“If they built it based purely on their own tastes, I’m sure the level of criticism would be staggering...” Sirius chuckled alongside her, before taking a furtive glance out the window and lowering his voice. “By the way, I have a favor to ask before we exit the carriage.”

Marialite stared at him with curious eyes, waiting.

“Try not to get separated from me. No matter what.”

“I understand. If I got lost in a completely new country, it’d be quite the ordeal.”

“That’s not what I mean...” he murmured in reply, but since she’d already agreed to stick with him, he didn’t bother explaining what he *did* mean. Raven, on the other hand, glanced outside the window with a frown on his face, apparently understanding the gravity of Sirius’ request.

With the once-peaceful atmosphere inside the carriage growing ever so slightly frostier, they finally pulled up outside the main gates of the palace.

The road leading up to the palace doors was lined with soldiers wearing large, heavy armor. Trying to brighten up the solemn atmosphere, Raven leaped to his feet.

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks and all that,” he muttered jokingly before climbing out of the carriage door. Sirius soon followed him, then turned around to hold a helping hand out to Marialite.

“Here, Lady Marialite. Please hold onto me as you climb down.”

“Are you sure that’s all right?”

“Of course! I’ve dreamt about this scenario for a long time!” he insisted with a huge grin, and Marialite couldn’t possibly find it in her to refuse.

She slipped her hand into his, and as soon as she nimbly jumped down, he wrapped his arms around her to steady her.

Then, in that same moment, a deafening roar erupted right behind her.

“Oh no! The carriage...” she gasped.

The carriage that the three of them had been occupying mere seconds ago had been blown to smithereens. The debris was whipped up into a pillar of fire, but strangely enough, none of the sparks or splinters of wood reached her skin. That was when she noticed a thin, scarlet membrane encasing both her and Sirius, protecting them. Somehow, he must’ve quickly cast some sort of protective magic within those few, vital split seconds.

“Lady Marialite, are you hurt?” he asked, his tone heavy with concern.

“I’m all right, but what about the horses...?” she worried, nibbling her bottom lip.

“Rest assured; they seem to have teleported to a safe place.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” she sighed with relief.

“Marialite?” Raven called out, a shaky laugh in his voice. “Aren’t you a little too calm for someone who almost got blown up?”

She had no chance to reply before a storm of colossal, sharp icicles came raining down from the sky, aiming towards Raven.

“Raven, duck!” Sirius barked.

“Wha—? O-Okay!” he panicked, quickly doing as Sirius said. Once he crouched down, a huge wall of fire spread over the top of his head, intercepting the icicles. They burst into steam the moment they touched the fiery shield and immediately evaporated. There wasn’t even a single drop of water left behind.

Unfortunately, the licks of flames also scorched the top of Raven’s hair.

“Yaowch! That’s hot!” he yelped.

“Oh, don’t make such a fuss. It’ll grow back,” Sirius rolled his eyes.

“What do you mean, ‘grow back’?! How much hair have I lost?!” he cried, fiercely patting at the top of his head to find out. In reality, only a little had burned off, and he was in no danger of exposing any bald patches.

“Thank you so much for saving us, Lord Sirius,” Marialite smiled fondly.

“Well, I’m the cause of it, after all. What sort of a demon would I be if I just

left you to take the hit?" he uttered sincerely. "Raven's lucky I didn't, though," he tacked on in a murmur.

"You can let me go now. I'm all right," she assured him.

A strangely long silence fell as a look of deep thought crossed Sirius' face.

"...There might be more attacks, so let's stay like this a little longer," he eventually concluded. Marialite could feel his heartbeat racing and heard his breathing grow a little ragged; perhaps he was feeling shaken from the sudden catastrophe.

"As always, your magic is something to behold, Sirius. And, my—how you've grown."

An unfamiliar voice rang out, their manner of speech old-fashioned and gentle.

Marialite turned to see a man standing atop the ash-covered splinters of the wreckage, smiling kindly. Judging by his appearance, he must've been around her age. He had pale blonde hair with a shine like moonlight and blue eyes reminiscent of the bottom of a tranquil lake.

Then, on top of it all, his head was adorned with golden, sparkling horns.

"I wanted to ascertain whether you were out of practice. I slipped out of the palace unnoticed, you see."

"Even so, I don't think that's any excuse to go to such lengths just to test me. You almost hurt Lady Marialite," Sirius objected in disgust, pulling her even closer.

However, everyone else was already on their knees, bowing their heads to the mystery man.

"Oh..." Marialite gasped in disbelief. "Are you...the emperor of this land?"

"Why, of course. Do you want a prize for your powers of deduction? How about some candy? Or— No, never mind. Let us begin with an introduction," he announced, cutting himself off. "My name is Uranometria Celaeno. I am the one who bears the distinguished title of emperor in this land," the demon emperor said, giving the two of them a relaxed wave.



MARIALITE had half expected the interior of the palace to be just as dark as its exterior, but when she actually stepped foot inside, it was surprisingly quaint.

According to the reading she had done during her time training to be queen, the palace was said to be decorated with mounted heads of the demon kingdom's massacred enemies and that the royal family drank from cups made from their foes' skulls. However, the reality was in stark contrast to the picture that so many other nations had painted; even Marialite could tell that it had been constructed with minimality and practicality in mind. Unlike the palace she'd lived in for five years, there were no gold ornaments, precious jewels, or fur rugs decorating the corridors.

Rufus once said that decorating a castle with various lavish materials and adornments was the best way to show off the wealth of their country. Marialite wasn't sure whether that was true, though—if the people ever found out that their excessive taxes were being spent on such things, she could just imagine the outrage.

One time, she did actually bring the tax issue up with Rufus—only to be told that she should discuss it with His Majesty the King. And, even when she did, nothing ever changed.

“You must be Marialite, the Jade Saint. I have to say, you are as beautiful as a violet blooming in a vast field,” Uranometria smiled from his throne, looking fondly upon the visiting foreign saint.

He was the one who blew up the carriage, as well as the one who hurled a shower of deadly icicles down on Raven. His reasons went no further than what he'd claimed a short while ago—to test them.

While he was the emperor, he was also Sirius' father, and Marialite could sense he had a somewhat mischievous personality.

“Thank you for your kind words, Your Majesty,” she curtsied. “However, what do you mean by the ‘Jade Saint’? No one's ever called me that before...”

“Saints go by different titles depending on the energy of their powers. In your

case, your power falls under 'Jade'—and it's a wonderful power, at that," he clarified wisely.

"My powers...? Jade...?" Marialite echoed in a confused mumble. The Jade Saint had a beautiful ring to it, but she'd never heard that each saint's powers consisted of different energies before.

"About that matter, Your Majesty..." Sirius began, facing Uranometria with a sharp gaze. "I didn't bring Lady Marialite here to make use of her power."

"I am aware of that," he quickly countered. "Besides, if any of us did utilize her power for anything, I expect the fierce lighting of the heavens would strike down to punish us."

He sighed before fixing his gaze on Marialite.

"You must be quite the oddball. Taking in a demon child and raising him is quite a feat. If you had sent him back to the palace right away, I expect you would have received a sizable reward for your goodwill. I'm sure you realized that, but even if you didn't, wasn't it a little uncomfortable to be living with a child whose background was completely unknown to you?"

"No, not at all. My house has a lot of empty rooms, and the kitchen's big, too. Lord Sirius and I were plenty comfortable living there together. Even after he grew up, it's not as though he took up a lot of space," Marialite replied confidently.

"I didn't mean it in that way, but...it appears that you both enjoyed yourselves, so I'll leave it at that," he said with a chuckle. "Marialite—you are very welcome in our land of Celaeno. And, if you so wish it, I will also allow you to become Sirius' consort."

Marialite's breath hitched at how casually he declared it. When she stole a glance at Sirius, she could see the same open-mouthed shock on his face, too.

Uranometria tilted his head in confusion at their silent reaction. It was a childlike gesture, and certainly not a mannerism that one would expect from an emperor.

"What is it? I thought you would both rejoice. Particularly you, my son."

“No, I’m extremely grateful for your kindness,” Sirius assured him swiftly. “I just assumed it would be much more difficult to seek your permission.”

“Have you forgotten, Sirius? Celaeno does not discriminate against humans. In fact, while they may be few, a small number live within our borders. Some marry demons and even bear children.”

“Those people are commoners, though. I thought there would be different rules when it came to royalty...” Sirius floundered.

“Investigate the matter later. It’s rare, but members of the imperial family have been known to fall in love with a human the way you have. Not to mention—she’s a Jade Saint, and you are so very indebted to her. I find it difficult to believe anyone would oppose your marriage,” he hummed. “At the very worst...you’ll have to deal with that fierce young lady who took a liking to you. She may try to bite your beloved.”

After adding that last part in a hushed murmur, Uranometria’s usual elegant smile graced his features once more. Sirius appeared to have heard exactly what he said, because he frowned in displeasure—but quickly shook it off and pretended he hadn’t heard as he bowed his head alongside Marialite.

When he did so, out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of her face. It was a look of sorrow and uncertainty.

“Now then, Sirius,” Uranometria continued. “Would you mind leaving us alone for a little while? I’d like to talk with Marialite about a certain matter.”

“I don’t mind, but...”

“Fear not. I won’t address her as a saint. I simply wish to converse as two regular individuals.”

“...All right. I’ll see you soon, Lady Marialite.”

Sirius’ shadow suddenly began to move of its own accord, peeling off the floor before coiling around his body. Once it enveloped him, the dark mass seemed to grow smaller and smaller, until eventually, he vanished completely.

“There we are,” Uranometria nodded in approval. “Marialite—there’s one question I’d like to ask. Would I be right to assume that you cannot yet see

yourself in a romantic relationship with Sirius?”

“Is that how it looks to you, Your Majesty?”

“I only ask because when I mentioned you becoming his consort, you didn’t seem very happy at all. Having said that, nor do you seem like you harbor any ill feelings towards my son. Your face simply showed all the signs of being conflicted.”

Marialite let out a small, genuine chuckle.

“I’ve already failed to get married twice. Last time, I didn’t develop romantic feelings for my fiancé whatsoever, even after a few years,” she explained, nibbling at her bottom lip. “Of course, I love Sirius, but I just can’t tell whether that love could lead to romance or whether it’s purely platonic. At my age, it’s... a little sad that I still can’t make sense of my own feelings.”

“Hmmm. That boy is rather similar to me in regards to disposition. He may look as though he hasn’t a care in the world, but really, he’s always thinking about rather difficult matters,” he said with a far-off look in his eyes, as though he were watching over a small child. “You have the right to fall in love, but it isn’t compulsory. Even if you are to marry someone, there is no need to turn yourself inside out trying to fall in love with them. If you can’t find those feelings within you, there’s no need to blame yourself. If no romance ever blossoms between a couple, it doesn’t particularly matter. It’s a common enough situation when marrying for convenience or political reasons, no?”

“But I feel bad for Lord Sirius,” she admitted. “I welcomed his feelings with open arms, but...”

Sirius had professed his love for her very passionately. She couldn’t bear to reject him when he was trying so hard, and she genuinely wanted to embrace his feelings. However, it bothered her that coming to his home country signified her *third* attempt at marriage, and she couldn’t get that out of her head.

And if this was her third time trying, that just meant she was running head-first towards her third farewell.

In order to escape that fear of losing him, it was possible she was subconsciously forbidding herself from falling in love with Sirius, and instead

latched onto that platonic, familial affection she felt for him.

“...Marialite,” Uranometria addressed her seriously. “Let me cast a spell on you.”

For once, a genuine look of fear crossed her eyes, but as soon as he said it, the emperor flicked his index finger into the air.

“Now, you should be able to believe in Sirius’ love.”



RAVEN was in the dining hall, stuffing his cheeks full of their best steak. He was off-duty for now; he’d been told to take it easy after his expedition, and he was definitely going to take advantage of that.

However, in the middle of gorging himself on steak at his own leisure, he was rudely interrupted.

“There he is! It’s Sir Raven!”

A group of officials burst into the hall and surrounded where Raven sat at the table. He froze, his cheeks bulging with food. All of a sudden, he had a bad feeling he’d done something to upset someone.

“...What’s wrong?” he asked nervously, gulping down his mouthful of food.

“I-I’m ever so sorry to interrupt your meal, but we need your help, Sir Raven!” one of the officials implored him.

“We are completely powerless...” another one lamented.

“Wh-What the hell?” Raven chuckled shakily. “Seriously, what’s happened?”

Don’t tell me the Rebellion are back...

He stiffened up, putting himself on guard. However, one crying official quickly quelled his fears, tearily beginning to plead with him.

“It’s about Prince Sirius...”

“Did he do something to you? Or maybe he said something nasty to you?” Raven contemplated. He’d known Sirius for a long time, but he could barely recall any occasions where he’d been unreasonable with his attendants.

Seeing how Sirius earnestly performed all of his duties without so much of a complaint—especially when all of his many brothers did nothing but slack off and play around—Raven couldn't help but want to stay with him. In the past, he'd been approached by one of the other princes with the promise of a pay raise, but he refused it. He believed that if this prince had the time to try to lure his younger brother's attendant away with money, he should be spending it helping with palace duties instead. A lingering sense of rage still remained within him.

That prince was the one who completely fell for a honeytrap; by the time he'd spent one night with this beautiful woman, his body lay cold in the sheets the next morning.

"Lord Sirius has only just returned to Celaeno. He must be extremely tired from the long journey home, too. Thus, I suggested that he retire to his chambers for a while, or spend some time with Saint Marialite, but..."

"But...?"

"He won't rest," the official explained, looking distraught.

"He's working nonstop?" Raven guessed.

"Yes."

"While I'm just sitting here eating steak?"

"Yes."

Right. I shouldn't be here right now.

Raven stood up and let his knife and fork fall to the plate with a loud clatter.



WHEN he arrived at the main office, Raven found Sirius just as he'd expected—surrounded by mountains of documents.

"Lord Sirius!" he greeted. "I can't eat in peace with you in here. Take a break, won'tcha?"

"I'm not tired, though," Sirius insisted. "Don't worry about me. You're free to go and eat as much fish and meat as you like."

“Aw, c’mon, you!” he whined. “How can you act like you’re just doing a little bit of work after going for a stroll in the garden?! You’ve been away for months!”

He was almost killed, escaped the country, and after a long detour, he finally made his way back. No one would complain if he took some time off. In fact, everyone *wanted* him to take some time off. There wasn’t a soul in the country cruel enough to make him return to work immediately after coming home.

“I already rested for far too long while I was living at Lady Marialite’s house,” he harrumphed.

“That wasn’t *rest*,” Raven sighed. “I was the only one with any means of contacting the palace, so you couldn’t possibly have done anything before I came and found you.”

“If I really wanted, I could’ve returned home myself,” he pouted. “I was too soft on myself by waiting for you to show up. Besides, the only reason I stayed there was for my own selfish desires.”

Apparently, he wasn’t cranky because he was physically exhausted—but rather, he was wallowing in his feelings of self-hatred.

“Well yeah, I get that, but...even the Celestial Dragon needs a break every now and then.”

The Celestial Dragon was another name that had been bestowed upon Sirius. He had excelled in magic ever since he was a small child, and his abilities soon overtook his brothers’ as he got older. Plus, he lived for his work, and it was that conscientious attitude that meant he was chosen to be the crown prince.

Knowing Sirius, there was only one reason Raven could think of to explain why he had wanted to stay behind in a foreign country so badly.

“Is it because you wanted to stay with Marialite?” he winked.

“...I am a weak, weak man,” he sighed, shaking his head as he let the documents he was reading flutter down to the desk.

“Now, don’t be silly,” Raven teased. “You weren’t just playing around like a kid. You were genuinely helping an adult with grown-up work, so I think

everyone would totally understand if you took a break. Now you're free to go to Marialite and flirt with her as much as you like, y'know?"

"I'm worried about that, too," he immediately countered. "Of course, I want to see Lady Marialite and let that smile of hers heal my heart. I also want to hear her lovely voice, and hold her hands."

"Seeing how overcome with love you are, I'm actually surprised by how pure-hearted those desires are..." Raven chuckled. "I thought you'd be fantasizing about sucking her fingers and all sorts of other weird stuff."

"....."

Sirius fell silent, and a bright, hopeful glimmer suddenly flickered across both eyes.

"Hey, I wasn't trying to give you ideas!" Raven wailed. "Definitely do not do that! Nope! No siree!"

I should've known not to say anything—even if it was a joke.

Regret clouded his face, while Sirius turned to gaze out the window.

"However, it seems like Lady Marialite still needs some time to gather her thoughts. I think I need to leave her be for a little while."

"Gather her thoughts? On what?"

"She looked very conflicted over whether to become my wife or not," he admitted sorrowfully.

"If she's not sure, shouldn't you go and try to persuade her right away? If she changes her mind, you'll get dumped, y'know," he reminded him.

"I don't want to *force* her into anything. The main reason I took her away from that godforsaken country was to *stop* her from being treated like some sort of tool, after all," he said, his eyebrows turning up forlornly.

"Yeah, you're right," Raven hummed in agreement.

The way the royal family had treated Marialite was absolutely terrible. And, even though they'd sent her away for the most selfish of reasons, they'd surely turn to her for help again if anything went wrong. Knowing Marialite's innate

inclination to help others, it was easy to imagine her agreeing to save them without a second thought.

“I want her to be happy more than anyone else. If this is what Lady Marialite wants, it’s not my place to convince her otherwise. All I can do is continue to love her with all my being for the rest of my days,” he murmured tenderly.

“If you’re the future emperor, don’t you think it’s a bad idea not to marry anyone...?” Raven pointed out.

“In that case, heirship would simply be transferred to another branch of the imperial family. There are numerous ways for me to protect both this kingdom and Lady Marialite without becoming the emperor.”

It’s really not as simple as he thinks it is.

Raven was pretty sure that if the current emperor caught wind of this plan, he’d do everything he could to stop it, too.

On a personal level, I want him to live however he wants, but as his attendant, I can’t just let him abandon the empire.

“If only we could get Marialite to look at you as a potential romantic interest somehow...” he mused. He never thought he would return to the now-peaceful demon empire, only to be immediately confronted with yet another earth-shattering obstacle in Sirius’ path.

All of a sudden, Sirius sprung to his feet with a look of realization on his face and threw the door open with a *slam*. He moved so quickly that Raven’s eyes couldn’t even track his movements properly; for a moment, he thought he’d teleported away.

“Oh, Lord Sirius!” He heard a melodic voice from the other side of the door. “How did you know I was here? I hadn’t even knocked yet.”

It was Marialite, along with a few palace maids. Apparently, Sirius had sensed her presence and swiftly leaped into action.

“Is something the matter, Lady Marialite?” he asked sincerely.

“This maid baked some delicious cookies. If you’d like, I thought we could eat some together, and—”

“Yes. Definitely.”

He didn't even bother waiting for her to finish her sentence before agreeing. Perhaps he'd become restless while forbidding himself from going to see her, because his movements were far too exaggerated for simply standing around talking.

“I'm overjoyed to receive such a wonderful invitation from you,” he whispered in a deep, heated tone. Most likely, it was entirely unintentional, but it certainly made an impact; the accompanying maids' cheeks flushed bright red.

Now, that's not fair. How can the guy be so handsome AND sound so good?

However, most crucially, it probably wouldn't have an effect on Marialite. Raven stiffly turned to look at her, chancing a peek at her expression.

“...I'm really happy you accepted my invitation, too,” she smiled, a hint of red staining her pale cheeks.



THE palace officials and maids were very grateful to Marialite; a single sentence from her had been far more successful at getting Sirius out of his office than all of their efforts combined.

However, no one could say that he looked entirely pleased about the fact.

His smile was mixed with discomfort. Raven, who'd been standing with him just a moment ago, was staring at the saint as though he was looking at some strange, unidentifiable creature.

No one could blame him, though; before, no matter how much Sirius turned his charm on, Marialite would only give him a casual, sweet smile. However, at that moment, she was genuinely flattered, with a pink flush dusting her skin. Sirius convinced himself he must have been dreaming, while Raven wondered if it was even the real Marialite.

“Lady Marialite...” Sirius hedged. “Did something happen?”

“Like what?” she blinked.

“...No, it's nothing,” he chuckled awkwardly.

“Oh?” she questioned with a tilt of her head.

Sirius automatically averted his gaze. Somehow, her mannerisms were even more charming than usual. Just looking at her made him imagine flower petals fluttering through the air around her, and he was doing his utmost to keep his flustered emotions in check. He tried not to let it show, but he feared he might stop breathing with how adorable she was. All he wanted was to pepper her pale skin with kisses and press his face up against her round, unbelievably smooth cheeks.

Meanwhile, the maids—who didn’t yet know what Marialite was usually like—gazed fondly upon the romantic scene. When they stepped into her room, the scent of sweet, freshly baked cookies and aromatic black tea wafted into their nostrils. Several of the maids were preparing plates and cups for their little tea party.

If he were to be pedantic, Sirius would have much rather had some cookies baked by Marialite herself, but there was no chance in hell the staff would let her do any work so soon after arriving at the palace. And besides—the maids looked like they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

“It looks like everyone’s more than happy to do this for you,” Marialite commented with a smile.

It was only then that Sirius realized he’d probably never participated in a tea party at the palace before. For one thing, he had no interest in such functions, and he assumed that the maids would be thankful not to have to do so much work. Apparently, that was a misconception on his part.

“Well, it’s fun to make food and drink for someone you care about. You want them to enjoy it, and you do everything you can to make that happen,” Marialite assured him.

“...Really?” he said, a hint of surprise to his tone.

“I know because that’s how I used to feel,” she sighed wistfully, staring up at the ceiling as though recalling a particular memory.

I wonder... Who’s she thinking about?

Perhaps she was remembering Sirius when he was younger, or perhaps the

prince that cast her away, or maybe even the man she was first supposed to be wed to.

Other than the distant look in her pale blue eyes as they lingered on her steaming cup of tea, he had no idea what she was thinking.

Of course, he was particularly fond of her smile, but there was another sort of strange beauty to her when she was lost in thought like this.

She looks almost...transparent, somehow. As though her consciousness has wandered away.

Even without the color of love clouding his vision, there was no denying that Marialite was beautiful.

"I was thinking of learning how to bake and brew tea one day," he told her.

"Really?" she asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

"Definitely! It would be wonderful if you could teach m—" he trailed off, stopping himself before he got too carried away. It was possible that would be too much for her at the moment. Naturally, he wanted to shower her with love and affection, but it was probably for the best not to force it on her. "No, I mean...the delicacies the maids prepare would both taste and look better than anything I could come up with, so it doesn't matter."

"I don't think that's true," she shook her head. Her doll-like expression finally relaxed into a loose smile. "Anything you make would be delicious, I'm sure. It would look great, too."

It was the smile that Sirius loved oh-so dearly. However, it was slightly different from usual; it was sweet, and she looked happy from the very bottom of her heart. He'd never seen her smile like that before.

"I mean, you can do anything, Lord Sirius," she beamed. Her face was the very picture of a young woman in love.

Sirius' face, meanwhile, was deadly serious; his grip clenched around his teacup, and within moments, it burst into shards. The china fragments clattered around him, and the tea inside slopped onto his clothes.

"Your Highness!" a maid called out frantically. "Are you all right?!"

“L-Lady Marialite...” he croaked. “There’s something I need to ask...”

“*Your Highness!*” the maid called again, her tone firmer this time. “Your own health is the most important matter at this moment in time! You can talk to Lady Marialite afterwards!”

With the freshly brewed tea all over his thighs, Sirius leaned forward to clutch Marialite’s hand. He understood why the maids were in such a panic, but there was no way a demon would suffer burns from such an insignificant accident. In fact, even if he did burn himself, he couldn’t care less at that moment.

There was something he had to ask right this second.

“What sort of cakes do you like?”

“Hmm... Fruit cakes, I suppose. With lots and lots of fruit,” she nodded. “Oh, by the way, you should take your clothes off as soon as possible.”

“It’s far too early for that!” Sirius yelped, a deep red rushing across both cheeks. “I’m glad you’re interested, though!”

“Huh? Your burn will get worse if you don’t, so earlier is actually better...” she argued. There was a confused lilt to her brow as she tilted her head to one side.



AFTER their little tea party, Sirius decided to head straight to the palace library to rummage for every single book about baking he could lay his hands on.

“I kinda don’t wanna ask, but...what’re you actually looking for?” Raven approached him hesitantly.

“How to make a wedding cake with lots of fruit. Why do you ask?” he swiftly replied.

“You look tired...” he chuckled awkwardly, a pitying look on his face. “I think you should head to bed soon.”

Sirius couldn’t understand why he was looking at him with such pitying eyes.



ONE week had passed since Marialite arrived in Celaeno.

By now, she was starting to get used to daily life in the demon kingdom. At first, the constant nighttime really threw her off, but after about three days of living with the dark, it stopped bothering her. There were numerous glowing orbs illuminating the way wherever she went—even outside the palace—so she never found herself unable to see the world around her.

Not to mention, her plants were growing beautifully. Normal plants wouldn't grow without sunlight, so usually, whenever she tried to use her powers to grow plants at nighttime or on days with thick clouds, the results were never much good. However, in Celaeno, agriculture and floriculture seemed to be booming despite the lack of sunlight. It wasn't as though they were importing their produce from other countries, either.

The rebellion forces that tried to kill Sirius were quelled a mere two months after the uprising began. Although Marialite was surprised that the issue was resolved so quickly, she thought it was even more strange that there was no evidence of the capital having been damaged whatsoever. With a displeased look on his face, Raven had suggested that perhaps the uprising was a purposefully orchestrated event.

Either way, Marialite was glad that the conflict was resolved without innocent citizens being caught up in the horrors of war. If they hadn't found peace, she was sure Sirius would never have considered bringing her to his home.

"Lady Marialite," Sirius addressed her, facing her with a sincere expression on his face. "I have something very important to talk to you about."

Although the maids had prepared a glorious spread of tea and cookies, he hadn't even touched them. He simply stared with an imploring gaze. The maids had long left the room after Sirius told them there was something he needed to discuss with Marialite alone.

The atmosphere in the room dragged a particular memory to the forefront of her mind—the last time she'd ever taken afternoon tea with Rufus.

Will this be the third time?

The thought crossed her mind for a fleeting split second, but for some reason, it immediately floated away from her train of thought like a bubble in mid-air. Probably because there was a soft kindness to Sirius' tone, despite his stiff

manner of speaking.

“Um...well...”

“Yes?” she prompted.

“It feels like my heart’s about to burst,” he admitted, his gaze rich with the fire of passion. He placed a hand on the left side of his chest and clutched it desperately.

“Oh, my...” she gasped.

Has he caught some sort of illness that only affects demons?

Just as Marialite began to worry whether this was really the time for them to be sitting down for afternoon tea, Sirius continued his speech in a proud, confident manner.

“Ever since you came to Celaeno, you’ve only grown more and more lovely by the day. In your presence...my heart just won’t stop pounding.”

“So, if it only happens when I’m around, it’s not some sort of terrible illness, right? Thank goodness...” she sighed with relief.

“For some reason, Raven suspected I had a head injury, so I went to see our physician, but...it seems like there’s nothing wrong with me,” he shrugged. While Marialite began to worry that perhaps there really was something wrong with him, Sirius simply breathed a deep sigh. “Anyway, it’s a fact that you’re even more enchanting than you used to be, Lady Marialite. I also feel as though you smile more at my compliments than you used to.”

“Really?”

“Most definitely! You’re so adorable, I wish I could hold you in my arms forevermore!” he piped up enthusiastically.

“That must be thanks to His Majesty,” she smiled.

“Yes, I th—” he cut himself off, his own smile suddenly freezing. “What?” He couldn’t imagine why on earth his father had anything to do with this. His train of thought came to an abrupt end as confusion took over.

Marialite continued to smile dazedly, completely oblivious to Sirius’

bewilderment.

“He cast a magic spell on me,” she sang.

“...Magic?” he asked tentatively.

“Yes. He did it when I first met him.” She really was grateful to him for that.

As she recalled what happened when she was alone with the emperor, the color of Sirius’ eyes gradually grew deeper and deeper, slowly turning a bright red.

“Sirius? Your eyes are going red...”

“And what sort of spell did he cast on you?” he asked in a cold, glass-like monotone. The tableware in front of them began to clatter as though a strong gust of wind were blowing through the room—but Marialite couldn’t feel anything. The flowers in the vase between them wilted gloomily.

Red sparks flew all around Sirius.

“His Majesty said that it would make me able to truly fall in love with you,” she recalled.

The sparks shooting into the air were like little fireworks, and they were beautiful. Just as she was admiring them, the sparks suddenly spiraled into fireballs the size of fists.

“...His actions will be met with dire consequences,” Sirius growled.

“What do you mean?”

“Listen to me, Lady Marialite!” he pleaded desperately. “I really do wish you’d love me! From the bottom of my heart! However, I cannot stand the thought of someone forcing you to engage in a fabricated romance...!”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” she insisted. The spell Uranometria had cast on her wasn’t as wicked as Sirius believed it to be. “He said, ‘my son loves you with all his heart. This will help you to fully realize that fact.’”

“...That’s all?” Sirius blinked.

“Yes. That’s all,” she promised.

The floating fireballs dissipated into thin air, and his red irises returned to

their usual jade-green color.

He was angry for her sake.

When she finally came to that realization, Marialite couldn't help but give a little laugh. It made her happy.

"I was secretly worried about whether I could ever really see you in a romantic way, but His Majesty saw right through me. He gave me some advice, too. He's a very kind man."

"I... Is that so...?" he replied with a relieved sigh.

"You might be disappointed that it wasn't anything more than that, though," she commented with an apologetic smile.

"Of course not," he said with a firm shake of his head. "I've long decided to keep on loving and protecting you no matter how you feel about me."

"...Thank you," she said softly. "By the way... Once I came to understand that you really do love me, I've started to get this fuzzy feeling in my chest a lot more often. I find myself thinking about how happy I am, too, and... Lord Sirius?"

She trailed off when Sirius hid his bashful, timid expression with both of his hands. The small slithers of skin she could see of his ears and neck were flushed deep crimson; he was blushing like a teenage girl in love. Marialite blinked at him in confusion, and she eventually heard a meek, thready voice from behind his hands.

"I'm going to make you the happiest woman in the world...!"





“...**MARIALITE**,” Uranometria addressed her seriously. “Let me cast a spell on you.”

For once, a genuine look of fear crossed her eyes, but as soon as he said it, the emperor flicked his index finger into the air.

“Now, you should be able to believe in Sirius’ love,” he smiled. “Listen—these cases are very rare among the imperial family, but every now and then, there are demons—such as Sirius—who take longer to grow than most. However, if certain conditions are met, they grow in the blink of an eye.”

“Certain conditions...? Like what?”

“It happens when they meet the partner they want to spend the rest of their life with. Once they offer up a sincere prayer to protect that partner, a growth spurt begins.”

Marialite’s eyes blew wide in shock. Uranometria simply offered her a kind smile.

“Although, in Sirius’ mind, it seems he believes he grew so quickly because of the fruit you fed him. Perhaps it’s for the best if we keep this information a secret—between you and me only,” he said with a grin.

“All right, then. It’s a secret,” she grinned cheerily in return.

With a twinkle in her eye, she was back to her usual self.

Intermission: What Happened to the Prince?

A lot of effort had gone into preparing for this day.

The ballroom had been redecorated, and they had sent for several well-known foreign chefs and music troupes. The ingredients they used for the food were also nothing less than rich, quality produce. The tables were full of lavish delicacies that usually only royalty would get to taste.

A full moon shone high in the night sky with not a cloud in sight. Rufus gave a satisfied smile.

This is a most wonderful ball, he thought.

"I sincerely hope you all enjoy the evening," he announced in the middle of the room. Ladies wearing glorious gowns nodded politely, with elegant smiles on their faces.

Rufus had only invited women to the ball, but there were several men dotted around the room. When he asked, he found out that they were all the ladies' butlers there as chaperones.

How unnecessary.

He wasn't at all pleased about them being there, but if he kicked them out for such a petty reason, it was possible the atmosphere would be ruined, and some of the ladies would have to leave. Besides, they weren't like the barbaric civilians of the kingdom, nor the half-witted soldiers. They understood their place in society and carried out their duties to the utmost of their capabilities. In reality, there was little to protest.

"Your Highness," a woman called out. "Thank you ever so much for inviting me to the ball this evening."

"Ah, Liza! I didn't realize you were here. I should be the one thanking you, though," he smiled smoothly. "That dress suits you wonderfully."

"I'm glad to hear that! My mother chose it for me," she explained.

The way she carried herself with such tranquility, and the way she didn't show even a glimpse of excitement or anxiety very clearly set her apart from the other young women. Her lips turned up into a well-mannered smile, completely immune to any emotional disturbance.

Her pale blue mermaid dress emitted an air of intelligence that matched her manner of speaking, and a bejeweled ornament in her hair reflected the light from the chandelier a million times over, creating the illusion that she was twinkling like starlight.

Her name was Liza, and she was the only daughter of Lord Rayford. She was mild-mannered, a passionate academic, and even well-versed in the arts. She was a woman of many talents.

Not to mention, her house was inferior to only the royal family in terms of political power. Although Lord Rayford was a very stern man, he claimed that his strict nature was for the sake of those weaker than him. That was his philosophy.

Unlike many other high-ranked individuals, he had not lost himself to greed, and he had an intense hatred for injustice and wrongdoing. Many aristocrats weren't too fond of his ideology, but the commoners, at least, trusted him deeply.

And, as part of the royal family, it was in Rufus' best interests to curry favor with him by any means necessary.

By emphasizing his friendship with Lord Rayford, his popularity among the commoners would increase, but there was another reason he wanted to keep him close—there was nothing more troublesome than a capable enemy.

"Between you and me..." Rufus began, leaning over to whisper into Liza's ear. The other ladies were looking at the pair, but he pretended not to notice, intentionally keeping his voice low and seductive. "I was eagerly anticipating your visit this evening."

Those words weren't just flattery; they were his true feelings. He'd invited noble ladies from many different countries, but if he were to officially make one of these women his crown princess, he wanted to choose Liza.

“Don’t choose her based on looks alone.” That was what His Majesty the King—his father—had told him.

Rufus already knew that.

Although he didn’t necessarily have to, he’d broken off his engagement to the saint. Due to the gravity of his decision, there was a lot of pressure on him to choose a woman who was even more suited to being queen than Marialite. Liza filled those requirements perfectly. And, if the new queen was to be a well-liked noble lady, he was certain the commoners wouldn’t complain, either.

“...Your Highness, I happened to hear a rumor about town...” she murmured in reply, putting a little more distance between them. “That your true intention for holding this ball is to find a new fiancée.”

“Where in the realm did such gossip come from?”

“I think you know that better than anyone else, Your Highness,” she smiled, an accusatory look in her eyes. Rufus didn’t reply; he simply smiled back.

True enough, Rufus was the one who spread the rumor. Thanks to that, the attendees were making an extraordinary effort to be liked by the prince. A fierce battle had unfolded before him, with beautiful women scrambling for his attention on all sides. Rufus had no idea how many of them genuinely harbored feelings of love, but it was clear that most of them had their eyes on the throne.

Frankly, Rufus didn’t care why they were toadying up for him; he could have Liza as his queen, and select some of the other women as his concubines. That was his plan.

He ordered the balcony to be cleared of people before taking her out into the fresh air alone.

“I apologize to the other ladies, but you’re the one I believe would be most fit to be our future queen,” he admitted.

“Oh, thank you,” she smiled, pleased. There was no exaggerated outburst of joy; she reacted with simple, calm delight.

Almost like Marialite.

“.....”

He fell silent, surprised at himself. He never thought his previous fiancée would cross his mind like that, even for a second—despite the fact that she was carted off to the palace the moment her status as a saint became known, and she had lived there as his future wife for years.

He thought they were too far apart in age, but the king wanted to make a saint his princess, and it wasn't as though she was unattractive. Plus, she was the sort of person who did whatever she was told, and Rufus had actually quite liked her. However, the more time passed, the more he gradually began to resent her.

While she always had that gentle smile on her face, he was convinced that secretly, she looked down on him for being younger than her. Besides, he'd always found the rule of not sleeping together with his betrothed until the day they were married infuriating.

No matter how beautiful she was, as the years passed, her skin would age. And then, he would have to procreate with her. He really wanted to avoid that.

"Me as your future queen, you say...? I think you could choose far better," Liza said.

"Now, there's no need to be humble," he assured her. "Even among the other royals, a lot of people agree that you would be a wonderful choice. Surely, you must have noticed that."

"I don't think I could ever replace Lady Marialite, though," she said gently. Although, with the moon illuminating her polite smile, it was clear that something wasn't quite right. She was still stunningly beautiful, but her expression faltered ever so slightly.

"I'm not intending to make you Marialite's replacement," Rufus huffed. "This country no longer requires the power of a saint."

"Ah, yes... I remember," she said with a bitter smile. "With magic items at our disposal, there won't be quite so many opportunities for a saint to offer their assistance."

The introduction of magic items to their society had changed people's way of living even more than Rufus had expected.

By embedding a certain crystal—a stone called an enchanted gem—into any tool or device, they could power anything by magic alone. With one of those stones, anyone could make fire or bring forth gushes of water and so much more. Of course, the same went for speeding up the growth process of plants.

Now, they could compete with the demon kingdom on equal footing.

In addition, thanks to the magic items, Rufus finally found an excuse to get rid of Marialite. In his mind, there was nothing for Liza to be worried about.

“Have faith, Liza.”

“Just give me a little while to think about it,” she sighed. “Putting that aside—I’d like to speak some more to the other guests, so if you don’t mind, I’ll excuse myself.”

“O-Of course,” he nodded. “...I truly mean what I just said. Please, think with the future in mind.”

“I will. Oh, by the way... There’s just one other thing I wanted to say to you, Your Highness.”

Quite frankly, Rufus was panicking. Contrary to his expectations, she hadn’t simply nodded and accepted his proposition with delight. Far from it.

“Y-Yes?” he replied gingerly.

Liza smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“You’d best not look down on women the way you do.”

“No, you misunderstand,” he floundered. “I think very highly of you.”

“I’m not just talking about myself,” she hinted, that same polite smile plastered on her face. “Well, then, I shall speak to you later.”

She walked away, and her slow-paced footsteps gradually faded into the distance.

Even if she was the daughter of a lord, she was still two years younger than Rufus. And yet, despite their difference in power and position, her words sent a shiver up his spine.



THE land of Pythia was once a glorious, glittering military nation renowned for its wealth and high status.

It wasn't as though the country had developed state-of-the-art weaponry, nor were their soldiers and tacticians particularly capable. However, the soldiers did have one thing going for them: their life force.

By sheer vitality alone, they had razed countless other countries to the ground. No matter how furious the battle became, or how many fatal wounds they suffered, they would return to battle the next day as though nothing had happened. There were even people who claimed to have seen soldiers who were pierced through the heart or pummeled with stones the mere day before.

The soldiers were invincible; no matter how many times they were defeated, they came back to life with just as much vigor. Eventually, their enemies—who were far better fighters, by all means—became exhausted, and were forced to admit defeat.

After a succession of victories in battles, Pythia's influence grew, and they claimed to be the strongest nation in the world. However, that period of glory only lasted twenty years. All of a sudden, the Pythia forces grew weak.

At that point, an enemy nation burned their forests and fertile land to the ground, and desolation overtook the country.

The people of Pythia racked their brains over how to solve the environmental crisis to no avail—until five years ago, when a certain woman came to them.

That woman was a saint named Marialite.



“PRINCE Rufus,” a servant addressed him. “A letter from Lord Rayford has arrived.”

“Oh? That was a swifter reply than I expected.”

Rufus, the current crown prince of Pythia, closed his book. He expected it was a reply to the letter he sent to Liza, Lord Rayford's daughter, a mere few days ago—although he hadn't expected it so soon.

He'd written his thanks to Liza for attending the ball and expressed his desire

to make her his new fiancée. Judging by the quick reply, she was just as eager to begin this new chapter.

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he ordered the servant to show the letter to him at once.

“O-Of course,” the servant stuttered. However, his expression seemed to cloud over while he continued to clutch the letter.

Knowing that he’d checked the contents of the letter beforehand, Rufus couldn’t help but feel a little anxious.

She can’t have turned me down...can she?

For a moment, doubt crossed his mind. But, how could that be? It wasn’t as though a third party had suggested their union; he’d chosen her *himself* and told her as much personally. Why in the world would she ever refuse?

“I demand that you show it to me!” Rufus bellowed at the hesitant servant before snatching the letter from his hands by force. His hands were trembling with nerves, and he struggled to unfold the paper.

The servant hung his head down, staring at the marble flooring as though to avoid facing reality.

“Is this...Liza’s handwriting?” Rufus asked himself, his voice trembling.

It wasn’t written in Lord Rayford’s hand, but rather a letter Liza had composed herself. As he scanned his gaze over each short, succinct sentence, his eyes grew wider and wider.

The trembling traveled further down his body, right through to his knees. If he didn’t steady himself, he would’ve crumpled to the floor right then and there.

Rufus’ expectations of a positive reply had been shattered in the worst possible way.



“**WHAT** in the realm is the meaning of this, Rufus? Explain yourself immediately,” the king demanded. There was an angry mixture of disappointment, sorrow, and bafflement written all over his face. Rufus himself bore a similar expression.

There was no point to his father's questioning. Rufus didn't possess any of the right information to give him a proper explanation—and yet, he couldn't just remain silent.

Rufus' train of thought grounded to a halt. However, he forced his brain into action, and just barely managed to squeeze some words from his throat.

"I...I never expected such an outcome, either. Not once did I think Liza would do something like this..."

"That is not the only thing I am referring to," he boomed, a sharp glint in his eye. That gaze remained undiminished in his age.

Rufus could do nothing but quiver, pinned to the spot like a small animal. Not even one of his most loyal attendants would dare to defend him in this situation. Some of them simply watched over their father-son exchange nervously, while others pursed their lips in anticipation of how their quarrel would come to a head.

Liza was going to publicly announce that she declined the crown prince's offer of marriage. Along with the words, "There isn't a single fiber of my being that would ever consider becoming queen of such a terrible country."

"She clearly regards becoming the crown princess with disgust. On top of that, she intends to make this fact public. There must be a reason why, but..." the king glowered. "Rufus, do you have any idea what it might be?"

His tone of voice was very much that of a father scolding his son. Evidently, he was conducting the conversation on the premise that Rufus was the one at fault.

When the daughter of a great, well-loved aristocrat was the one behind such dramatics, it wasn't something the kingdom could afford to overlook. Rufus knew that.

Not to mention, he was extremely annoyed and angry at how Liza was handling the situation.

Lord Rayford was known for being a man of integrity and honesty. And Rufus, the crown prince, had been turned down by his very own daughter. It was easy to imagine how the people would turn against him.

He'd never realized quite how devious that woman was. Rufus gritted his teeth in frustration, and the king shook his head with a deep sigh, massaging his brow with his fingers.

"...Don't you think the whole debacle with your engagement to Saint Marialite made her distrust you?"

"*What?* Why would it?" Rufus countered, his eyebrows shooting up his forehead. "Liza has nothing to do with Marialite."

"You fool," the king glowered. "What woman would want to marry a man who abandoned his previous fiancée due to her age? Not to mention, the matter was not even agreed upon after an audience with myself. You expelled her from the palace without so much as decent compensation for her time."

"B-But, she was *twenty-seven* years old, Father," he huffed. "Besides, she seemed to understand. There's nothing to be angry about."

"Liza saw that even a woman who completely devoted herself to Pythia was treated with awful disrespect. I suppose she deemed your conduct unforgivable," the king barked with a dry laugh. However, Rufus didn't hear it.

His mind had gone completely blank, and he could not form a single thought.



AFTER that, Rufus began marriage talks with several other influential noble women, but in the end, every single one of them refused his proposal.

At first, Rufus was convinced that it was all Liza's fault, but one day, a woman of the same social standing as the Rayfords told him this: "Are you really so unaware of what people think of you?"

She sighed as though she were bored, covering her lips with an elegantly designed folding fan. Rufus glared at her.

"What do you mean by that?!"

Things weren't supposed to go this way, he thought.

When he let Marialite go, he thought he would become a free man, surrounded by beautiful women vying for his attention. Then, he would enjoy taking his time choosing the one he liked best. However, that vision was no

more than mere fantasy, and reality loudly asserted itself in its place.

Seeing the irritation etched into Rufus' features, his servants quickly rushed over to console him. If he lost his temper and hurt a young lady of high standing, his reputation would only suffer more than it already had.

"Think back to how you arranged the ball, then broke off your engagement to Lady Marialite. We soon found out that both of these events happened around the same time," she smiled.

"S-So what...?"

"Apparently, some of your subordinates are not quite so tight-lipped as you might like. With a little money, many are quick to talk."

"That can't be. I mean, Liza—"

"You're an arrogant, selfish prince who abandoned the beautiful woman who saved our country just because you felt like it. Do you really think there are crowds of women jumping at the chance to attend your ball after you did such a thing? Those who attended were only there to save face," she said with a sneer.

Rufus was speechless.

"You'd best not look down on women the way you do."

An image of Liza speaking elegantly beneath the moonlight crossed his mind. The polite smile on her face was that of the Devil herself.

Chapter 3: The Noble Hellcat

EVEN before her holy powers awakened, Marialite had always been fond of gardening.

Although a gardener didn't necessarily have to raise their plants with love, it certainly required care—such as calculating how much water and compost to give them. Then, when the plants finally came into full bloom, the sense of achievement she experienced was a difficult emotion to put into words. At times, there were flowers she failed to take care of properly and wilted before their time, but she always learned from her mistakes to make sure she did everything properly the next time.

Sometimes, she would buy bulbs of truly bizarre-looking plants. In the past, her parents and ex-fiancé would give some of the plants a look of slight disgust, but their strange appearance never bothered Marialite.

So, when she found out that there were plenty of plants in Celaeno that were as yet unknown to the human realm, her eyes sparkled with an excited gleam. She felt like a child again.

I need to try growing some of those!

She could barely contain herself.

“Lord Sirius,” she beamed. “Would it be possible for me to grow some new plants here at the palace?”

However, he simply blinked at her blankly.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she backtracked. “If it’ll be an issue, I don’t want to trouble you.”

“No, no—it’s not an issue,” he assured her. “But you do realize there’s no need for you to do that, don’t you?”

His tone was laced with surprise. For a moment, she wondered if he was

offended that she wanted to spend her time on something else when he was right there. True enough, her gardening habits weren't "necessary," and she could live a happy enough life without dedicating time to her hobby.

However, she also knew that Sirius wasn't the sort of person who would say such things. While she remained silent, trying to figure out the intention behind his words, his eyes shot wide open as though he had just realized something.

"Oh, I understand. That sort of thing is normal in the human world, isn't it?"

No sooner than that hushed murmur left his mouth, he turned to Marialite to give her a sincere bow of apology. However, she gently put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"Does that mean...gardening isn't a very common activity in this country?" she wondered.

"Precisely. I suppose it's just one of those cultural differences. I regret to say that fact escaped my mind. I didn't mean to sound rude."

"I thought that might be the case," she smiled.

In Celaeno, cultivating seeds and crops was seen exclusively as manual labor.

Although cultivation had been practiced since before the country was founded, it was mostly considered a way of acquiring food, and people had no concept of growing plants for their aesthetic value. Plants weren't there to be admired but rather as a necessity.

In the early years after the country's founding, every family had a vegetable garden. However, the kingdom then grew wealthier, and many people considered growing such things unnecessary once a stable supply of food was established. There were quite a lot of families who still had vegetable gardens, but that was purely to make their daily lives more economically viable; none of them had any intention of making a hobby out of their gardens. Even when some plants were grown for visual enjoyment in public spaces around the country, practically no one took it up as a personal hobby.

"I thought you were growing so many fruits and flowers in our garden simply to feed me," Sirius admitted.

“Well, naturally, that was my top priority, but...”

“So, I couldn’t figure out why you would want to do such a thing when we already have plenty to eat at the palace. I also assumed flowers were only grown when people wished to purchase them for decorative purposes,” he explained.

That reminds me of something that happened a few days ago...



A group of bodyguards had volunteered to accompany Marialite on a tour around the capital.

This time, Raven was leading the party. Sirius had been buzzing with energy to go with her, but unfortunately, there was some issue or other with the paperwork he drew up with the palace officials, and he entered into a long battle for some freedom. Not to mention, he had duties with the military to attend to, and he didn’t feel justified in putting them on hold for his own personal pleasure.

Hence, Sirius chose Raven to accompany her. Raven didn’t look all too pleased about it, but he was soon lured in with the promise of unlimited steak.

Apart from the fact that night never ended and people looked a little different, the demon kingdom was extremely similar to the human world—especially the peaceful, calm atmosphere on the streets.

Just wandering around the capital while listening to Raven’s comments about each location was extremely enjoyable. The feel of the town reminded Marialite of a never-ending festival.

However, when she looked at the people’s gardens, she couldn’t see a single flower bed.



“IF that’s how things are in this country, perhaps I should just give up on gardening,” she wondered.

“No, no,” Sirius stopped her. “I was only saying that it wasn’t necessary—not that you shouldn’t do it. I can have a garden prepared for you at once.”

“You mean, right now...?” she asked.

“Of course! Just leave it to me!” he grinned.

He took her by the hand, and she followed with a dazed look on her face.

When they came to a stop, she found herself in front of a small building that overlooked the western side of the royal court. Just the same as the rest of the palace, it was made of a pitch-black material.

The space around it was absolutely thick with weeds, and there were no people in sight. It exuded a sad, lonely aura that made it clear that it was an abandoned building.

“This storehouse was once used by one of my brothers—the fifth prince. He collected various treasures from different countries and used this building to store them,” Sirius explained. “Well, it was more like he persuaded people into giving them up with promises of large sums of money, but...after he was poisoned, the storehouse was emptied and is now completely vacant.”

“The architecture is wonderful, though,” Marialite commented.

“Indeed,” Sirius hummed. “If we just left it unused, it would be a waste of precious building materials. It’ll be of more use if it’s repurposed. My father only recently ordered me to have it taken care of, so this actually works out perfectly.”

He took out a small, milky-white glass bottle from his breast pocket and popped the cork out. As he did so, the entire storehouse began to wobble and sway like jelly. Eventually, it melted into a black liquid and flew right into the glass bottle without making a single sound.

Now the land the building had been standing upon a mere ten seconds ago was a flat, empty plain. There was nothing to suggest anything had ever been built there at all.

“There. It’s all yours, Lady Marialite,” Sirius grinned.

“Wow! Thank you very much!”

She had a feeling she’d just witnessed something incredible, but she decided not to draw too much attention to it; she simply smiled in delight, not bothering

to think too hard about it.



“WHOA. So, he gave you the whole plot of land?” Raven asked with raised eyebrows.

“The way he demolished the building was amazing. I’ve never seen anyone do anything like that before. He opened this little glass bottle, then the building melted and got sucked inside,” she recalled, digging her shovel into the earth where the storehouse once stood.

Raven looked on awkwardly, as though he didn’t know what to do with himself.

Rather than the pale evergreen dress Sirius had gleefully gifted her, Marialite was wearing work clothes specifically designed for gardening. In all honesty, the drab clothing looked a little strange on her; her gentle, buoyant personality suited elegant garments far better.

Hidden from view, several palace maids intently watched Marialite work, curious about what she was doing. They all had a look of bewilderment in their eyes.

Marialite herself, however, was continuing her work with just as much energy and vigor as usual. Raven’s first impression of her was that she always carried herself with a mellow, cheerful attitude, but he was surprised to find out she was pretty strong, too. Gardening took a lot of stamina, and she was by no means frail.

“It’s been a while since I grew anything just for fun, so I’m really excited,” she said with a grin.

“Humans sure are strange,” Raven said with a strained laugh. “I can’t really understand why you’d want to invest so much time into something that’ll just wither up and die if you get it wrong.”

“I think Sirius feels the same way,” she nodded. “Still, he gave me permission to do this right away. I didn’t even need to persuade him.”

“That’s ’cause he’d do anything as long as it makes you happy...”

Not to mention the fact that Sirius was under a lot of pressure to cater to the future empress' wishes—especially since she was a saint.

“Actually, the fact that a Jade Saint loves growing plants makes a lot of sense,” Raven hummed.

“Oh, yeah, Raven, I wanted to ask you about that,” she said with a tone of realization, pausing her digging. “What other kinds of saints are there?”

“Those with the power to control fire are Ruby Saints, Aquamarine Saints can control water, and Moonstone Saints have healing powers. There's a pretty broad range of 'em.”

“I've never even heard those titles before...”

“That's 'cause humans don't know anything about the Book of Reschmun. I'd be more surprised if you *had* heard of them.”

“What's that?” she asked. However, before Raven could answer, a soldier came sprinting towards them, shouting in the distance as he approached.

“Saint Marialite! I'm back! I got you some seeds!”

As he drew closer, an expensive-looking box decorated with jewels came into view. The soldier dropped to his knees in front of Marialite and offered up the box to her.

Marialite, however, had no idea what was going on. She stared at the soldier blankly.

“What are they?”

“They're topazios seeds. Didn't Lord Sirius tell you about them?”

“Well, he did say that once I started on the garden, I should absolutely plant some topazios seeds first. But I didn't realize that they were... Um...”

That they were the sort of thing to arrive in such a fancy box!

“Anyway, thank you,” she smiled, finally taking the box from the soldier and flipping the lid open.

Inside, sitting atop a soft, plush cushion, was a cluster of little brown seeds. Marialite stared down at them with curious eyes and tried to recall what Sirius

had told her.

Topazios was originally the name of a Jade Saint who lived in ancient times. Apparently, it was possible to grow other plants around the topazios plant, but Marialite was a little worried that it might hinder their growth. However, according to Sirius, it would have the opposite effect; having topazios seeds in the vicinity prompted plants to grow faster.

That was how the seeds got their name; it was believed that the power of a saint resided in each one.

“I wonder what the flowers will look like,” Marialite mused as she studied the seeds.

“It’s different depending on who plants the seed,” Raven chimed in. “People with strong personalities bring forth large, bright red flowers, while the more pessimistic types sprout little blue ones...and so on. I bet you’d grow some lovely, vivid pink ones.”

“You think so? Shall we find out?” she said with a clap of her hands. She knelt down to the freshly dug hole and sowed the first seed.

She held her palms towards the earth and offered up a simple prayer. The moment she finished speaking, a green shoot heaved its way above ground. Silence fell around her as Raven, the soldier, and all the maids hiding around the corner watched curiously.

Holy power surrounded the bud as it began to rapidly shoot into the air. It grew and grew until it was about three feet tall and little buds began to sprout from the stem. The buds seemed to be tinged red, but...

“Wait, hold on a sec! Something’s not right!” Raven started to panic—and he wasn't the only one. The soldier wore a puzzled look on his face, and the maids reacted similarly.

It was the furthest thing from a dainty little flower. It was utterly enormous.

Marialite was the only one not panicking; she simply watched over it as it grew with a casual smile on her face.

“It reminds me of how Lord Sirius grew so big so suddenly,” she laughed.

“I don’t think anyone could call that thing ‘lovely’...” Raven said with a strained laugh, side-eyeing the monstrous plant.

“Who cares?” Marialite countered. “It’s growing up strong and healthy. That’s the most important thing.”

Then, finally, the topazios flowered.

The petals unfurled to display a deep, brilliant crimson. That much was expected. However, what sprouted in the middle of each flower was another matter altogether.

It was the face of a rugged-looking man.

“Aaaaaaaah!” the maids screamed in terror.

Strictly speaking, the entire plant was in the shape of a man. Nevertheless, it was huge. The plant was as tall as a real man, he was wearing heavy-looking leafy armor, and something like a sword sprouted from his hand. It looked like something that had stepped straight out of someone’s nightmares.

“Ooh! I’ve never seen such a handsome plant!” Marialite admired gleefully. However, she was the only one to do so. Everyone else was fearfully looking between her and the sinister-looking plant and cowering pathetically.

“Th-This has to be some kind of mistake!” Raven yelled, his features stiff with fear. While Marialite’s skin was flushed pink with excitement, Raven had almost turned blue.

“What? Why?” she asked, oblivious.

“You can’t even call that a flower! It looks like it could kill two or three people at once!” he replied, exasperated. “Won’t it ruin the view to have all your plants growing around that thing?”

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s almost like a guardian for the rest of them. I think it’s wonderful.”

With the topazios in the middle of the garden, Marialite had a strong feeling it would protect its fellow plants from anything that came at them. Perhaps it would repel every plant’s natural enemy—bugs.

Just as she was thinking of all the ways it might benefit the garden, an ear-

splitting scream interrupted her train of thought. It was one of the maids.

Marialite turned around to witness something...unexpected. While one of the plant knight's hands was holding his sword, the other one was slowly extending towards her. It was *moving*.

Raven rushed to catch Marialite in his arms, but she rushed over to the "knight" without so much as a moment's hesitation.

He doesn't want to harm anyone. It feels more like he's trying to tell me something.

The topazios slowly reached out to her, then stopped.

"Are you...trying to say 'it's nice to meet you'?" she asked it.

The flower nodded its head up and down in response. Evidently, it could understand her.

Wow! It's so intelligent! You'd never guess it's only been alive for a few minutes.

Feeling a strange sort of camaraderie, Marialite took the knight's hand in both palms and gently shook it. She had an inkling this would be the start of a long companionship; she was growing more and more fond of the plant by the second.

"It's nice to meet you, too!" she beamed. "Um... You'll need a name, so just give me some time to think about it. I'll try to find one that's just as magnificent as you are." Naming things definitely wasn't one of her strong points, so she thought it'd be a good idea to borrow a book from the library later.

That was when something caught her attention. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her shadow quivering slightly. Not a moment later, a handsome young man with silver hair appeared where her shadow lay. The soldier and maids fell to their knees, bowing down.

"Lord Sirius?" Marialite asked hesitantly. "That's an unusual way of teleporting..."

"My powers have a strong affinity to darkness, which means it's possible for me to travel through shadows the way you just saw," he shrugged. "Anyway,

did something happen? I sensed a weird presence, so I came here to check it out as soon as I could.”

“Come here, Lord Sirius. I made a new friend,” Marialite said with a proud look on her face. The topazios knight slowly maneuvered its hand into a peace sign; he had quite the jolly personality.

For a moment, Sirius didn’t say anything at all. His expression remained neutral, and he simply stared at the topazios.

I wonder if there’s some sort of problem...

Her heart sunk. What if Sirius told her she should kill it as soon as possible?

“Thank goodness it appears to have worked.” Surprisingly, when he finally spoke, Sirius’ cheeks stretched into a satisfied grin. “The topazios seeds I gave you were imbued with my magic. That way, I can protect your garden even when I’m not around. Then, my magic interacted with your powers and gave birth to the strong, intelligent plant we’re looking at right now.”

“Oh, so that’s why it’s like this?”

Perhaps that was also the reason why the seeds had been kept in such a lavish box.

As Marialite looked up at the plant made of both magic and holy energy, it gently caressed her head with its red, flowery hand.

“We need a good name for him,” she piped up. “Do you mind if I choose one?”

“Of course not. Besides, it’s a product of our love, after all. I expect he’ll grow to have your pure heart, so I’m really looking forward to seeing how things go,” Sirius said energetically, quickly detailing his thoughts. “I know—let’s keep a diary to record each day of its growth. I know I already keep a diary, but I was thinking we should keep it in a separate notebook. It almost feels like we’re keeping track of our child’s first words, and I’m really excited, and my heart won’t stop pounding...!” His eyes shone, turning a deep crimson. “By the way, I’ve been keeping that diary ever since I first met you, so I’m actually on my fourth one.”

He spoke so fast that Marialite half-wondered if he was breathing properly. Still, he seemed happy. Now that his eyes had changed color, she noticed his irises were an exact match to the color of the topazios flower. Perhaps that was the color of his magic, and traces of it created that same brilliant red.

In other words, the plant was, in a lot of ways, like a child to them. As Marialite stared inquisitively up at the knight, who was practicing his sword-handling, something moving in the night sky caught her eye. It was a single black bird flying towards them. It swooped down onto Raven's head and let out a sequence of squawks. Raven listened, and after a few moments, his brow furrowed in response.

"Ugh... For real? I knew this'd happen, but why so soon?"

"What's wrong, Raven?" Sirius asked, a blank look on his face. Raven heaved a huge sigh and frowned as though the world was coming to an end.

"You have a guest, Lord Sirius. It's Lord Elestial's daughter."

The moment that name reached his ears, Sirius froze. In much the same fashion, the maids and the soldier's eyes widened, and they stiffened up. In unison, they all turned to look at Marialite, a look of despair on their faces.

"...Does she have something to do with me?" she asked in confusion.

"No, not at all. It's just..." Sirius fumbled. "She might want to see you, but...I don't think you should get involved with her, Lady Marialite."

With the way he was mumbling and giving half-baked answers, it seemed like he was determined not to tell Marialite about this woman. Raven, however, rolled his eyes and gave a proper answer instead.

"She's the most troublesome demon in the entire kingdom. Trust us, you do NOT want to go anywhere near her. Her parents raised her wrong, I'm telling ya. Anything bad you can think of... Trust me, she's already done it."

And he was deadly serious.



"I *canceled* my afternoon tea for this! Did you know that?" a woman's voice shouted, absolutely indignant. "I want to get this over and done with as soon as

possible. Bring His Highness, the Celestial Dragon, out here right this instant!"

There was a red carriage parked outside the front gates, and the source of the voice was coming from inside, where they could see the woman yelling incessantly at a guard. The old butler standing next to her didn't try to stop her, and instead complained to the soldiers with a deep frown on his face.

"How many more minutes do you intend to make us wait?! My lady is a busy woman! If you make us wait any longer, I shall consider it an insult upon her!"

"P-Please calm down! We simply can't let anyone inside the palace grounds without His Majesty's permission!" a soldier insisted.

"Why would we need *his* permission?" the butler spat. "My lady... There's no reason for us to listen to the claims of these lowlives!"

"Yes, you're right," she nodded in agreement and exited her carriage. "It would be quicker if we went in and found him ourselves."

Ignoring the soldiers' desperate attempts to turn them away, the woman and her butler strode straight past them. However, they soon came to a stop...

Because the person they were looking for was standing right there—Sirius, the heir to the throne of Celaeno.

He was surrounded by a crowd of bodyguards, who were all staring suspiciously at the two "guests." It was as though they were wordlessly conveying the fact that they would immediately resort to drawing their swords if they had to. And, not to mention, Sirius himself was wearing the same sort of murderous expression.

However, the woman was anything but scared. She gave him a ferocious, fixed stare in return, and licked her lips eagerly.

"My, my. You used to be such a cute little thing, but I suppose the rumors were true. You've grown into a wonderfully handsome man. Very well... I must have him," Cornelia, the daughter of Lord Elestial, grinned wickedly.



SHE *would* have all of her wishes fulfilled, and she *would* get her hands on everything she could ever want. No matter who suffered because of that, she

didn't care so long as she was happy with the way things turned out.

Because of that twisted way of thinking, everyone around Cornelia feared her.

People often wondered what in the demon realm made her so selfish, but the answer was mainly down to her father. Lord Elestial was a demon with a long lifespan of several hundred years. He excelled in politics and military affairs, and he had contributed greatly to Celaeno's development. Many people praised him for his talents, but he had one, huge fatal flaw: he was the utter definition of an adoring parent.

He would do anything for his sweet little daughter, who was the apple of his eye. Even if it was something reprehensible. In fact, that was what he was best at. In a way, it was only natural that Cornelia grew up the way she did with that sort of a father as her role model.

She was a talented fire mage, and she was rumored to be the most powerful woman in the land. Such talk only fanned the flames of her arrogance. There was no one who could stop her—apart from maybe her father, who would never even dream of attempting to get in the way of his beloved daughter's wishes.

Currently, there were two things the terrible Lady Cornelia sought after: Prince Sirius, and the throne. The fact that the prince already had a partner would do absolutely nothing to change her wicked mind.

"Basically, from Lady Cornelia's point of view, you're her rival. As far as she's concerned, you came out of nowhere and snatched Sirius up from under her nose," Raven sighed. He and Marialite were sipping at some tea in her room, doing their best to relax under the circumstances.

"She sounds like a lot of trouble..." Marialite replied with a sad smile.

When Sirius heard that Cornelia was at the palace, Marialite had clearly seen him make a terrified expression. However, she never could have imagined quite how terrible this Cornelia really was.

"Immediately after Sirius was chosen to be heir to the throne, Cornelia insisted that she was going to be his empress," Raven bit out. "Of course, Sirius refused each time, especially since he can't stand people who abuse their

power to get their own way. The people would've kicked up a fuss if His Majesty chose Lady Cornelia to be the future empress, too, so he even sent her a letter to say he wouldn't let her marry his son. I don't know why she keeps on trying."

"Wow..." Marialite said, putting a hand over her mouth. However, her reaction wasn't one of shock—but rather excitement that someone like Cornelia existed in real life, and not only in fairy tales.

She knew some noblewomen back in Pythia, but they were all very polite women who placed a lot of importance on their reputation. In particular, she remembered Liza, the daughter of Lord Rayford. Just like her father, she was a hard-working, refined woman.

That was why she was so curious to learn that noblewomen with bad personalities even existed.

I just have to meet her, she thought.

"I'm sure Lord Sirius already told you, but it's best if you don't meet that woman. I thought she might give up after hearing that he made a foreign saint his fiancée, but it sounds like she's marched into the palace huffing and puffing with anger," Raven heaved with yet another sigh.

"...Okay."

Marialite doubted whether Cornelia had even heard the news of their engagement at all. No one with common sense would try to propose to somebody else's man. Even Rufus broke off their relationship before searching for a new fiancée.

"Come to think of it, I wonder if he ever found the woman he was looking for?" she wondered to herself.

"Hm? What was that?" Raven looked at her blankly.

"Oh, no, sorry—I was talking to myself," she smiled. "Lord Sirius is probably talking to Lady Cornelia right now, isn't he?"

"I'm not hopeful that she'll just shut up and accept that he's off-limits, but... Oh! She's here," Raven exclaimed as a crow swooped down onto the windowsill and cawed for him. He swiftly rushed over. "Yeah... Mm-hm... Okay... I thought

she might say that..."

He nodded over and over as the crow cawed at him; evidently, although Marialite couldn't understand a thing, he understood it perfectly. It was sweet. The crow's eyes were big and round, and there was a certain charm to them.

She watched on, leisurely sipping her tea with a big smile on her face. Eventually, the bird finished giving its report and flew away once more. When Raven turned back around, he had a lax smile of relief on his face.

"Thank goodness!" he exhaled. "Apparently, she left!"

"What? Already?"

"The discussion got a little too heated, and they were hurling fireballs and lightning bolts at each other until, eventually, the chandelier crashed down onto the table. It seems as though even Lady Cornelia had to admit defeat at that point," he explained.

It sounded like their "discussion" was the furthest thing from a polite exchange of words over tea—it ended up more like a battlefield. Two or three people were injured in the scuffle, but judging by Raven's blasé reaction, Marialite could only assume that was an everyday occurrence when it came to Cornelia.

Raven gave her a serene smile that she'd never seen before. He must've been really relieved that the situation hadn't escalated any further than that. Marialite, on the other hand, was secretly a little disappointed that she didn't get to meet Cornelia.

"Well, then... I'll go speak to Lord Sirius directly now," Raven said.

However, as it turned out, that was far from the end of things. They suddenly heard a commotion from outside the door, shouts and clashes filled the hallways.

"Halt!"

"Stop right there!"

More and more warnings of that effect echoed through the palace, the shouts getting closer and closer. Apparently, whoever it was had no intention of

stopping.

Raven pursed his lips nervously.

“Stay right here, Marialite,” he said gravely. He then put a hand on the door handle with a frown on his lips.

In the next moment, the door came flying open, and the door smacked Raven square in the face with a fierce *wham*.

“Raven!” Marialite yelped in a panic, rushing to kneel down next to where he’d collapsed. However, she didn’t get very far. Barely a second had passed before someone entered the room, blocking her way.

The woman before her had wild, fiery red hair and fierce ashen eyes. She wore a bright crimson dress that stuck fast to her slender figure. Despite her stunning beauty, something about her screamed *unapproachable*—even if she weren’t snarling ferociously at Marialite.

“Are you the saint that Lord Sirius is so fond of?” she spat. “Looking at you, I’d say you’re barely worth mentioning. His Highness has terrible taste in women.”

She’d only just laid eyes on Marialite, yet she was already hurling a stream of verbal abuse at her. Meanwhile, Marialite was barely listening at all; she was totally fixated on the cat ears sprouting out the top of the woman’s head, vivid red to match her hair.

“My name is Cornelia. I’m Lord Elestial’s only daughter, and this country’s best hope of having a worthy empress,” she smiled smugly. “*You*, on the other hand... Apart from being a saint, you have absolutely nothing going for you. We’re worlds apart.”

Marialite stared up at her in a daze, completely silent.

“Heh. I see I have rendered you speechless. Don’t worry, though—I’m used to people being floored by how much more beautiful I am than them. Are you worried that I might catch His Highness’ eye?” she smirked. “Poor girl. If things go as planned, there’s no way in hell you’ll ever be empress... Helloooo? Are you even listening?!”

No matter how much she tried to provoke Marialite, she simply stared up at

her cat ears blankly, her expression unchanging and her lips unmoving. Cornelia began to panic. Marialite's pale-blue eyes were sparkling with wonder, and she wasn't listening to a single word of Cornelia's abuse.

"Owww..." Raven complained as he got to his feet with a pained wince. Then, he opened his eyes to witness Cornelia antagonizing Marialite. "Eeeeeek! Yikes! It's Lady Cornelia!"

He squealed as though he'd just seen some sort of humongous insect—but it seemed that Cornelia was far more comfortable receiving that sort of reaction than the one Marialite was giving her. Her expression morphed into a wicked, arrogant smile, and she laughed in a high-pitched tone.

"And, what do we have here? The little bird that pecks around Lord Sirius' feet! Were you asked to 'guard' our little saint here?"

"Hold up! Why the heck are you here?!" he said in a panic, shaking his head.

"Isn't it obvious? I just had to see the woman for myself. That's why I came here today, after all. But then, His Highness was being so awfully *stubborn*. He's all, 'I won't let her meet the likes of you!' He probably thought I would roast her alive," she cackled, conjuring a deep red flame in her hand.

Her ashen eyes were full of murderous intent. That was all she needed to do in order to deter the soldiers who were attempting to enter the room. Raven froze, too—worried about what might become of him if he moved.

"The small fry can just shut up and behave. I'm here to talk to the *saint*, not you," Cornelia said, huffing through her nose before turning back to Marialite.

"So, *you're* Lady Cornelia!" Marialite beamed, finally finding her voice again. She didn't seem at all paranoid that she might steal away her fiancé. For Marialite, meeting Cornelia was an amazing experience.

And she even came to find me herself!

Her excitement was intensifying by the second.

"Y-Yes... I am," Cornelia replied unsurely, set off-balance by the look of joy on Marialite's face. That was the last thing she expected. She approached her, bringing the fireball in her hand closer. "I'm Lord Elestial's only daughter, and

this country's best hope of having a worthy empress." She repeated the same line from earlier, but this time, her voice was much higher. She wanted to make triple sure that Marialite heard that part. "What say you? Does my presence paralyze you with fear?"

"Fear...?" Marialite echoed in confusion. She wasn't trembling nor backing away. She simply stared in wide-eyed amazement, studying Cornelia from the tips of her ears down to her toes. Her mouth opened and closed several times as she analyzed the fiery woman in front of her.

"Not at all! I think you're beautiful. And very sweet, too," she giggled.

"...*What?!*" Cornelia screeched. Her pale cheeks turned apple-red. "Do you realize how foolish you sound? Can't you see the flames in my palm?!"

"I can. They're absolutely mesmerizing!"

"All right, I concede. You're stunned by my powers and my looks. I can understand that. And...? What else? You must have other opinions of me, too!"

"Huh? Like what?" Marialite frowned, becoming increasingly confused. She thought Cornelia was a very charming woman. What else was there to say?

"You are far more beautiful than she could ever be, Lady Marialite."

Marialite suddenly felt breath against her ear as a low, seductive murmur interrupted her.

She turned around to find Sirius standing there; at some point, he must have teleported into the room without her noticing. Violet-tinted lightning sparked around his right hand, shooting a crackling sound through the air. Wasting no time, he thrust his hand out towards Cornelia with all his might, sending a terrifyingly powerful lightning bolt in her direction.

She dodged it—just barely. It must have missed by a hair's breadth. Instead, it sent a shock through the chair behind her, rendering it a pathetic, ashy pile of wood.

"Thank goodness you're safe," Sirius sighed with relief, reaching out to wrap his arms around Marialite from behind. However, Marialite quickly ducked down, and he ended up embracing thin air. Sirius stumbled, thrown off balance

for a tense moment before regaining his composure.

Then, he shot a red-hot, angry glare at Cornelia.

“What are you doing here, Cornelia?” he growled.

“I only wanted to say hello!” she sighed. “How could I resist? The Jade Saint, who took the long journey here from the human realm... I had to make sure for myself that she was fit to become empress. But you forbade me from meeting her!”

“What did you expect? A repulsive woman like you doesn’t even deserve to breathe the same *air* as Lady Marialite.”

“That’s a little harsh, don’t you think? Besides, you’d have to be insane to think that she’s deserving of the title of empress,” Cornelia scoffed. “I thought that perhaps she has no fear for her personal safety, but since you turned up, it appears the fear has crippled her.”

Sirius’ irises were instantly dyed a furious crimson. That wasn’t all, either; countless balls of lightning appeared in the air and illuminated the room with purple flashes. Cornelia faced him with an expression of total composure, and a flurry of fireballs floated in the space around her. It had only taken a minute for the ornate, elegant room to morph into a treacherous battlefield. It was well past the point of a friendly tussle; something about the focused buzz in the air suggested that neither of them would let up until somebody died.

Raven took refuge in the corridor outside the room and watched over the scene of carnage along with the soldiers lined up there.

“Lord Sirius! Could you at least send Marialite out of the room?!” he panicked. “If she stays with you, she’ll get caught up in the conflict!”

“That will be unnecessary. The safest place for Lady Marialite is at my side.”

“Pfft!” Raven scoffed in disbelief. “The ‘safest’ place?! More like the most dangerous!”

Even if there was a grain of truth in Sirius’ claim, now was *not* the time to test it.

“Ew... You people make me sick,” Cornelia muttered, absolutely revolted by

the way Sirius couldn't bear to be apart from Marialite for even a second. Despite her violent personality, it appeared she was actually rather weak-stomached when it came to romance.

The onlookers silently prayed that her disgust would spur her into giving up and going home, but there was no way Cornelia would back down now. If she did, that meant never becoming empress. And she couldn't let that happen.

"Listen, Your Highness," she sighed. "Even if you make that saint your wife, I won't stand for it."

"...What?" Sirius spat.

"Oh, my... Did I forget to tell you? The truth is, I—"

Ignoring Cornelia's taunts, Marialite suddenly moved away from Sirius. Apparently, she wasn't all too worried about the situation, because she walked up to Cornelia without a care in the world.

"Lady Marialite!" Sirius gasped urgently. Taken off-guard by her unexpected movements, even Cornelia automatically took a step back.

"Wh-What are you doing?" Cornelia asked uneasily.

"Is this yours, Lady Cornelia?" Marialite asked, holding her hand out. Between her fingers lay the broken chain of a necklace with an ash-gray jewel as its centerpiece.

Cornelia slapped a hand to her own neck in a fluster. It must have broken when she dodged Sirius' lightning attack. There was a look of uncertainty in her ashen eyes, but Marialite simply gazed into them and said, "It's the same beautiful gray as your eyes."

"*Beautiful?! Wh-What do you...?*" Cornelia yelled, her cat ears pricking right up. Both Sirius and Raven peered at her with a look of confusion on their faces.

"Saints really are all-powerful," came a murmur from the crowd.

"L-Listen, *you!* Jade Saint!" Cornelia yelled, pointing a finger at Marialite. "I will *pulverize* you in a Duel of Maidens! I'll drive you out of Celaeno, if it's the last thing I do!"

Despite her declaration of war, her manner of speaking was far from that of

an oppressor addressing someone vulnerable; she sounded more like a small-time villain in a fantasy novel trying to make a quick escape.

The fireballs surrounding Cornelia clustered into one big, swirling mass and rose into a pillar of fire. A moment later, the whoosh of fire went silent, and the magical pillar disappeared along with Cornelia. Marialite pursed her lips.

She forgot her necklace...



THE residence of Lord Elestial—possibly the most famous man in Celaeno—towered over the western side of the capital. Unlike the murky, black palace walls that sometimes drew in complaints from citizens about being “too hard to see,” the walls of the Elestial estate were all painted the same brilliant red.

In fact, not only were the walls red, but so were the pillars, rooftops, and main gates. A few brave citizens secretly complained that the vermillion estate “hurt their eyes,” or “should be illegal,” but most were so afraid that the family in question might hear their jibes that they didn’t dare say a thing. No one had been brave enough to say anything to their faces, either.

The front door was unnecessarily lavish; it was inlaid with all sorts of red gemstones such as ruby and garnet, and servants stood in waiting outside it. Whenever the lord’s *sweet, adorable* daughter arrived home, every servant in the estate came out to greet her. That was one of the rules they were instructed to follow. If anyone broke a single rule, that person was immediately expelled from the estate and ordered to return all the wages they had ever earned in return for the offense they caused.

Celaeno was once the kingdom of a tyrant of an emperor, and the rules of Lord Elestial’s estate were comparable to the sort of treatment the tyrant emperor subjected his servants to. However, the salary was unbeatable. Thanks to that, a considerable number of people had begged to work at the estate, proclaiming they were prepared to lose everything.

“There’s the carriage. Our lady has returned,” one of the maids announced, her tone stiff and formal. All the other servants’ faces went rigid. Welcoming Cornelia home was tough, meticulous work. If anyone displeased Cornelia in any way at all—intentional or not—their salary would be cut by fifty percent.

The servants waited as the carriage drew through the main gates and up to the front door, their faces as dour as criminals lining up to face the guillotine. The carriage door opened, and Cornelia's main butler climbed down before offering a hand to the fiery woman herself. The servants bowed their heads solemnly.

"*Aghhhh...!* You'd never believe how *angry* I am!" Cornelia growled, her cat ears pricking up as she stomped her feet in frustration. With her anger, the temperature rose by a few degrees. Her emotions were spiraling out of control, converting into magic as a hot, humid wind pulsed around her.

The number one person no one ever wanted to upset was already furious the moment she arrived on the premises. The servants were taken aback by her unexpected display of rage, but they managed to keep their composure so as to not let it show. If they did anything to add fuel to the fire at this stage, a pay cut would be the least of their worries.

"W-Welcome back, my lady," the head maid piped up, putting her life on the line. She bowed her head first, then the rest of the servants followed suit.

"...Thank you."

The maid's mouth hung open.

"M-My lady, I didn't catch what you said. Could you please say it again?"

"I *said*, thank you! What of it? Is there a problem with that?" Cornelia barked, pinning the maid to the spot with a stabbing glare.

"Of course not, Lady Cornelia!" she replied swiftly, shaking her head vehemently.

However, she wasn't the only one at a loss; Cornelia's trusty butler was wide-eyed and utterly speechless. Usually, when their lady was upset, she would laugh scornfully at all the servants desperately bowing their heads so as to avoid conflict, and silently saunter her way inside the estate. Usually, she would grimace and start smacking people's faces with fire-clad slaps at even the slightest offense.

But, today, she said "thank you." She said it today, of all days—when she was supposed to go and pick a fight with the prince's new fiancée. However, for

whatever reason, she'd come home with slightly better manners.



“**DID** you manage to meet with the Jade Saint? How did it go?” a butler asked in the calmest tone of voice he could muster.

Since he'd been waiting for the carriage to return the entire time, he knew nothing about what had happened during her visit. Although he wanted to avoid rubbing her the wrong way when she was already in the worst possible mood, he had an obligation to report back to Lord Elestial later. If possible, he wanted to be aware of all the details as soon as he could.

“It was absurd. I've never met such a slow, empty-headed woman before,” she scoffed.

“My, my. I never would have expected His Highness to fall for such an insignificant human,” the butler agreed.

“It's truly astounding, but that's just the way he is. Did he always have such a revolting personality, I wonder?” she murmured to herself.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing,” she said with a flick of her hand. “That aside, are the arrangements for the Duel of Maidens in place?”

“Why, of course,” the butler smiled smoothly.

When the crown prince of Celaeno got engaged, it was customary for that woman to undergo a test to ascertain whether she was fit to become empress. And the one who conducted the test was the woman in the role of Goddess of Judgment—and funnily enough, Cornelia had just been appointed as such.

In all honesty, she hadn't faced much competition in landing the job; no one really wanted to be the one to critique the woman their prince had oh-so lovingly chosen. Usually, one of the lords' wives was chosen to fill the role, but this time around, all of them were too afraid to volunteer. That was why Cornelia landed the job so easily after Lord Elestial pulled a few strings.

The decision took place behind closed doors, and Cornelia had purposefully been keeping her plan a secret. She'd dropped Sirius a small hint earlier, so he

would probably catch on to what she was talking about sooner or later.

When the Goddess of Judgment concluded that the prince's fiancée was not fit to be empress, a Duel of Maidens would take place. In other words, the prince's fiancée and the woman serving as the Goddess of Judgment had to—as one might guess—duel each other.

If the potential empress won, then her marriage to the prince could safely go ahead. However, if the Goddess of Judgment won, the engagement would be called off.

Empress Vera, the wife of Emperor Uranometria, was also challenged to a Duel of Maidens before marrying into the family. Apparently, she beat the opposing party to a pulp. Marialite, on the other hand, was a weak human, and had nothing going for her other than her saintly powers. She didn't stand a chance against Cornelia.

"Hehe..." Cornelia chuckled to herself. "Human *or* saint, she shall be fairly judged. This kingdom needs a *strong* woman to lead it."

"Precisely, my lady," the butler added with a bow of his head. "Now, let us deliver the letter detailing the duel forthwith."

"Yes, let's," she grinned. "I'll compose a threat so bone-chilling that the Flower Bed Saint will have no choice but to..." she suddenly trailed off, a blank look in her eyes as the silence continued.

"M-My lady...?" the butler prompted her gingerly.

"The truth is, I have a problem."

"What is it?"

"I honestly don't know the best way to frighten Marialite," she admitted, heaving a deep sigh as she pressed a palm against her forehead. Her cat ears drooped dejectedly atop her head. "Even when faced with death, she didn't flinch. At all. How am I supposed to inflict emotional damage on a woman like that? It feels like no matter what I write, she'll simply grin and say 'Wow, that's impressive!' in that sickly oblivious tone of hers."

"Do not fret, my lady. There's not a person alive who wouldn't cower when

faced with your menacing presence.”

“You weren’t there, fool. What do you know? Even when I—” she cut herself off, her mouth hanging open in a disturbed look of realization. She slapped a palm to her chest, desperately feeling around her bare neck. “*Aaaaagh!* Oh, hell!”

She had forgotten to take her pendant back from that abominable woman.

“Get the carriage!” she barked. “I need to go back to the palace!”

“W-Whatever’s the matter, my lady?”

“Can’t you tell by looking at me?! That *Marialite* took my pendant!” she screeched. If it were any other accessory, she wouldn’t care. She could replace those cheap old things as many times as necessary. However, *that* pendant was different. She had to get it back.

Leaving her half-drunk cup of tea behind, Cornelia fled the estate.



“I knew it,” Sirius sighed as he scanned the documents in front of him, one hand rubbing at his temples.

It was unheard of for an unmarried woman to take on the role of Goddess of Judgment—and a woman who claimed *she* would be the one to get married to the prince, no less. For all intents and purposes, the letter was a rudely worded declaration of war. Sirius could practically hear Cornelia’s wicked laugh echoing through the paper.

This was yet another one of her dirty schemes.

However, what Sirius couldn’t understand was why on earth his father agreed to host the duel without any hesitation. When a shaken-looking official sought an audience with Uranometria to inform him of Lord Elestial and Cornelia’s conspiracy, the emperor simply smiled serenely and said, “What a wonderfully compassionate woman. I think it admirable that she stepped up to take on a duty that no one else wanted.”

Sirius wondered if his father was beginning to go senile; even emperors couldn’t avoid the plight of old age, after all. The previous emperor had also lost

his marbles in his later years, a common issue being that he would ask when his meal would arrive a mere ten minutes after he'd already eaten. He would always eat whatever he was given, though, so at least no food went to waste.

At this rate, Marialite—a human woman with no experience in combat—would face off against a demon. It was like giving a mouse to a serpent.

“Shut up. I’ll kill you,” Sirius muttered, angrily reprimanding himself for comparing Marialite to a mouse, of all things. Unfortunately, the official standing in front of him had no idea what was going on inside his head, and his face turned deathly pale in response. Being on the receiving end of the crown prince’s death threat was, by all means, terrifying. “...Sorry. I didn’t mean you.”

“Th-That’s good to know...”

He’d accidentally insulted a servant because he was too absorbed in his own ocean of thoughts.

How inappropriate of me.

“I really am sorry,” he reiterated. “What is it you came to tell me?”

The official immediately reverted back to his usual, business-like character, shaking the terror from his expression.

“It’s about Lady Cornelia,” he began. Sirius’ expression immediately fell; he was utterly sick of hearing her name. “She’s here, saying that she wants to see Lady Marialite again. What should we do?”

“Tell her to come back tomorrow.”

Sirius thought he might faint on the spot if he had to see that woman’s face three times in one day. Her only intention would be to unleash another torrent of verbal abuse on Marialite, anyhow.

He drew a circle in the air with his forefinger, then drew a pattern inside it. It was a way of creating a defensive barrier. Barriers and spells which required chanting were particularly dependent on the amount of magical power feeding into them, but it also meant that the more energy they used, the more effective they were.

This time, Sirius had commanded the barrier to react to Cornelia’s magic,

meaning that it created an invisible wall that anyone apart from her could pass through. Truthfully, he would've preferred to personally find her and drive her away, but he felt like he might lose his mind if he saw Cornelia's face one more time. He'd already gone through a lot of effort to quell his anger from earlier; he'd recharged by soaking up Marialite's tranquil energy, and he didn't want to undo that now.

Not to mention, being barred in such a manner would exhaust Cornelia far more than Sirius could—both physically and mentally.



“AAAAGH! How dare he use such an impertinent spell on me?!” Cornelia bellowed.

“A-Are you quite all right, my lady? We should go back home and call again another time...”

“What?!” she barked. “If I don't return home with that pendant in my possession, there'd be no point in wearing myself out like this! I've already come this far!”

Her body felt as heavy as lead, and her skin felt as though it was buzzing with a relentless electric current of pain. What was more, a sharp pain shot through her head each time she tried to cast a spell.

Her butler trailed behind her, but he appeared to be feeling no ill effects. The barrier was targeting only her, it appeared—and it was most likely Sirius' doing. After facing off with him, Cornelia could tell his powers were either equivalent to hers or even stronger.

“What else did I expect of royalty?” she sneered to herself.

For that reason, she'd had to resort to acting like some sort of petty thief. After being told she couldn't enter the palace, Cornelia tried to bulldoze her way through the defenses just like last time, but now, they had hindsight on their side. As she tried to force her way through, a certain magical power tried to suffocate her the moment she stepped onto the palace grounds. To get through, she either had to attack the caster of the spell or break through the barrier by brute force.

Her plan had been to shatter it, but no matter how many times she tried, it was futile. Sirius' determination not to let her through was palpable in the air itself. However, Cornelia would not back down. Even if she couldn't break the spell completely, she could create a tiny hole for herself to pass through. She aimed for the back door, where security was slightly lower. Then, before the opening she created for herself closed up, she slipped inside the barrier.

However, Sirius' magic wouldn't stand for it. With Cornelia within the bounds of its reach, it punished her with constant agony. To make matters worse, she could no longer use her magic. As her butler was unaffected by the barrier, she ordered him to cast an invisibility spell over them, but it wasn't so effective as to erase their presence completely.

It seemed as though the soldiers had been deceived, but how much time did she have? Although she'd managed to infiltrate the palace, the problem was what to do next. It was possible that Marialite was with Sirius.

"...Eep!" she gasped, noticing that her body was becoming faintly visible again. "Don't you even know how to sustain a spell?!" she spat at the butler, her tone high with panic.

"M-My apologies, my lady, but that spell does drain one's energy extremely quickly..." he tried to explain, his meek voice quivering from behind. It only fueled Cornelia's frustration.

"If such a measly spell has an effect on your energy, you must be ludicrously feeble. It's a wonder you're even allowed to serve under me."

"I'm so very sorry," he said with a strained voice, hanging his head.

"And what will apologizing about it do?" she snarled. "What makes you think you can act so high and mighty? Oh, that's right—because you serve *me*. You hold a position of power because of *me*. If I hadn't employed you, you would be a typical, old, senile fool."

The butler frowned, falling silent.

"Anyway," Cornelia said, clearing her throat. "Once we get back to the estate, I will properly inform Father of your incompetence. If you do not wish to be dismissed, you will get on your knees, and..." She suddenly froze in the middle

of her cruel, anger-tinted lecture. Something was wrong.

The butler, who was behind her mere moments ago, had suddenly disappeared.

“H-Hello?” she hedged shakily. “Where have you gone?”

With him nowhere to be found, the invisibility spell upon her would also break. Right now, being alone was the worst thing she could possibly fathom.

“Is that really all it takes for you to go away and sulk? And to think you’d ignore your lady when she’s talking to you! Honestly!” she huffed. “You are most definitely dismissed. On the spot! Do you hear me? Hello? Why won’t you answer me?!”

However, no matter how many times she called out in anguish, no reply ever came. Cornelia’s body was growing more and more visible by the second—and at the worst possible time, too. She could hear some soldiers engaging in pleasant conversation, their laughs growing louder as they approached. If she didn’t do something, they’d find her. Usually, that wouldn’t bother her, but when she was powerless, it was another story altogether.

How could she ever recover from the shame of being caught by soldiers who were far weaker than her? She already felt like a fool after being abandoned by one of her most “loyal” servants. The possibility of public humiliation grew ever closer with each of the soldiers’ footsteps.

Her lips began to quiver. Never before had she experienced such frustration and fear, and before she knew it, her lips were moving on their own.

“S-Save me! Somebody—”

Somebody suddenly grabbed her arm from behind. Before she could see who it was, she was already being pulled into the shade of a conspicuously placed tree.

“Apparently, Lord Elestial’s daughter is here to pick a fight again.”

“Ugh, for real? I feel bad for Lady Marialite. She already went through so much in Pythia, only to come here to be faced with Lady Cornelia’s wrath...”

Cornelia held her breath as the two soldiers ambled along past where she

stood. They had no idea the very person they were gossiping about was right beside them. With her pulse thrumming in her neck, she remained standing stiff against the tree until she was certain their footsteps were no longer audible. She pursed her lips nervously.

“Lady Cornelia! I’m so happy to see you again,” an airy tone greeted her.

The person who saved her from her predicament was none other than Marialite herself.

“Thanks. Because of your help, she managed to hide,” Marialite said as she touched the trunk of the tree. The moment she did so, a sudden light flashed around it, and the tree turned back into a small seed. Apparently, she’d grown it using her powers.

Cornelia frowned. With a mixture of irritation, relief, and surprise on her mind, she wasn’t sure how to feel.

“J-Just what are you trying to do?” she hissed.

Marialite’s pale blue irises shone with excitement, not a shred of malice dwelling within them. Although she’d never once left the country, Cornelia had heard that the world outside of Celaeno was home to a blue sky. She imagined the color of Marialite’s eyes was much like the sky of the outside world.

“You seemed a little scared that those soldiers would see you, so I thought I’d give you somewhere to hide. That’s all, really...”

“*Scared?* What a joke. Of course I wasn’t scared,” Cornelia claimed, crossing her arms.

“But your cat ears were drooping,” Marialite countered with a friendly smile.



“N-No, they are *not!*” Cornelia insisted in a high-pitched tone, covering her ears with both hands. Her cheeks were flushed a deep red, lamenting the fact that this *utterly despicable woman* had immediately pointed out her biggest insecurity.

She had no idea why Marialite was walking around the palace without a bodyguard to accompany her, but Cornelia was certain that if she called out for one, those soldiers would come rushing to her aid.

At that moment, Marialite had absolute power over Cornelia. She could probably even kill her if she wanted to. On the one hand, Cornelia didn’t want to do anything that might encourage Marialite to attack her while she was vulnerable, but equally, she didn’t want to toady up to her, either. In the end, she decided to shoot a piercing glare at her.

“Oh, right!” Marialite exclaimed, clapping her hands together in realization. “I wanted to return this to you,” she said, holding out her palm. In the middle of it sat Cornelia’s pendant, its ashen-colored jewel shining unabashedly.

“That’s mine!” she gasped, instinctively reaching to snatch it from her hand. However, she froze midway before slowly retracting her hand.

Marialite tilted her head in confusion. Cornelia wrinkled her nose; why was she acting like she hadn’t orchestrated this blatant theft in the first place?

“...And what are you asking for in return?” Cornelia queried, her tone laced with suspicion.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play the fool,” she scoffed. “You were trying to indebt yourself to me so that I would authorize your marriage to His Highness. Or is there something else you want from me?”

“Something I want from you...?” Marialite echoed, putting a finger to her chin in thought. “A variety of seeds might be nice. I’ve just started designing a garden here at the palace, so that would be a huge help.”

Why in the demon realm doesn’t she simply ask the prince for such a thing?

Surely, he would provide her with anything she asked for. And, besides,

gardening was an activity that only *poor* people partook in so that they could feed their families.

Does she have no self-awareness of her position as the future empress?

"Growing plants is a very popular hobby in the human world, you see," Marialite grinned. "That's how I used to spend my time back home."

"Hmm... I never knew that," Cornelia nodded without thinking. Marialite had read her mind so easily that she let her guard down for a moment. She shook herself; she was forgetting the danger she was currently in. Never had she let someone else take the initiative in a conversation before, and the situation was making her rather uncomfortable.

She convinced herself that it was only happening because of the constant electric current of pain she was barely holding her own against. This would never *usually* happen. All she needed to do was reassert herself.

"Well, you'll soon be returning to your home country, so you needn't bother," Cornelia said with a harrumph. "You can simply grow plants when you get back, no? When I face you in the duel, the sheer violence I'll inflict on you will be enough to send you running home. I'll make sure of it."

"We're going to have a duel?" Marialite asked, her eyebrows high on her forehead.

"Yes. Since I don't approve of the marriage between you and His Highness, that means we must duel each other to determine your true strength. Of course, if you win, I'll allow the wedding to go ahead, but... Well. Both you and I know that won't happen," she grinned wickedly.

"Okay, then! I'll start working out right away," Marialite smiled, her eyes twinkling as she flexed her biceps triumphantly.

"What?" Cornelia scowled. She thought Marialite would be cowering with fear at the mere prospect of it. Instead, she was far from scared; she actually seemed to believe she could *win*. Had she cried and begged for forgiveness, Cornelia was even willing to let her leave Celaeno unharmed. But now...she was furious.

"Are you insane?! You've seen my magic! There's not a chance in hell you'd

be able to withstand it!” she exclaimed, her voice turning shrill in response to the palpable fighting spirit flowing from Marialite.

“Well, I’ll never know unless I try,” Marialite shrugged. “That’s what I learned from one of my favorite books.”

“That’s *fiction*! This is reality, fool! To think you couldn’t tell the difference at your age...” she sighed. “Do you truly understand what’s at stake here? I intend to *wound* you. Badly! Everyone else might fawn over you and pamper you just because you’re a saint, but I’ll send you home crying in agony!”

“I’ll admit I want to avoid getting hurt,” she smiled sheepishly. “But still, Lord Sirius said he’ll make me happy living here. I think that’s something worth fighting for.”

Unlike Cornelia’s hurried, flustered speech, Marialite’s tone was quiet and full of gravity. She was like a huge, unmovable tree amid a hurricane.

“I want to make a happy life alongside someone who truly loves me. So, if I have to battle you in order to do so, I’ll gladly go through with it.”

“...You’re the second person I’ve met who wasn’t at all scared of standing up to me,” Cornelia observed with a murmur.

“Who was the first one?” Marialite replied curiously.

“Lord Sirius,” she sighed. “This...really is ridiculous.”

At the end of the day, Cornelia would most definitely win in a duel between the two. Nevertheless, on an emotional level, she could never win. Cornelia was certain her words and actions would never, ever have an effect on this woman.

Perhaps Cornelia would defeat her with very little effort, marry the prince, and become empress. However, even if she reached every goal she had set for herself, she would live with the frustration this woman had inflicted upon her until the day she died. When it came to matters of the heart, she would lose to a puny, powerless human with a far shorter lifespan than her own.

No—she had already lost long ago.

“I will be on my way now, so give me the pendant,” Cornelia snapped.

“Of course. Here,” she replied.

It was entirely within Marialite's power to bargain with her—to demand that she called off the duel in return for her precious pendant. And yet, she simply smiled, readily handing over her one means of manipulation.

Cornelia cast her eyes down, clutching onto the pendant, safely back in her own grasp.

"This once belonged to my mother," she murmured.

"Oh... It's a good thing it wasn't damaged in any way, then," Marialite said gently.

Cornelia nodded in reply, and a cluster of fireballs suddenly appeared all around her. Apparently, the magical barrier had either worn off or been taken down, because she was able to use magic once more. An airy, light feeling bloomed as the tension left her body.

My butler... Oh, forget him! She had a strange feeling she would never see him again, anyway.

"Listen, you. I'd like to ask a question," she stated with a shrill tone.

"Yes?" Marialite replied, only too happy to help.

"Do you have any demon friends?"

"Um...not really. Not yet, anyway. I often talk to the maids and soldiers at the palace, but I'm not sure that counts," she shrugged.

"Is that so? You poor thing."

In the next moment, a pillar of fire encased Cornelia, and she disappeared, leaving nothing but those few, blunt words in her wake. Marialite stared in wonder for a moment before pulling her fists close to her body, gearing herself up for her next mission.

"I need to start going for a run every day!" she said, devising her new workout plan enthusiastically.

As she made punches at thin air, a single black bird watched from a rooftop outside. It then hopped down from the ledge and flew into an office window.

Sirius held out his hand to welcome it. It obliged, swooping down to perch on

his wrist and fold its wings away. He slowly reached out with a fingertip, stroking its beak gently. The bird seemed to enjoy it, because it happily nuzzled its head into the creases on his hand.

“Lady Marialite...” Sirius whispered.

He’d heard what happened with Cornelia. Naturally, he’d anticipated her attempts to break through the barrier, thus he planted those guards in order to catch her in a weakened state, but...never had he imagined that Marialite might save her before they could do so.

What was even more unexpected was the way feisty Cornelia completely lost her will to fight. If Raven ever saw her act like that, he’d probably pass out from shock.

And, of course, he was overjoyed to hear that Marialite was willing to fight; she truly did believe him when he said he would make her happy. That was a big step.

However, at that moment, *he* was the one who was extremely happy. He wasn’t completely sure if that would be of any use in bringing Marialite happiness, but for now, he couldn’t deny the lovestruck smile on his face.



THE next few days were a brief period of respite from Cornelia and her antics. However, on the fifth day after her last visit, a letter from Lord Elestial detailing the particulars of the duel arrived at the palace.

It had shaken the residents of the palace to their very core.

“Ugh... I get the feeling that this was the worst possible outcome,” Raven commented awkwardly after he finished reading the entire letter, his face drooping dejectedly. Sirius had already inspected its contents before him, and his face was such a terrible sight that Raven didn’t even want to chance looking at him again.

It was evident that Cornelia’s sole intention was to make an enemy of Sirius. Within the lengthy, self-assured letter, there were two important developments that bothered him. Firstly—although it was to be expected—Cornelia still refused to authorize the marriage between Prince Sirius and Saint Marialite.

But, now, she wished to make a servant of Marialite once their engagement was over.

“What are you gonna do, Lord Sirius?” Raven asked, nibbling at his lower lip.

“I will destroy her.”

Secondly, rather than Marialite, Cornelia had officially nominated Sirius as her opponent.



EVERYONE had been waiting for Cornelia to declare a Duel of Maidens. The idea that she might employ Marialite as her servant if she won wasn't beyond the realm of possibility, either. It was just like Cornelia to subject a woman to slavery until the day she died, just to rub her victory in her face.

However, no one could have foreseen her choosing *Sirius* as her opponent instead. Nevertheless, Sirius had immediately accepted her challenge.

“How did this come to pass?” the emperor lamented, shaking his head.

“That's what I wanna know,” Raven agreed, a frown on his face.

Besides, it was Uranometria's fault for never trying to oppose Cornelia's appointment as a Goddess of Judgment in the first place. But when Raven faced the emperor with resentment in his gaze, all he got in return was a cheerful smile.

“I was under the impression that Marialite may be able to do something for the troubled young lady, considering that she is such a gifted saint,” Uranometria explained. “Lady Cornelia has always forced her way through life by pushing others to submit to her and proceeding to use them however she wishes. As Marialite does not fear such threats, I'm confident that she is somewhat of a natural enemy to Cornelia.”

“That's true, but...well...”

Since Cornelia was the type of person who thrived off of getting a rise out of others, she did not deal well with people who weren't affected by or afraid of her verbal abuse. So much so, that she called off the duel between her and Marialite.

But now, for some reason, she's just targeting Sirius instead.

"Do not fret, my boy. Sirius said he would find a quick solution, after all," Uranometria nodded.

"He said he'd *destroy* her," Raven corrected. "His reputation would suffer if he, as the crown prince, seriously injured a noblewoman."

"Rest assured, I have also given thought to that matter. I have decided to implement a certain rule instead of letting this duel with my son go ahead," he grinned as though he were eagerly anticipating whatever idea he had brewing.

Don't tell me he was aiming for this since the beginning...

Raven quickly shook his head, dispelling his suspicion as best as he could. No matter how pleased Uranometria looked, that *had* to be overthinking things.

"Okay, so what is this, uh...rule?"

"You'll simply have to wait and see," he grinned. "I am doing my best to ensure both parties will go unscathed as a result."

"I sure hope it turns out like that..." Raven sighed.

Sirius was utterly terrified by the prospect of Marialite being taken away from them. All Raven could do was hope that this new rule would be enough to quell the murderous anger emanating from the prince ever since he read that letter.



THE day of the duel finally arrived.

It was early morning, and Marialite was out on her daily run. Sweat dripped down her temples as she jogged along, one of Raven's crows following not far behind. However, they both suddenly came to a stop when Marialite stood still to take in the scenery around her.

"There's a strange feeling in the air today, don't you think?" she hummed.

That morning, the maids had brought her breakfast, and they'd exchanged trifling small talk and jokes just as usual. Even so, she got the sense that under the surface, they were extremely restless.

Not to mention, Sirius always came to greet her every morning, but today, he

never did. She hadn't even seen him around the palace. Usually, he carefully planned his timing so as to not disturb her morning routine, but he'd never been completely absent before.

"I wonder what's happened?" she mused to herself.

She'd still heard nothing about the duel that Cornelia challenged her to. When she asked, Sirius had claimed that she wouldn't be needed for the duel anymore, but she kept her training up just in case the formal letter showed up. Thanks to that, she was a lot lighter on her toes than she used to be, and she barely ever got out of breath anymore.

Maybe the letter already came. Sirius might've already gone to Cornelia's estate to try and change her mind.

If her theory was correct, she had to stop him somehow. In Marialite's mind, this duel was something that she, and she alone, had to overcome. It felt like she had been handed an opportunity to prove her worth.

However, she was still forbidden from leaving the palace by herself.

What should I do?

Despite her worries, once she finished her run, she headed to the land where the old storehouse used to be with a watering can in hand. The topazios knights welcomed her by waving their leafy hands.

When she came to water the original plant yesterday, she noticed that another flower had sprouted alongside it. It looked almost exactly the same as the first one, apart from this time, its petals were blue. The new one also took on the appearance of a knight, but carried a spear rather than a sword. More flowers meant that she would have to go back to draw water more often, but in all honesty, she was glad for the exercise.

Apparently, it took a month for topazios plants to properly embed their roots in the soil. After that, she would be able to nurture all kinds of different plants. Until then, she had to give the two she already had a lot of love and attention. In a way, she felt a motherly responsibility for them.

Dreaming about her future plans for the garden, her train of thought was suddenly interrupted when the tips of her toes came up against something

hard.

“Hm? What’s this?”

There was something buried between the two flowers. When she bent down and scooped the earth away with her hands, an emerald-green object came into view. It seemed rather large and looked like it would take a lot of effort to dig up.

Perhaps it’s part of the topazios?

She stared unblinkingly at the bizarre mass amongst the dirt, when someone suddenly called out to her.

“Lady Marialite. Are you out here?!” a cold, monotonous voice shouted.

She turned around to see a woman with brown hair standing there. Her dress was covered in mud, and her hair was so long that it was difficult to see her face.

“I think it best that you make your way to see Prince Sirius. Immediately.”



ON the east side of the imperial capital of Celaeno, there stood a building shaped like a dome. Usually, it was used as a venue for whatever large events the city had going on, but today, it was being used as a battlefield for the duel. It was a colossal structure, and it had enough space to accommodate a sizable number of spectators.

And today, inside that gigantic structure sat a middle-aged man with fierce, red hair and a thick mustache. It was Lord Rockwell Elestial, the individual credited with the advancement of Celaeno as a developed nation, as well as being well-known for his underhanded ways of granting any and every one of his daughter’s requests.

However, at that moment, his face was deathly pale, and he was clutching a large handkerchief in both hands.

“Cornelia, my sweet... How...? How did it turn out this way...?” he sobbed.

Why would my daughter duel the crown prince?

When he first heard her idea to duel Sirius, he'd laughed. He genuinely thought she was joking, so he laughed. *Laughed*. Now, he couldn't laugh even if he tried.

Naturally, he thought it was a terrible idea for her to duel Prince Sirius. He'd made arrangements for Cornelia's withdrawal, but Sirius' response to her challenge came even quicker. He'd gladly accepted her challenge. When Lord Elestial had read his letter, overwhelming dizziness assaulted him.

He wasn't the only one who was uncomfortable with this whole situation, either. Some spectators had wide-eyed, frightened looks in their eyes, while others' clouded over with anxiety. Among them was Raven, clutching a small vial of medicine for his stomach. He'd been sent by Uranometria to watch the duel in his place, seeing as he couldn't leave the palace for any amount of time, but Raven wasn't pleased about it.

"Yeesh...we can never tell Marialite this happened. She'd be distraught," he muttered.

In the middle of the battlefield stood two figures. One was a beautiful young man with doll-like features and silvery hair, while the other was a gorgeous woman with vermillion hair and cat ears.

The murderous glare they shared was almost palpable. Crowds of spectators were leaving the building, unable to bear the taste of bloodlust they exuded. However, in between their furious glares, a thin, white bubble of light enveloped each of them.

"I thought I said these wouldn't be necessary," Sirius frowned, slapping the inside of the bubble with the palm of his hand in displeasure. They were exceptionally strong magical barriers cast by Uranometria himself.

"I couldn't agree more," Cornelia quipped. "To think all it would take to win is to destroy your barrier first... I see that His Majesty can be quite the coward. I would have killed you," she spat, glaring at the barrier that encased her.

"There's one thing I must ask you," Sirius called out. "What do you want Lady Marialite for?"

"It's not that I *want* her," she cackled. "I simply wish to make her *my* toy to

play with. And, besides, I can't deny that I've always wished I could face off against the Celestial Dragon for real."

"I won't let you have her."

"But if you win, I shall gracefully authorize your marriage to Lady Marialite. Even so, I won't go easy on you simply because you're royalty."

"I won't hold back an inch, either," he vowed. "I took an oath, after all; I *will* make her happy."

"You're quite the persistent one, aren't you?" Cornelia said with a look of disdain. "If you're not careful, Lady Marialite will get sick of you before long."

"Shut up, you wicked woman," he growled. "Lady Marialite will end up hating the likes of you long before that ever happens."

The spectators were bewildered by what was unfolding before them. For one thing, if Cornelia wanted to marry Sirius, she was making an enemy of the worst possible person—the man himself. And he was really concentrating on the fact that she'd specifically chosen not to fight Marialite.

If her goals hadn't changed, then why would she alter her plans to destroy Marialite?

"Before we begin, Cornelia, I'll give you one piece of advice: try not to die."

The moment he finished his sentence, a terrifying maelstrom of electricity whirled around Cornelia. It coiled around her like a snake, threatening to close in on her as a thunderous roar rumbled through the air.

The same thought ran through the entire audience's minds at that moment: *we'll be trapped under rubble by the end of this.*

"C-Cornelia!" Lord Elestial cried out, jumping to his feet. He leaned out of the skybox and tried to drop down onto the field, but Raven stopped him.

"You'll get zapped alive if you go down there right now," he warned him coldly, putting a casual hand on his shoulder. In all honesty, if Lord Elestial got caught up in the fighting and got hurt as a result, he couldn't care less.

"Silence! What sort of a parent would I be if I simply sat by and watched my daughter be killed?!" he barked in anger. Raven shrugged indifferently.

And what sort of a parent constantly caters to their daughter's cruel, self-indulgent attitude without ever teaching her how to properly behave?

"I'm not sure you deserve to call yourself a parent, to be honest," Raven scoffed.

"Excuse me?! How dare you criticize me! I am more than you will ever be! After this, I'll have His Majesty throw you in prison!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure ya will," he yawned. "Besides, your daughter ain't so delicate as to let something like this defeat her."

As though to prove his point, the tornado of electric energy surrounding Cornelia was dispersed by a sudden flood of water bursting out from the inside. Emerging from the chaos, Cornelia wore a fearless grin on her face as she summoned several wolves made of water from the palms of her hands.

Aiming for the throat, the wolves leaped at Sirius, but they were wrenched back down to the ground again when a mass of fresh, green ivy sprouted forth and coiled around their legs. They writhed and wriggled, but before they could escape, the ivy soaked up their water-formed bodies until eventually, they vanished.

Sirius' eyes shifted, the color of his irises turning blood red as he focused on the fight.

Yet, despite the huge amounts of energy, both of their barriers remained unscathed.

"Hehe. How very impressive, Your Highness," Cornelia chuckled. "Perhaps I really will have to start getting serious."

"Surely you should be concentrating on the fight rather than using up precious time and energy to antagonize me," Sirius said with a quirk of his eyebrow. "You might get so caught up in talking that you won't notice me breaking your barrier."

When it came to prattling off villain-like phrases, they were both as bad as each other. Sirius, in particular, was insinuating a lot more than was immediately apparent—but Raven could tell that meant he was planning to attack her and frame her death as a terrible accident.

That'd be bad. Really bad.

"Lord Sirius!" he called out in a panic. "This duel's not gonna end with anything worse than a couple of scratches! Remember?!"

"Don't meddle in your master's affairs, Raven," he growled.

"Don't just play the 'master' role when it suits you!" he groaned. "Ugh. If you harm Lady Cornelia even a little, I'll tell Marialite *exactly* what you did. You got that?!"

Sirius' expression remained fierce, but Raven did notice his shoulders flinch a little.

It's working.

"If she finds out you hurt someone in this silly little fight, she'll be furious! No matter who your opponent is!"

Sirius fell silent for a moment, pursing his lips in deliberation.

"...Listen, Cornelia," he began. "If I break your barrier, make a run for it as quickly as you can. Otherwise, I'll make certain you have no future ahead of you."

"My—are you genuinely scared of that fiancée of yours? That's priceless. All she does is stand there with that idiotic smile plastered on her face," she spluttered in reply.

"Lady Cornelia," Raven said, turning his attention to her. "You're no exception. If Marialite hears that you hurt His Highness, she definitely won't let it slide. Remember that, yeah?"

"You needn't worry," she smirked. "Once I penetrate Prince Sirius' barrier, I shall gracefully end the duel there. I can't be leaving any scars on a prince's face now, can I?"

Thanks to Marialite—who wasn't even there—it appeared as though they could avoid any bloodshed. As soon as Raven sat back in relief, Sirius conjured a huge black cloud above his head, the wispy outlines of it sparking with brief flashes of violet lightning when an electrically charged dragon swooped down from it.

Meanwhile, a similar shadow appeared at Cornelia's feet, and a wolf several times bigger than the first one she summoned came jumping out of the darkness. Its body was covered in crystals of thick ice, and its icicle-like fangs glinted where they poked out of its snout.

The dome echoed with the roars and growls of the two beasts, and shards of ice went flying into the audience each time they clashed. The wolf latched onto the dragon's neck with its huge, powerful jaws, but the dragon easily detached it with a swipe of its gigantic wings.

"Urgh..." Cornelia moaned quietly, staggering a little. A devilish smile remained unchanged on her face, but even so, her moment of weakness didn't pass Sirius by.

"You're far too easily incited," he smirked. "You unleashed too much energy. If you keep on summoning beasts after such excessive use of magic, you may burn out completely."

"A good opponent doesn't worry for their enemy's health," she huffed. "Besides, you're in the same position as me, are you not?"

"Am I?" he grinned mischievously. "How about you try me and find out? I'll be happy to indulge you."

At that moment, something in Cornelia's gaze changed. In response, Sirius abandoned his taunts and instead continued speaking to her with a composed, gentle tone.

"But even if we keep on going, you have no chance of winning. It's time to give up now, Cornelia."

"I shan't. I *despise* losing. Especially when I have something in my sights," she insisted.

"What is it your sights are set on, then? The throne? Another toy to play with? Or—"

"You talk too much, Your Highness!" she cackled. At some point, a wolf had snuck behind Sirius, and was now charging at him at full speed to break through his barrier.

However, in the split second before its icy fangs reached him, an icicle came flying down from the night sky and pierced straight through the wolf's armor of ice. Sirius didn't even have to turn around to look at it; their fiery gazes remained locked as the wolf whimpered before disappearing into thin air.

"Unlike you, I have the capacity to deal with a pathetic beast while speaking. It's not difficult," he said with a smug smile.

"No... I won't give up yet..." she snarled.

She tried to shoot fireballs from the palms of her hands, but all that came out was a wispy, thin stream of smoke. Her breathing grew ragged, frustration and exhaustion clawing at her; her magic energy had run so low, she couldn't even produce fire anymore.

Eventually, she collapsed to her knees, her body weakened. Sirius let his eyes close calmly.

"If you want to attract Lady Marialite's attention, you should come up with a better plan than this. All you need to do is say you want to be her friend, and she'll—"

"Shut up! I don't want *anything* of the sort!" she cried, her high-pitched voice echoing through the stadium. As soon as she did, the dragon perching on Sirius' back emitted a huge strike of lightning, and the barrier surrounding Cornelia shattered.

The spectators leaped to their feet and cheered.

"Yessss! He did it!" Raven beamed.

"Oh, Cornelia... My darling daughter..." Lord Elestial sobbed.

"I think you should speak to your daughter a little more often, Lord Elestial. Properly," Raven said, leaving his words to sink in before strutting away from the stands and down to the field. He ran over to Sirius, who was just walking towards the exit.

"Aw, I knew you could do it! Not the duel, I mean—the fact you managed to beat her without turning her into a bloody mess!"

"I did consider finishing her off, though," Sirius admitted.

“Yeesh, you’re scary...”

I take back what I said. When it came to Marialite’s safety, he couldn’t really trust Sirius to hold back.

“Do you really think we should end things here? You could’ve punished her for her actions a bit more.”

Sirius turned to look back at the battlefield in consideration. Cornelia was still crumpled on the ground, hanging her head in disappointment.

“...No, I don’t think that’ll be necessary. Let’s get out of here.”

“All ri—”

An explosion deafened them, a rumbling reverberating through the air. Several pillars of fire began to climb into the air one by one all across the field.

“Lady Cornelia?! Is she still tryna fight back?!”

“No,” Sirius shook his head. “Raven, evacuate the spectators as quickly as possible.”

“What...?” he floundered, peering around the stadium to try to come to grips with the situation. That was when he saw it; a look of astonishment on Cornelia’s face, and a man standing next to her, cackling scornfully.

“You picked a fight with the prince, of all people, then suffered such a crushing defeat...” he sneered. “You’re pathetic, my lady.”

Cornelia stared up at him in shock; it was the butler who once served her.

“Wh-What are you doing here?” she croaked. Her body was heavy from exhausting her magic, and she couldn’t muster the energy to stand. All she could do was glare at him, while he shot a hair-raising grin at her in return as he snapped his fingers.

Yet another flurry of flames shot into the air right next to them.

Spectators screamed at the top of their lungs, and soldiers hurriedly attempted to usher them out of the building. Lord Elestial was among them, desperately shouting his daughter’s name and throwing torrents of water onto the battlefield. However, his magic was ineffective against the ever-growing

flames, and the soldiers ended up dragging him out of the building.

“It is no use, my lord. This is fearsome magic; it will remain on the field for several days, rooting itself into numerous spots across it. Its effects are immense, thus you will not be able to quell the flames with such reactive techniques,” the *butler* commented.

“Silence! Answer my question at once!” Cornelia hissed.

“Watch your mouth, you bitch!” he snapped.

Her mouth fell open, and she couldn’t help but cower. She’d never, *ever* been spoken to in such a foul-mouthed manner before. Of course, she realized that most demons in the country spoke ill of her behind her back, but not once had they insulted her to her face like this.

He reached out to Cornelia, where she trembled on the ground, chuckling as he did so.

“It’s true that I lived a life of luxury thanks to working in your service. Even so, everyone’s got their limits. There’s only so much nonsense I can take.”

He thrust a hand into Cornelia’s hair and *pulled*. Her face contorted in pain and the fire of hostility and anger in her eyes gradually grew weaker, replaced by a mixture of despair and fear.

The soldiers were conjuring huge, magical tidal waves in order to quell the flames, but they saw very little effect. In fact, the flames only seemed to rage even stronger, and it looked like it wouldn’t be long until the entire dome was razed to the ground. The blisteringly hot wind took their breaths away, and gasping for air sent a burning pain down their throats. It was like being trapped inside a huge oven.

If she was still inside a protective barrier, Cornelia probably could have withstood it. However, since Sirius had already smashed it with his attacks, she had been left completely vulnerable.

“Do you realize what a kerfuffle you’ve created? You must be insane to involve His Highness in such violence,” she said with a bitter laugh.

“The prince has already been forcibly removed from the building—even

though he was trying to save you. Ah, how pitiful.”

“I never *asked* him to save me,” she huffed.

“Rude to the bitter end, I see. Oh well—that’s not my concern anymore. Now that I’ve had my revenge, I can die in peace,” the butler sighed with relief. He’d put many lives at risk to fulfill his goal; if he were to be put to death for those crimes, he would rather end his life now. He laughed, filled with a twisted sense of achievement.

Dark patches entered Cornelia’s field of vision, and the man’s cruel laughter seemed to grow distant. Lulled by the promise of silence, she began to fade out of consciousness.

Perhaps this is my comeuppance for living so selfishly. When that thought crossed her mind, her fear eased somewhat.

In pursuit of a desire never to be fulfilled, she would turn to ash.

What a miserable fate... I can only hope Mother will be there to welcome me.



“**WHAT** is that?” the butler gasped, a deep suspicion in his tone.

The wall of fire remained unchanging, flames enveloping the stadium just as intensely as they’d begun. However, in the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of green.

“It *can’t* be...”

In the midst of the blaze, a huge, thick plant came stretching through the flames, creating a tunnel big enough for someone to walk through. On closer inspection, it was decorated with flowers of various colors, creating a beautifully designed display among the chaos.

“It’s not burning?!” he remarked in a panic. “But, why...?”

“Lady Cornelia?” a bright, casual tone echoed across the roar of flames. “Are you there? If you are, please say something!”

The sound of someone running grew closer and closer.

“Ugh...” Cornelia groaned, finding herself immediately on her feet despite

thinking she couldn't even move a finger. The butler tried to push her back to the ground, but the plant-tunnel slapped him away as though to protect her.

Despite being extremely unsteady on her feet, Cornelia managed to run down the path that the plant had provided for her. Strangely enough, inside the tunnel, she could no longer feel the heat of the flames. The interior was covered with swathes of red flowers, beaming as though to encourage her.

"Lady Cornelia! There you are," Marialite's voice called out as she appeared before Cornelia, running towards her with a bright smile on her face. Cornelia's cat ears drooped. Tears spilled over her eyelashes, and she found herself rooted to the spot, unable to walk another step.

"Someone I've never seen before guided me here, but it was a huge shock to see the place on fire," Marialite explained. "That was when I heard you were still trapped inside. Luckily enough, Lord Sirius only recently gave me the seeds of a fire-resistant flower. I never thought it would come in so handy!"

Cornelia didn't reply, and instead shook her head silently, sniveling.

That's not quite right. Even fire-resistant plants would burn to a crisp if they were attacked with the intensity of flames such as these. No—it was surely Marialite's holy powers that had given birth to a plant this tenacious.

Then, Marialite had rushed inside the building to save her. Cornelia had no doubt that she never even weighed up the positives and negatives of doing so.

"Now, let's get out of here," Marialite said, using a handkerchief to wipe the tears from Cornelia's cheeks.

"...All right," she sniffed with a nod.

For whatever reason, the faint floral scent that perfumed the soft fabric only made her cry even harder.



"**DAMN** it... *Damn it all!* What in tarnation is that?!" the butler panicked, ogling the tunnel as it refused to burn. He decided he would have no choice but to take Cornelia by force, but the entrance promptly closed itself up once she was safely inside. There was no way for him to go after her.

Who in the demon realm would come to save her?

There were countless individuals who would benefit in one way or another from her death. The number of those who cared enough to save her, however, was small enough to count on one hand.

“Like this, I’ll be the only one who dies!” he lamented.

He wouldn’t stand for it. He staked his *life* on his revenge; he couldn’t let it go to waste in such a tragic turn of events.

I need to break this thing open. He grimaced, pulling and scraping at the vines that blocked off the tunnel. Then, all of a sudden, a droplet plipped onto his skin from above.

It was raining. Within seconds, a torrential downpour erupted, the roar of it so loud that it drowned out the noise of the raging fire. The butler watched on in astonishment as the storm of raindrops smothered the flames until they fizzled out, reduced to no more than a pile of smoking ash.

“The fire...” he gasped. “How? Who could have...?”

On the other side of the smoke emerged the faint silhouette of a single young man. A blue, glowing magic circle had been composed at his feet, informing the butler that he had been defeated by a torrent of magical rain.

“It was a good thing I decided to come back after I shook off my soldiers,” Sirius huffed. “I never thought Lady Marialite would go this far.”

Unsheltered from the rain, he stood there just as soaked as the butler. The butler broke into a cold sweat. He saw how much magical energy he used up during the duel—and yet, he was commanding a huge spell with no effort whatsoever. Just how much power did he possess?

He might be royalty, but that’s absurd!

“With this much power, surely you could have slaughtered Cornelia in the blink of an eye...”

“Is that all you have to say?” Sirius replied, raising an eyebrow.

“N-None of this is my fault!” he contended. “If you’re going to blame someone, blame Cornelia! She made a fool of me after everything I put up with

for her!”

“So, that’s your motive? All right. Get him.”

With that single cue, a dark shadow swiftly made its way around the butler’s back. Then, it knocked him back with a roundhouse kick.

“Guh...!” he groaned in pain, the impact sending him to the ground. A splash resounded as he hit the water-logged ground, and Raven laughed.

“He was all talk in the end, huh?” he commented, amused.

“I have more to ask him. Make sure he doesn’t end his own life before then,” Sirius ordered.

“Yes, m’lord,” Raven nodded. He glanced at the huge, fire-resistant tunnel, and a wave of emotion welled up inside him. “You and Marialite make a great couple, y’know. You both go way above and beyond.”

“It’s only natural; I expect my powers have something to do with her, after all.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean?”

“Let’s leave the chit-chat for later. We need to deal with this fool first,” he said. The moment the magic circle at his feet disappeared, so did the rain. As the black clouds dispersed, a clear night sky appeared above them, the moon and stars illuminating their way.

“Still, it’s a shame Marialite didn’t get to see you show off.”

“I have no desire to perform such egocentric displays,” he retorted.

“Well, it’s partly a good thing she was inside that tunnel. If she wasn’t, her clothes would be soaked right through about now.”

“L-Lady Marialite...with her clothes soaked right through...?” Sirius’ mind came to a halt.

Raven kept his mouth shut, staring at him with an exhausted look of disdain on his face.

Chapter 4: The Cry of the Divine Beast

WHERE am I?

I'm trapped in some sort of small, enclosed space. My body aches from the way it's been forced into a cramped position. I haven't been given much to eat. I'm hungry.

But more than hungry, I'm scared. Not long ago, I could hear scattered cries of "Let me out!" and "Help me!" echoing around me. But after a few minutes, the shouts grew distant, and now all I have is unsettling silence. I have no idea whether they grew tired of speaking or if they're dead.

I had tried shouting, too—just once.

"Please, take me back to my mother!"

However, they simply laughed my plea off. As if it were a joke.

Nobody's coming to save us.

All they do is laugh. Laugh as they wait for us to go insane or die.

But I won't let either of those things happen to me. I swear.



"LADY Marialite, I believe this dress here would suit you best," Sirius said with a nod. "Of course, you look good in anything, but this one perfectly matches your elegant aura."

"Thank you, Lord Sirius," she smiled. "Are you all right, though? Your face is beet red."

"Oh, no, I'm fine. I'm simply excited to see you wear it," he said, visibly thrilled as he looked between the blue dress he'd picked out and his fiancée.

Marialite had a feeling he was far meeker and sweeter when he was smaller, but she was still happy to see him enjoying himself.

In fact, the other day, a similar thing had happened with a certain lady; she

gave Marialite a dress, enthusiastically telling her how the ruffles and soft fabric would complement her “relatively adorable face” (because, naturally, her own face was “a lot prettier”).

Incidentally, their choices of dress couldn’t have been more different; Sirius’ had a formal, graceful design, and they both seemed to appreciate different facets of Marialite.

Sirius, however, was most likely unaware of that fact. He clutched a hand to his chest, his eyes glimmering with passion. They said that ignorance was bliss, but Marialite didn’t consider that fact carefully enough to realize that her next words might be a mistake.

“It’s fantastic, thank you. Lady Cornelia gave me a dress the other day, too. It’s a really nice one.”

“*She* gave you a dress?” Sirius spat in disbelief.

“Mm-hm,” she nodded. “But when I tried to say thank you, she rushed back to her work right away...”

Sirius’ gorgeous face contorted into a very ugly expression, but at that moment, he couldn’t care less about his looks. He gritted his teeth in fury.

“She beat me to it...! What a fool I am!”

“That’s not true. I love both of them!”

“Lady Marialite...” he admired, looking at her as though she shone like the sun. However, in the next moment, he wrinkled his nose in displeasure. “If I’d known it would turn out like this, I never would’ve shown that woman mercy,” he muttered.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“Oh, no. I’m just talking to myself. Ignore me.”

Sirius was having regrets about inviting Cornelia to the palace to work as a lady-in-waiting. Shortly after the Duel of Maidens, Celaeno Palace received a letter from the Elestial household claiming that Cornelia wished to atone for her wrongdoings.

On the one hand, she was probably very shaken up by the fact that one of her

own employees tried to kill her. On the other, it was possible this was yet another one of her evil schemes. Amid various complaints and suggestions, Sirius eventually decided to take Cornelia in under the condition that she live out her punishment by waiting on Marialite hand and foot.

All in all, Cornelia had ended up serving under the very person she wished to overthrow; it must've been tremendously humiliating for her. Now, if she ever went on another rampage, she would have Sirius' unbridled wrath to deal with.

In addition, Lord Elestial had been ordered to apologize and pay a sum of money to each person that had ever suffered under his family's tyranny. At first, he refused to comply, but after being threatened with the loss of his status, he decided he had no choice but to obey Sirius' wishes. Although Lord Elestial had imagined some degree of demotion within the upper echelon, he'd never foreseen the possibility that he would have his title stripped completely. Yet, contrary to her father's horrified reaction, Cornelia simply watched on calmly.

In truth, Sirius had assigned Cornelia to be Marialite's lady-in-waiting because of how badly his beloved fiancée seemed to want to befriend her. He wanted Marialite to be happy—that was all. As usual, Raven saw right through his reasoning.

Even so, the fact remained that someone who had lived her life in luxury was now the one in a position of service. Cornelia struggled immensely with cleaning and cooking, but considering everything, she was making an extremely valiant effort. After a bit of practice, she was starting to get the hang of things.

"Whenever there's something I don't know about Celaeno, Lady Cornelia always goes out of her way to explain it to me. She's a huge help," Marialite said fondly.

"L-Lady Marialite, if there's anything you're not sure about, you can ask *me*," Sirius replied, his tone a little desperate. "I'll explain far more politely than Cornelia can—"

As though to interrupt Sirius' jealous grumbles, a crow perched on the windowsill began to squawk.

"Oh, hello there!" Marialite greeted it.

The bird gave a louder, cheerful squawk in reply. Even though she couldn't yet understand what it was saying, she could at least recognize a greeting when she heard one. She stretched out her fingertips, and it lowered its head slightly, asking to be petted. It was adorable.

"What's wrong?" Sirius asked, swiftly striding over. It cawed a few times in quick succession, and Sirius' eyes widened in shock.

"What happened?" Marialite asked, concerned.

"Do you remember that I once mentioned a magical architect named Celestine? He has finished creating his newest device, so he would like to meet with the both of us."

Marialite certainly remembered their discussion about the eccentric engineer; he was the man who'd sealed the nation of Celaeno away from prying eyes. She was about to nod in agreement, but a certain thought pulled her back.

"Do magical architects have a very high social status in Celaeno?" she asked.

Usually, normal people couldn't just invite Sirius to a social occasion without any formal proceedings (Marialite was a special case). If Celestine was sending such casual requests, he must've been looked upon very highly.

"Yes. Celestine has invented many excellent devices—not just the one that powers the mystical barrier shielding Celaeno. They have many practical uses in our daily lives," Sirius explained. "In fact, he was supposed to receive a noble title for his contributions to society, but..." he pouted, folding his arms. "He refused it on the basis that the nobility would put more on his list of things to do. Instead, he asked me to give him a workshop wherein he could do whatever he likes. He was ecstatic when we agreed."

"It sounds like he really loves his research."

"Indeed. It would be no exaggeration to say that Celaeno's continued peaceful existence is thanks to him," Sirius nodded sagely.

"I'd love to meet him. But, will you have time, Lord Sirius?" Marialite wondered. For her, it was an honor to be invited to something by such a prominent figure, but Sirius looked a little doubtful about the whole thing.

“Yes. I’ve already seen to everything urgent.”

Sirius’ feelings for Marialite were very intense. However, he was the sort of person who wouldn’t allow that to distract him from his work, and he always made sure to dedicate enough time to both.

“Let’s make our way there right now,” he nodded before turning to address the bird. “Please let Celestine know we’ll be there soon.”

The crow squawked loudly in acknowledgment as it flapped its wings. It took off, but instead of heading out the open window, it swooped straight down towards the floor. Marialite flinched, expecting there to be a nasty impact, but its black feathers passed right through the rug and disappeared from view. She blinked in confusion.

“It’s the most direct route to Celestine’s workshop,” Sirius explained.

“I never realized it was inside the palace.”

She thought she’d memorized each and every room of the palace, but it appeared this one had slipped her memory. She pouted slightly, and Sirius quickly rushed to save her mood.

“Well, technically speaking, it’s underneath the palace,” he clarified, pointing directly below him.

There was a special way of gaining entry to Celestine’s workshop. As requested by the man himself, the construction workers did not build any stairs leading from the palace. As such, anyone apart from the crows had to use one of his magical inventions to physically gain access.

“We’ll be using this to get inside,” Sirius said, holding up a white feather.

At the very tip, Marialite noticed a small, sky-blue gemstone attached to it. It was called a spellstone, a form of crystallized magic. She reached out for it and felt a soft wind blowing from the crystal. She could just about make out the feather itself swaying slightly, too. A smile stretched across her face, amazed by what she saw.

“Ooh! It’s gorgeous.”

“Not as gorgeous as you, my love,” Sirius quipped. “This is a teleportation

device. The magic running through it can fuel an instantaneous journey to the workshop.”

“Really? It looks more like a hair accessory...”

“Then what do you say we try it out?” he grinned. “Hold on tight, Lady Marialite,” he said, opening his arms wide. It was a poor excuse for a hug when a simple touch would have done just as well, but Marialite was clueless about this fact.

“Okay!” she nodded, wrapping her arms around him.



DEEP beneath the palace lay a strange, cluttered room.

Pieces of various dried meat hung from the ceiling, and the shelves were lined with dubious-looking herbs and plants. A silver cauldron filled with pink liquid bubbled away in the middle of the room, while a glowing, red, corked flask stood on the table next to it.

This was Celestine’s workshop, a place that no one would dare to enter unless they had to. The man himself was sitting on a rickety chair, leaning back with his nose pointing at the ceiling. A hot towel covered his eyes, and steam leisurely wafted into the air. He let out a groan of pleasure.

“Mmm... Ahhh... There’s nothing quite like a steaming hot towel after completing a project.”

“You sound like an old man, Celestine,” a young girl with black, bob-cut hair snickered.

“Because I *am* an old man!” he scoffed. “Just let me have this,” he said, shooing her away with a flick of his hands. She gave a deep sigh in response.

On her head sat the crow that had delivered Sirius and Marialite Celestine’s message a few minutes ago, cawing in disbelief.

“Prince Sirius and the Jade Saint will be here soon!” the girl reiterated. “You can’t give them a proper welcome like that!”

“Ya think I care? I’m always my authentic self, no matter who’s visiting.”

“Ugh, whatever. You’re not my problem. *I’m* going to change clothes, okay?” she huffed.

“Mm-hm, gotcha.”

“You’re useless,” she muttered as she turned to leave the room with a roll of her eyes.

At that moment, a pillar of light appeared right in front of her—the sign of an incoming teleport. The color of the light depended on which color of feather the teleporter possessed. This time, it shone white, which meant...

The girl gasped and promptly swiveled around to shake the “old man” awake. She grabbed him by the shoulders and said, “Wake up, Celestine! His Highness is already here!”

“Oof, that didn’t take long...” he mumbled. “All right. I’ve heard that Sirius has grown considerably, but I’d like to see it for myself.”

A silver-haired young man emerged from the light with the whites of his eyes showing.

Celestine and the girl’s faces immediately fell.

“So, this is his workshop? It certainly looks like one...” the woman that appeared with him mused. “Wait, Lord Sirius? Are you okay?”

The woman had his neck in a vice-like grip. It looked like she was completely cutting off his blood supply.

“*Nooooooooo!* Your Highnesssss!” the young girl cried out, her scream echoing through the whole workshop.



AT first, Marialite was holding Sirius’ waist, but he had the sudden urge to hold her closer. He asked her to wrap her arms around his neck instead, to which she agreed. After the moment their faces came together, Sirius had no recollection of what happened next. His senses were overtaken by a sweet, mellow scent.

Now that he’d been saved, he was at least alive to tell the tale. He’d certainly learned his lesson; his own self-indulgence nearly killed him.

“I’m so sorry, Lord Sirius,” Marialite apologized, her tone heavy with guilt. “You told me to hold on tight, but I suppose that was *too* tight...”

“No, no. If I had died being crushed by your love... I can’t think of a better way to go,” he laughed, trying to dispel her worries.

The old man in white robes smirked. He had vibrant blue hair and purple eyes with a hint of mystery to them. Wearing that easygoing smile, he bowed his head to Marialite.

“My name is Celestine Giola. The royals kindly supply me with research funding, hence why I’m working as their one and only magical architect.”

“I’m Marialite Harty,” she replied, bowing her head in return. “I’m a Jade Saint, and I came to this country after becoming engaged to Prince Sirius.”

“The Jade Saint, you say? Hmmm...” he hummed, peering into her eyes for a few moments before letting out a bellow of laughter. “Very good! I’m pleased to see that you have the tenacity of a future empress. I suppose you agree, Your Highness?”

“I thought you might say that. I got the same impression, after all,” Sirius smiled, giving a sigh of relief. Marialite did the same, flattered to have been complimented by the eccentric man. Then, she noticed the black-haired girl staring at her with intense, curious eyes.

She was wearing the same sort of white robes as Celestine; perhaps she was an assistant of his. Under that assumption, Marialite bowed her head to her, but was met with a look of shocked embarrassment.

“I-I-I’m so sorry! I should be the one bowing to you first!” she panicked.

“Exactly. Where are your manners?” Celestine scolded her.

“Oh no... I’m sorry, my lady! I didn’t mean to offend you!” she exclaimed, genuinely upset. Sirius’s brow furrowed in concern.

“You’re far too harsh on your assistant, Celestine,” he said, unimpressed.

“What a kind soul you are, Your Highness,” he grinned before turning to the girl. “Go on. Introduce yourself to ’em.”

“I was getting to that!” she huffed, glaring at Celestine. A hint of anxiety

entered her gaze when she looked back at Marialite. "My name's Liffey. I'm Celestine's carer."

"His carer...?" Marialite echoed, glancing over at the magical engineer.

His manner of speech was certainly a little old-fashioned, but in human terms, Marialite would have guessed he was in his twenties judging by his looks. From the outside, it didn't look like he needed a caregiver at all.

"Don't be fooled by his appearance, Lady Marialite," Sirius said with a point of his finger. "He's old. Even older than my father and Lord Elestial."

"You've spent quite some time living in this world, haven't you, sir?" Marialite said.

"One could say so. I've had my fair share of close encounters with death during all 'em needless wars, though," he shrugged. "I've been fortunate to have lived this long, ya know? Thanks to that, I now spend my days working on many varieties of magical devices."

He took up a handful of multicolored candles and softly blew across the wicks. Simultaneously, a spectrum of colorful flames burst into existence. Blue, green, red...all the flames matched the color of each stick of candle wax.

"Wooooow!" Marialite admired in delight, clapping enthusiastically. "Are those magical devices, too?"

"Indeed," Celestine nodded sagely. "I created them by crushing up a fire spellstone into powder and mixing it into the wax. A simple breath of air is all that's required for ignition. They're perfect for decorating the home."

"Hang on just a second!" Liffey objected. "*I'm* the one who came up with the colorful candles! You can't take all the credit!"

"You think *you* deserve the credit?" Celestine scoffed. "You made a suggestion. That was all. Could you have brought that idea to fruition? No, of course not. I'm the one who made it," he said casually before putting the candles down and picking up a glass.

It was a beautiful azure color, and the bottom half was decorated with what looked like blue sand. He lightly shook it in his grip, and the sound of a splash

suddenly rang out as the glass filled itself with clear water from the bottom upward.

“And this glass is powered by a water spellstone. It’s incredibly useful; one can drink delicious, cold water wherever they like, whenever they like!”

Marialite had gone completely silent, absolutely transfixed by the glass.

“Hm? What’s the matter, Marialite?” Celestine asked curiously.

“Oh, it’s just...” she trailed off. “I feel like...I’ve seen this somewhere before.” She frowned as she looked at it, trying to forcibly gain access to the depths of her own memory. She’d definitely seen a glass with a similar design before...

“Oh, I remember!” she suddenly exclaimed. “That was one of the magical items being developed in the human world!”

“That doesn’t surprise me a smidgen. They’re trying *ta* mass produce the prototype devices they stole from me.”

“They’re doing *what?!?*” Liffey yelped, astounded by his bombshell of a statement. “Why on earth haven’t I heard about this?!”

“Hmm. Because I didn’t tell ya?” he hummed pensively, casually taking a big gulp of water from the glass.

Marialite’s mouth suddenly felt very dry, thinking about how refreshing the water looked, but Sirius was more concerned about what he’d said.

“Celestine,” he said seriously. “Could you please tell us about what happened in more detail?”

“It’s not a very long story, m’lad,” he shrugged. “When I visited the human world along with some of my prototypes, some fellows identified me as a demon. They—quite rudely—stole my belongings.”

“Why would you take your prototypes with you?” Sirius asked in exasperation. He simply couldn’t understand it.

“For a vital experiment, I’ll have you know. However...it appears that simply stealing the items was not enough for ’em. Did they create copies and claim the invention as their own?”

Marialite nodded in response. The country that announced they had found a way to create magical implements had not even once mentioned the fact that it was based on Celaenic technology. Humanity celebrated it as a huge development for them, but no one even questioned whether their invention had suspicious roots.

In fact, their success was influential enough that it had eventually become Prince Rufus' excuse to call off his engagement to Marialite.

"I'm so very sorry, Sir Celestine..." Marialite said dejectedly.

"You're not the one who has to carry the can, young'un," Celestine reassured her. "Don't apologize for people you don't even know."

"E-Exactly!" Liffey chimed in. "It's totally this old fogey's fault for not having his wits about him in the first place!"

"Fwghh—!"

Just as Celestine gulped down the last dredges of his glass of water, Liffey slapped him on the back—*hard*. A spritz of water came rushing out of his lips.

"Ghhh..." he groaned. "I'm not particularly bothered about it, ya know? They'll get their comeuppance."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Who knows?" he grinned. "That aside, we're overwhelmed with guests today," he commented, nodding towards an amber-colored pillar of light.

Once the intense gleam subsided, a man with swept-back, ashen hair was left behind, along with a few bodyguards. His dignified appearance commanded a heavy atmosphere upon the workshop that wasn't there a few moments ago.

"Oh?" the man said, immediately noticing Marialite and giving her a gentle smile. "Might you be...the Jade Saint, Marialite?"

He moved to take her hand, but Sirius swiftly thrust his body between them.

"Brother, I ask that you don't touch my fiancée so thoughtlessly. At least ask beforehand," he said with a frown.

"S-Sorry, Sirius. I forgot myself. I was just thrilled to be in a saint's presence..."

the ashen-haired man replied, awkwardly taking a few steps back. Meanwhile, Marialite was looking him over from head to toe.

“Are you one of Lord Sirius’ brothers?” she asked.

“Indeed, my name’s Leonis. Sirius might have taken away my right to the throne, but I’m actually older than him.” He spoke softly, but there was a hint of spite to his words.

Even so, Sirius didn’t react—not with anger nor with sorrow. His expression was completely calm and showed no trace of the panic he underwent only a few minutes before, when he was nearly strangled to death by his own fiancée.

“What is your business with Celestine, Brother?” he asked plainly.

“I was wondering if I could ask him to make a device that can be used to keep divine beasts in check,” he smiled.

“And why would you need something like that?” Sirius deadpanned.

“No, no—it’s nothing suspicious,” he insisted. “I’m taking care of some injured divine beasts until their wounds heal. However, they keep struggling and trying to get away. It makes feeding them and treating their wounds rather troublesome,” he shrugged with a sigh.

As Marialite watched on from behind Sirius, she tried to think back to what she’d learned about divine beasts.

Like saints, divine beasts received their holy powers from the gods. They were a native species to Celaeno, and due to their dwindling numbers, people were banned from capturing them or keeping them. However, for that same reason, there was a rampant poaching problem.

Monsters were another race that existed within Celaeno, but although they were able to command magic in the same way as demons, many were ferocious beings. A demon’s eyes could determine divine beasts from regular monsters quite easily, just by seeing whether they possessed holy energy or magic. That was how they told the difference between them.

“It’s a large number of beasts, Sir Celestine,” Leonis implored him. “I could really use your assistance.”

“I don’t fancy it.”

It was an immediate rejection. Celestine sat back down in his chair and fished a large piece of hard candy out of his robe pocket before tossing it into his mouth and crunching down on it. Rather than Leonis, Liffey was the first one to take issue with his blasé attitude.

“Why not? You could help those divine beasts,” she reminded him.

“I know there’s nothing I can’t fashion, but what exactly do you hope to achieve by restraining those beasts? You’ll cause ’em stress, nothing more,” he grumbled.

“But they won’t listen to me,” Leonis interjected. “Poachers were the ones who hurt them, so now they think all people are out to get them.”

“So what if they won’t listen? Ya going to force ’em to? I don’t reckon they care a hoot about whatever the devil you want,” Celestine cackled. Leonis was less than impressed.

“It’s not like I *want* to add to their level of stress! But, sometimes, there are things you just have to do. Not that a stubborn old fool like you would understand that.”

“Stubbornness is a virtue, don’t you think? If you’re all soft like a piece of fudge, you’ll only wind up getting used,” Celestine quipped.

“I will take my leave!” Leonis barked, walking back to where his bodyguards stood behind him. The pillar of light appeared once again, then he was gone.

Silence filled the room. Sirius looked at Celestine inquisitively.

“That was strangely argumentative of you,” he said in surprise.

“Ah, I hate the stench’a beasts—and he stank. I was prompting him to leave the room at the earliest opportunity,” he said, wrinkling his nose.

“I’m not sure that’s a good enough reason to turn down a prince’s request,” Liffey sighed, feeling around in Celestine’s robe pocket for another piece of candy.

“Are you okay, Lady Marialite?” Sirius asked, realizing how silent she’d been. She flinched, suddenly brought back to reality.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking herself. “I was just thinking about something.”

“Is it about my brother?”

“Yes, but...how should I put this?” she hummed. “I got a strange feeling from him.”

For a moment—just a moment—she thought she saw a black, hazy mist clinging to his body. She pursed her lips in confusion, while Sirius studied her silently for a few seconds before deciding to open his mouth.

“My brother is very passionate about his conservation efforts. He has always harbored a great love for monsters and beasts,” he explained.

“I think that’s very admirable,” she smiled.

“As do I. Thanks to him, plenty of divine beasts have been saved,” he said softly, a certain melancholy to his tone.

“Lord Sirius...?”

“Yes?”

“It just felt like you were acting kind of different from usual...” she mused. She couldn’t explain exactly *what* was different, but she got the impression he was hiding something—and she was trying to figure out what that something was. Sirius chuckled lightly.

“I have nothing to hide from you, my love.”

“Oh, no—hide anything you like. I don’t mind,” she assured him.

“You don’t?” he blinked.

“Everyone has something they want to keep to themselves,” she nodded. Besides, Sirius was a good-hearted man; he would never hide something at the expense of others’ feelings. She believed that.

In fact, that was exactly why she suspected he *was* hiding something.

“Are you hiding something that you think would worry me?” she theorized.

“Of course not. There’s nothing at all that you should be worrying about,” he said gently, clearing his throat. “Let’s leave it at that.”



MEANWHILE, in Celaeno Palace...

“Curse that stupid old man!”

Leonis was unable to repress his anger, cursing and growling as he walked along the corridor with his bodyguards in tow. From his usual demeanor, no one would guess it was even possible for him to get so angry. Court officials and servants looked at him in concern, unsure of what to do.

Among them, there was one man brave enough to face him.

“Lord Leonis! Aww, don’t look at me like that; all that anger doesn’t suit your pretty face!”

That man was Raven.



MARIALITE was planting some seeds, humming to herself as she worked.

With each seed she planted, she offered up a silent prayer that they would grow up big and healthy, but she didn’t use her holy powers. If she did, they would grow immediately, but what was the fun in that? She wanted to take her time and enjoy the process of watching her garden thrive on its own.

“I wonder what sort of flowers will grow here?” she thought aloud, smiling. “...What’s wrong, Lady Cornelia?”

“You dare to ask what’s wrong with *me*?” she scoffed. “Didn’t Prince Sirius say anything when he saw all this?” she asked, her eyes fixed on the strange topazios plants.

For one thing, there were the strange, knight-like flowers, and then there was the mysterious green orb, now slightly sticking out of the soil. Cornelia felt a sudden urge to burn the whole place to the ground.

“Yeah. He said he was happy,” Marialite answered plainly.

“It’s as if he’ll agree to anything when you’re involved,” she rolled her eyes. “If your personality was a little more like mine, I dare say this country would already be in ruins...”

There were many cases where countries had fallen due to their king choosing to be blind to his own queen's wrongdoings. Cornelia was suddenly extremely thankful that Marialite was the sort of person who was painfully honest about her own thoughts.

And at that moment, Cornelia could clearly see a sort of loneliness weighing on Marialite, her eyebrows knitting together ever so slightly.

"What's the matter? Has he done something to hurt you?" Cornelia asked, narrowing her eyes.

"No, it's not that," Marialite shook her head. "It's just...recently, he seems to be hiding something from me."

"Hmm... I think you can at least be certain he's not cheating on you," she snickered.

"To be honest, I think it might be something to do with Raven," Marialite said, casting her eyes down sorrowfully.

Raven had recently become Prince Leonis' attendant.

A large number of people had seen Raven trying to butter Leonis up, and apparently, he even told him confidential information that Sirius had entrusted to him. Sirius took issue with that betrayal of trust and dismissed him from his post. Then, as though that was exactly what he'd been waiting for, Raven chose Leonis as his new master.

"Raven's been stuck to Prince Leonis like glue as of late," Cornelia told her. "Rumors have been flying around that he'll become his attendant instead. Moreover, it appears that Prince Leonis wishes to reclaim his right to the throne from Prince Sirius by any means possible."

"Even though he's his brother?"

"It's *because* he's his brother!" Cornelia snapped. "The people are fond of Prince Sirius because he's a good-natured man, but politically speaking, Leonis—the Second Prince—is of higher standing than him. His work with divine beasts gives him a boost, too. People often question why Prince Sirius was chosen to be the next emperor in the first place—behind his back, of course."

Marialite nodded as she listened. She'd never heard Sirius talk about politics before. It was possible he was trying to keep her from worrying by making sure she was unaware of the current issues.

"That sounds like a complicated situation," she hummed.

"For one thing, this isn't the time to be lounging around and gardening," Cornelia warned her. "Do you realize that if Prince Leonis really does secure the throne, you won't become empress anymore?"

"Oh, that doesn't bother me," she smiled. "We could just live a normal, countryside life together again. If he wants to, I mean."

"No, no. Even if you have your right to the throne taken from you, the fact remains that you won't have to live as a commoner again. Not unless you do something ghastly."

Frankly, Marialite didn't care either way. As long as she was with someone who truly loved and treasured her, she believed she could find happiness no matter where she lived.

"You really are devoted, Marialite," a voice called out from a distance. "You'll make a great wife one day."

The two women looked up to see Raven leaping onto the topazios plant, landing on the sword-bearing knight's head.

"Eugh! Speak of the devil, it's that feathery fiend," Cornelia scowled.

"Aww, that's not very nice," he replied with a smile.

"What business could you possibly have with Marialite? You're with Prince Leonis now," she huffed.

"I have my reasons," he sighed, jumping down from the thick body of the flower. "Marialite, could I ask you a favor?"

"A favor? What is it?" she blinked.

"Take a look at this," he said, holding out a black drawstring pouch. Inside, she found a wealth of tightly packed seeds.

"What kind of seeds are these?" she asked.

“They’re fruit trees for the divine beasts. They can be pretty picky eaters, so they’ll only eat certain types of fruit—and, of course, they’re all hard to come by. That’s why I was hoping you could grow a whole load of ’em using your powers,” he explained.

“How is that our problem?” Cornelia argued, her cat ears pricking up and her claws extending. Evidently, she was full of anger.

“It’s not like I feel good about asking a favor from my old master’s fiancée either,” Raven pouted. “But gathering enough food for the beasts is hard work. We always end up having to risk our lives entering monster territory to pick the fruit. And even then, we can’t find enough. A lot of the beasts are going hungry,” he sighed, putting on a thick, sorrowful tone and over-dramatically wiping a tear away. He pretended not to notice the way Cornelia clicked her tongue in disbelief.

“Okay,” Marialite said plainly, taking the bag full of seeds. Her smile was just as steady as it always was.

“Huh? R-Really?” Raven asked hesitantly, as though he had never expected her to agree so readily.

“Wait, Marialite,” Cornelia interrupted them. “You have no obligation to do *anything* for that nasty little birdbrain.”

“Well, I don’t want the beasts to starve,” she shrugged.

“I know, but—”

“I’ll have them ready for you soon. Okay, Raven?” Marialite smiled.

“Thanks.”

“I hope your work goes well!” she said encouragingly, that same carefree smile ever present. Raven’s expression faltered for just a moment—but was quickly replaced by a wide grin.

“Great! See you soon!” he called out, waving as he left.

Cornelia glared at his back as he jogged away. She tried to snatch the pouch away from Marialite...but the saint was quicker. She swiftly stretched her hand above her head so that Cornelia couldn’t reach it, and Cornelia couldn’t help

but admire the other woman. Despite her carefree nature, Marialite's reflexes were surprisingly sharp.

"Now, it's our turn to do something for those beasts!" Marialite beamed.

"Did you say *'our'*?" Cornelia repeated in horror. "Don't involve me in your strange endeavors! I won't stand for it!"

"But it'll be difficult alone..." Marialite said softly, concerned.

"Well, I certainly *won't* be the person you call on for help! I *won't* do it!" she insisted, folding her arms decisively.

Ten minutes later, the two of them were bent down over the soil together, with Marialite teaching her how to plant seeds.



FAR from the capital, in a near-empty plot of land, there stood one large building.

It was the Divine Beast Conservation Facility, run by Prince Leonis himself. The entrance was forged by a large iron gate that was several feet long, and there was a handful of guards keeping a watchful eye on it at any given time.

The main purpose of the facility was to treat wounded divine beasts. The staff employed by the facility desperately tried to give them the treatment they needed inside their cages, but it proved to be a very difficult job. Birds with rainbow wings squawked and cawed in a panic, and wolves with thick, fiery red fur snarled and snapped. Squirrels with gemstones embedded in their foreheads chirped and scratched at the walls to try and escape.

"Wowee," Raven sighed. "They're full of energy today."

"They probably think we want to hurt them. I can understand that feeling of anger and fear very well," Leonis said with a forced smile. "Thank you, Raven. You've helped me out a lot since becoming my attendant. It's thanks to your help that we secured the saint's cooperation, too."

"Ah, she's a soft touch. Just like Prince Sirius," he grinned. "Besides, you're paying me handsomely for this. Of course I'm gonna get the job done properly."

"People don't usually admit that outright, you know," Leonis raised an

eyebrow.

“Welp. Does that really matter?” Raven shrugged, a wide smile on his lips. “I bet Prince Sirius has already overheard all the rumors that I left him for all your promises of money and honor. I’ll do anything to make sure you get your right to the throne back.”

Leonis hummed, stroking his chin in thought. “The throne isn’t all I want from my little brother,” he added. “I want that saint, too.”

“You want Marialite?” Raven blinked. “Well, I guess being a saint is an attractive quality in and of itself, but I thought you weren’t really into carefree, happy-go-lucky women like her.”

“Hmm, you’re not wrong,” he admitted. “But with her on my side, I’ll be able to bring the paradise I envision to fruition,” he murmured in a voice low enough for only Raven to hear, a smirk tugging at his thin lips.



“**LORD** Sirius? Lots of the fruit for the divine beasts have ripened now, so could you maybe give these to Raven?” Marialite asked, using both of her arms to clutch a huge basket loaded with fruit to her chest. It was like a mini mountain made of fruit, and Sirius’ conscience couldn’t bear to watch her carry it any longer. He decided to at least take it off her hands.

“This is extraordinarily heavy,” he commented. “You carried this all the way here?”

“Huh? You’re making it out to be a bigger deal than it actually is,” she laughed. “Of course, I couldn’t carry *all* of it, so I’ve left some back at the orchard.”

In order to accommodate the sheer number of trees Raven had asked her to cultivate, Marialite ended up growing them a short distance away from her garden. As it was an urgent request, she’d used her holy powers to immediately speed up the growing process before picking the fruit. Albeit begrudgingly, Cornelia did help her with the process; thanks to that, procuring the fruit had gone very smoothly.

Marialite was just as light-hearted about the situation as she always was, but

Sirius' expression soon clouded over.

"Lady Marialite..." he sighed. "I already thought you were extremely kind when you decided to befriend Cornelia, but please know you don't have to abide by the requests of that traitor."

Most likely, he was referring to Raven.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, I'll try to keep a distance from him in the future."

"No, no. I won't force you to do anything because of me," he said, shaking his head. "I mean... What could I really ask? He did once risk his life for my sake, and he was there for me when we fled our enemies."

"Yeah..." Marialite smiled sadly, sensing just how much Sirius still trusted Raven deep down. Trying to avoid her probing gaze, Sirius dropped his head down to stare at the fruit.

"Besides, Leonis far surpasses me. Even my father had been putting off dealing with the dwindling divine beast population. But, Leonis? He's concentrating all his time and effort into solving the problem."

"People often say that you can judge someone's heart by their treatment of animals, don't they?" Marialite remarked.

"...Indeed. When I was young, he often read books detailing divine beasts aloud to me. I didn't truly understand at the time, though," he murmured softly, reminiscing upon his childhood. When Marialite looked at his smile, she didn't see him as the future emperor, but just a regular man.

"I hope you can make up with your brother one day," she said, matching his soft tone.

"Make up with him?" Sirius echoed, thinking on it. "If the title of emperor went to him, I'm sure he would accept it in the blink of an eye... No, never mind! Forget I said that. I'm sorry," he said in a fluster. Marialite looked at him curiously.

"What are you so panicked about?" she asked.

"Well, I brought you here intending to make you my empress. However, if I

can no longer become emperor...”

“Then we can go back to selling fruit and flowers, just like we used to,” she beamed.

“R-Really...?” he replied, his eyes shimmering with hope.

“I don’t see why n— Oh. But if you don’t become emperor, that doesn’t necessarily mean we have to leave the palace. It might be difficult to make things exactly how they used to be,” she mused.

“In all honesty... I dream of a life where I am with you. It doesn’t matter where or how. I’ll be happy if we’re simply together,” Sirius said with a bashful smile, thinking back on the simple life they had once led together.



AFTER parting with Sirius, Marialite made her way back to the orchard. A sweet fragrance wafted from between the luscious green leaves of the trees where they stood in neat lines. Around the outer edge of the orchard, there were several magical traps designed to keep out any trespassers. If anyone *did* enter without Marialite or Sirius’ permission, they would be immediately encased in ice—a trap expertly engineered by none other than Cornelia.

“It’s amazing that even *Cornelia’s* been helping Marialite so much. She must be more powerful than she looks,” one of the maids commented.

“Apparently, when she first met Cornelia, she wasn’t even a little bit scared,” another replied.

When they first found out that Cornelia would be working alongside them, they thought it was the end of the world as they knew it. However, contrary to all expectations, she’d been working hard at everything entrusted to her.

For one thing, she was a very quick learner, so it wasn’t long until she’d picked up all the skills she needed—but Marialite definitely had the most profound impact on her.

They’d heard about how Marialite took a lost Sirius in despite knowing he was a demon, and many were of the opinion that she should be referred to as the Saint of Compassion rather than the Jade Saint. She was even worried about the

trees at the orchard because she'd accelerated their growth using holy power rather than natural means. The way she checked each and every tree over was the very picture of benevolence.

"Oh, there you are," a voice boomed from behind the maids. They whirled around, and their mouths fell open in shock.

"L-Lady Marialite!" one maid called out.

"Yes? What is it?" she shouted in reply.

"Prince Leonis is here to see you!"

"Prince Leonis? Why...?" Marialite said, bewildered.

Just as the maids had said, she looked over to see Leonis admiring the trees with a look of fascination in his eyes. In fact, to be precise, his gaze was fixed on the red fruit growing on the branches.

"How wonderful..." he gasped. "I can barely believe my eyes. It's bizarre to see a fruit so rare grow in such a short amount of time—and in such huge numbers..."

"What brings you here, Your Highness?" Marialite asked, walking over to him. Leonis shook himself, remembering to keep up his formalities.

"I thought I should come to personally thank you. It was quite a shock to hear that you would answer my plea so readily when I politically stand as my little brother's opponent."

"It's no trouble at all," Marialite assured him. "I just want the divine beasts to eat a hearty meal for once."

Listening in on their conversation, the maids shot distrusting glares at Leonis. Although, when the bodyguards accompanying him returned their glares, they quickly looked away.

Why did this have to happen when Cornelia isn't here? the maids thought. All of a sudden, they sincerely regretted thinking it was a good idea to put the fiery woman on room-cleaning duty—but it was too late now.

"As thanks for your efforts, I was wondering if I could invite you to see the Conservation Facility for yourself," Leonis offered.

“Ooh! I’ve never seen a divine beast before. That sounds great,” Marialite agreed.

“W-Wait a moment, Prince Leonis!” one of the maids spoke up, realizing that Marialite had no idea of the danger she was getting herself into. “Lady Marialite is Prince *Sirius*’ fiancée. I think it best that you ask him whether he’s okay with it first.”

“My little brother already gave me his blessing,” Leonis responded immediately. “He said he thought she would love it. Would you like to see my permit? Would that put your mind at rest?”

“R-Really? I apologize, then...” the maid said hesitantly.

“No, no. It’s understandable that you would be cautious of me,” he said kindly to the maids as they bowed their heads.

He reached out to put a hand on Marialite’s shoulder, only to have it swiftly brushed away when she suddenly spun in a circle.

“Aaaah, I can’t wait!” she beamed, full of newfound energy.

“Uh... I’m glad to hear it,” Leonis said, smiling awkwardly in the face of her unbridled joy.



MARIALITE and Leonis left the capital in a carriage that took them out into a dark, barren wasteland. When they reached the facility, the colossal iron gates squeaked open, making way for the carriage as though they had been expecting them. The large, white building beyond the gate seemed to emit a sort of holy aura.

“This place is *ginormous*,” Marialite admired.

“The costs to run it are ginormous, too,” Leonis quipped. “However, I don’t regret building it. This is all for my beloved beasts, after all.”

“You really love divine beasts, don’t you, Prince Leonis?” she smiled.

“How could I not? They’re precious creatures, blessed by the gods themselves. I believe I have an obligation to care for them and protect them.”

They climbed down from the carriage and headed inside the building. When they stepped through the doors, Marialite couldn't smell the beasts right away, but she could hear their cries.

"They're always like that," Leonis shrugged. "Try not to pay too much attention to it."

"R-Really...?" she replied hesitantly.

The beasts cried out in anguish, refusing to eat their food or stay still for their wounds to be treated. None of them were recognizable species to Marialite, but she could still tell they were severely anxious and distressed.

"Calm down! *Please* calm down! I just want to help you...!" an employee wearing a white hood pleaded with a strange-looking animal. Its body was that of a cat, and its head that of a bird. The employee was desperately trying to cast a healing spell on it, not stopping even though the beast was scratching him all over.

It would be good if his true intentions could get through to the beast somehow... Marialite wished in her heart.

However, she stopped when she noticed something. The half-bird, half-cat beast didn't seem to be directing its threats towards the employee on purpose—rather, its eyes were fixed on Leonis.



"**COME** on, everyone! You've got lots to eat today!" an employee shouted out to the animals, feeding them the fruit Marialite had grown. At first, the beasts seemed hesitant, but once they caught a whiff of the fruit, they chomped down on it happily.

Thank goodness, she thought. Several employees turned to face her with tears in their eyes.

"Thank you, Saint," one said tearily. "With your help, we can give the divine beasts all the food they need. We weren't able to handle it on our own..."

"I'm glad I could help solve some of your problems," Marialite smiled. "Besides, I'd never grown trees like that before. It was a fun experience for me,

too.”

“O Saint...” another employee chimed in. “Your arrival in this country has been nothing but a blessing.”

“Exactly,” Leonis nodded. “I believe the same thing, Lady Marialite. From the bottom of my heart.”

He reached out to take her hand, but she suddenly dropped to her knees to pick up a fruit that rolled onto the floor, and he ultimately missed it altogether. Clueless, the employee simply thanked her as he took the fruit back from her.

“Lord Leonis? You seem a little sad... What’s wrong?” another employee asked in concern.

“No, it’s nothing. Anyway, Lady Marialite, I am truly grateful for your help. I hold a great deal of respect and affection for you,” he said sincerely.

“Thank you,” she smiled. “But I think you’re the one who deserves the most credit, Prince Leonis. You’re really trying to save these divine beasts.”

“...If that’s what you think of me, could I possibly ask you for one more favor?” he asked in a low tone, his eyes narrowing. “I would appreciate it if you could work for me... and keep it a secret from Sirius, if at all possible.”

“What? Why?” she questioned, her brow furrowing. A sly smile stretched across Leonis’ lips.

“You are to become his wife,” he said. “If it gets out that you’re helping another man, your reputation will most definitely suffer.”

“So, I can’t even help someone out without being suspected of doing something bad? What a cruel world...” she said with a dry chuckle.

“Of course, I can arrange some sort of reward or repayment for you. I can acquire anything you desire or even get rid of people causing you grief,” he proposed.

“Um...” she winced. “Isn’t that taking things a little too far?”

“That just goes to show how crazy about you I am...” he whispered in her ear.

Marialite blinked a few times blankly. Then, she shook her head lightly with

an awkward smile.

“Lord Sirius already gives me everything I could ever want,” she assured him. “Plus, I love everyone here. No one’s causing me any grief, anyway.”

“...Don’t you ever think about the fact that someone other than Sirius could provide for you?” he hinted.

“Well, perhaps that’s true—but I *want* it to be him.”

“I...I see...” Leonis replied, clearing his throat. “Apologies for saying something so strange. There’s a matter I must attend to, so I’ll take my leave. In the meantime, please explore the facility at your leisure.”

“Thank you. I’ll enjoy the rest of my time here,” Marialite smiled with a nod.

“Excuse me,” Leonis said as a word of parting, turning his back on the group.

He frowned in deep displeasure.



LEONIS kissed his teeth as he stomped along a corridor reserved only for the most important members of the staff. The cause of his anger was *that saint*.

Apparently, she was once the fiancée of a Pythian prince, but the rumors said she wasn’t treated all too well. Hence, Leonis had assumed she would latch onto him as soon as he dangled a little kindness in front of her. However, she had thus far subverted his expectations.

She was just as Raven had described her—carefree, and completely incapable of logical thought. However, that wasn’t all. She possessed a strong will—her heart resembled a large tree with big, thick roots. That was what made it particularly difficult to get through to her. Leonis found people like her the most difficult to deal with.

“I *must* make that saint mine. By any means necessary...”

If he couldn’t find a way to shift Marialite’s interests from Sirius over to him, he would be in deep trouble. The plan he concocted the moment he heard of Marialite’s arrival in Celaeno would come to stand at an impasse.

“What’s wrong, Lord Leonis? Looks like something’s ruffled your feathers,” an

airy voice quipped up ahead. Leonis looked up to see Raven with a worried expression on his face.

“Oh...” he sighed. “My bargaining with Lady Marialite didn’t go as planned.”

“Eek... Don’t tell me you asked her to keep her assistance a secret from Lord Sirius.”

“You must be psychic,” Leonis said, his brow furrowed.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think she’ll go along with anything like that,” Raven explained with a shrug. He hadn’t known her for all that long, but even he could tell that much from the little interaction he’d experienced with her.

Leonis quickly understood that it was going to be far more difficult to get the saint under his control than he’d anticipated. A wave of anger and despair washed over him.

“Leave it to me, ‘kay?” Raven said with a smile, as though he’d sensed his dilemma. “Marialite has a kind heart—almost *too* kind. If we can just use that, I think she’ll gladly become your puppet.”

“Hmm... That sounds rather promising,” Leonis said with a raised eyebrow.

“You know me,” Raven grinned. “I even betrayed Prince Sirius for you. I’ll do anything to earn your trust.”

“No, you already do quite enough just by serving me. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Why, thanks! I really am glad I started working for you instead, Lord Leonis. Between you and me, Prince Sirius has done nothing but obsess over Marialite ever since he got back to Celaeno. He’s left his work basically untouched!” Raven exclaimed, his tone colored with contempt. Leonis couldn’t sense a single shred of loyalty towards Sirius from him any longer.

Leonis chuckled to himself. After betraying his former master, Raven had truly fallen for him hook, line, and sinker. Leonis was certain he would continue to serve him no matter what awaited them.

“I trust you, Raven. In fact, I’ll prove to you exactly how much,” he said with a grin.

“Ooh, what does that mean?! I’m kinda excited now.”

“Follow me.”

Raven hopped along beside Leonis as he led him down the corridor. It split into two, and they took a right before venturing even deeper into the building, until they came to a dead end.

“Only my most trusted personnel are permitted here. You should feel proud of yourself,” Leonis said, clapping a hand to Raven’s shoulder before drawing a circle on the wall with his finger.

A black door gradually emerged, solidifying itself into the wall before automatically swinging open.

“What’s in here?” Raven asked.

“My paradise.”

They took a step inside the secret room. It was dimly lit, but a huge collection of cages soon came into view in the middle of the room. They were filled with all sorts of creatures—divine beasts.

“What *are* they?” Raven asked, squinting.

“Divine beasts of the most prized, rarest variety. It’s far too dangerous to let them roam the outside world. The chance of them getting captured again is too high.”

“And you think that’s a good enough reason to keep them here?” Raven asked, eyebrows raised.

“I *saved* them; I *earned* the right to *own* them,” Leonis insisted. “Alas, there are many who would disagree with that, hence I keep them hidden here.”

Raven breathed a hefty sigh. “I still don’t think that means you’re justified in keeping ’em cooped up in such small cages. Poor things.”

“It’s better than letting them back into the wild to be hunted or killed, don’t you agree? It’s been difficult finding enough food to keep them fed, but Saint Marialite’s cooperation now makes that a non-issue,” he nodded.

“So, *that’s* why you were so keen on securing Marialite’s help...”

“Of course, when I become emperor, I will legalize the keeping of divine

beasts, and no longer will I have to keep them hidden.”

“Is that your main reason for trying to steal the throne from Lord Sirius?” Raven surmised. Leonis continued talking with a laugh, completely missing the way Raven referred to Sirius using his former manner of address.

“Don’t get me wrong—that is but one factor. I fully intend to carry out all my duties as emperor,” he smiled, not even a hint of shame in his voice.

Then, he noticed something in Raven’s hand. It was a black feather with an amber spellstone embedded in the tip.

“...Is that one of Celestine’s inventions?” he questioned.

“That’s right,” Raven smiled. “It’s a reverse teleport. Rather than using it to teleport elsewhere, it allows a specific person to teleport to your own location. It’s an amazing little invention...isn’t it, Lord Sirius?”

The feather glowed, creating a sudden flash and a golden yellow pillar of light. Leonis’ face fell when he saw a young man with silvery hair step out from it.

“Sirius...!” he exclaimed.

“Brother,” Sirius boomed, his voice low and angry. “Where do we even start?” he scowled, deep crimson eyes glaring at Leonis. An ice-cold, wintery chill blew through the air.



AS Marialite busied herself hand-feeding the divine beasts, she was suddenly interrupted by a huge crowd of soldiers running into the facility. They called out, asking for everyone to comply with their orders, while the employees shouted back at them, asking them to be quiet so as to not frighten the beasts. Unfortunately, the clamor of voices did nothing but aggravate the beasts, and they panicked and cried among the shouts. The facility quickly devolved into chaos.

Among the confusion, one soldier noticed Marialite and swiftly ran up to her to explain the situation: under Sirius’ orders, they were to arrest employees involved in the illegal keeping of healthy divine beasts. After updating her, they took her to the room where Sirius and Raven had confronted Leonis.

“...So, you’re telling me Raven started working for Prince Leonis in order to find out where he was illegally keeping divine beasts?” Marialite asked.

“Yes,” Sirius nodded. “I heard there were suspicions that Leonis was wrongfully caging some of the beasts in his care. However, since we couldn’t confirm the location of said beasts, we decided that infiltrating his inner circle would be the best course of action.”

“We came up with some fake confidential information, and I ‘leaked’ it to him,” Raven explained. “If he realized what I was up to, it’d be game over, y’know? That’s why we kept the operation a secret from everyone apart from His Majesty.”

“I’m not too proud of having kept you in the dark, Lady Marialite. I’m so very sorry if I ever made you worry,” Sirius sincerely apologized.

Marialite shook her head. If that was part of the strategy, who was she to complain? She calmly looked at the soldiers as they freed the divine beasts from their cooped-up cages.

“Still, Raven...” Sirius piped up. “I never heard that Lady Marialite would even be here at the facility.”

“I didn’t think he’d go this far, either!” Raven scoffed in disbelief. “He even had a fake permit from you! And anyway, Marialite—you’re so *mean*!”

“...I am?” she echoed, tilting her head.

“You realized I was only pretending to work for Leonis, didn’t you?” Raven pointed at her, his tone nervous. Marialite nodded in reply.

“I just thought I should keep quiet about it. I was sure you had some sort of reason for not telling me,” she shrugged.

“Sooo... What gave me away?” he hedged.

“I’m honestly not sure. It just felt like you were the same old Raven,” she smiled.

“When you said, *‘I hope your work goes well, Raven!’*, I got the impression you’d sussed me out. And there I thought I was putting on a great act, too,” he lamented with a sigh, a smile quickly forming on his face, too.

Sirius scowled at his attendant.

“Don’t ever try to imitate Lady Marialite’s words again. You will never bear the grace that she possesses,” he growled.

“I never thought for a second that I would. Don’t get your knickers in a twist,” Raven snorted.

“Don’t take any notice of him, Raven. I thought it was cute,” Marialite laughed.

“Oh... Well... If Lady Marialite permits it, then I suppose there’s no probl—”

“Shhhh! Shut *up* for a second, lovebirds!” Raven hushed them in a sudden panic, putting a hand up in front of Marialite’s fond expression and looking around the room.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I just realized that Prince Leonis is nowhere to be seen...” he said, concerned.

“When our soldiers released the first lot of divine beasts, he tried to cast a spell on them. He started ranting and raving at us not to lay a finger on his ‘collection,’ so I had him removed from the building,” Sirius explained, his tone brimming with disappointment. “He never saw the beasts as actual, living beings; they were like objects to him. I should’ve noticed how strange he was acting far sooner...”

“It’s not your fault, Lord Sirius,” Marialite assured him sorrowfully.

“No—illegally keeping divine beasts in captivity wasn’t his only crime. It turns out that he was in league with the poachers themselves; they would hurt the beasts, and he would show up to ‘collect’ them,” Sirius sighed, disgusted with his brother’s actions.

“The whole thing was one big charade, huh?” Raven frowned.

“Either he or one of his servants would attack the divine beasts, then once they weakened it enough, they would bring it here to the facility. Of course, many of the employees were completely unaware of what was happening behind the scenes and simply tried their best to treat the beasts. That’s how things ended up like this.”

“That’s horrible...” Marialite gasped, thinking of the divine beast she’d seen snarling at Leonis earlier. Now, she understood exactly why the creatures were still so terrified even after they’d been brought to *safety*.

“That guy’s a real nasty piece of work,” Raven spat. “He went around doing all that cruel stuff in the name of ‘conservation’...and even let people praise him for it.”

“But why did he do it?” Marialite wondered.

“That’s what we’re going to find out. Trust me; we’ll get it out of him,” Sirius nodded. “Now then, Lady Marialite. Let’s be on our way.”

Just as Sirius held out his hand, an ear-piercing screech traveled through the air.

“*Mrowwww!*” a beast’s cry rang out, its high-pitched meow echoing through the dark room.

“Whoa, what’s with that cat?! It’s got wings!”

“I’ve *never* seen a divine beast like that before...”

“L-Let’s try to calm it down! It seems even more skittish than the rest of them.”

A group of soldiers were all huddled around a single cage. Curious, Marialite stood on tiptoe, trying to get a look at the creature. Raven unabashedly strode over to examine it and soon beckoned Marialite over.

“Hey, Marialite, Lord Sirius! You wanna see it, too?”

“Raven,” Sirius said disapprovingly. “Don’t take advantage of the poor thing.”

“I’m only looking! I mean, you don’t get to see a Phobos cat every day, do you?”

Sirius’ eyes immediately shot wide open.

“Th-They really exist?” he blinked.

“Are they rare or something?” Marialite guessed.

“Very rare indeed,” Sirius nodded. “They are scarce even among other divine beasts, and tales of their existence have been recorded since ancient times.

They are somewhat of a mythical creature, I suppose. To think Leonis went as far as to capture one..." He gritted his teeth, a surge of anger welling up inside him.

"Rrrrrrr..." the pitch-black kitten growled as Marialite peered inside the cage, its fur standing on end as it snarled at the soldiers. They attempted to console it by poking pieces of fruit through the gaps in the iron cage, but that didn't seem to have any effect.

At first glance, it looked like a normal black cat. However, on closer inspection, there were batlike wings sprouting from its spine.

"It looks really scared..." Marialite noted, the corners of her eyebrows upturned.

"Seeing as it's still trapped in this cage, it appears as though it hasn't yet awakened to its special powers," Sirius hummed.

"It has special powers?" she asked curiously.

"If we are to believe the legends, Phobos cats have a power that makes them particularly difficult to deal with. We need to soothe the creature before that happens," he said with a frown. Raven and the soldiers nodded vehemently in agreement.

The clamor of voices speaking over one another interrupted their discussion, shouts growing louder as the source of the confusion came closer.

"Step away from the door! I am under strict orders from Prince Sirius not to let you enter!" a soldier shouted.

"Silence! You can't tell me what to do!" another voice raged. A moment later, the owner of that voice threw the door open and rushed into the room.

"All the divine beasts in here belong to *me*! I won't let you pilfer my collection!" Leonis screamed, struggling against the rope that kept both of his hands bound. Saliva went flying into the air as he raged.

Sirius stared down his nose at Leonis' pitiful display. "Take him away," he ordered calmly.

However, Leonis wasn't prepared to go down quite that easily; he thrashed

against the soldiers that tried to restrain him and threw himself at the Phobos cat's cage.

"Please, if nothing else, just let me keep this cat!" he sobbed. "It's a *Phobos cat*, for crying out loud! And I found it! It's *my* pet!"

"...Brother. Please, stop this."

"Shut up! Shut up, *shut up*! I won't be ordered around by my little brother, of all people!" he barked.

"Yes, you will," Sirius said, his eyes cold and unblinking. "I don't want to see someone I once admired in such a disgraceful state any longer than I have to."

"...Tch." Leonis kissed his teeth, falling silent at Sirius' words. He finally went limp as the soldiers dragged him away.

Sirius cast him a downcast look as he went, then pulled his eyes away to look back at the Phobos cat as it came out of its cage. It didn't seem to have any visible injuries, but it looked extremely malnourished.

Marialite felt so sorry for the poor thing that she clasped a hand over her mouth, disturbed by its miserable appearance.

"It was him. He hurt me."

Out of nowhere, she heard the voice of a young child.

"What?" she reacted aloud, looking around in confusion.

"Marialite? What's wrong?" Raven asked.

"I thought I just heard a voice," she explained. "It said, 'He hurt me'..."

She couldn't see anyone even resembling a child in the room. Was she imagining things? Just as she was about to brush it off, she heard it again.

"He shot fireballs at me. I tried to run away, but he broke my leg. I told him it hurt, but he didn't stop..." the voice said, filled with pain and hatred.

"Now, it's saying that someone shot fireballs at it, and that they broke its leg..." Marialite continued.

"Lady Marialite..." Sirius hedged. "Where is the voice coming from?"

“Um... Over here, I think,” she said, gesturing in the general direction of the soldiers and the Phobos cat.

“They took me away from my mother. I’ll make him pay... I’m going to make him pay!” the voice growled. At the same time, the cat’s eyes turned blood red.

“Now, it’s saying it’ll make him pay,” Marialite relayed.

The Phobos cat spread its wings, then let out a fearsome roar, bearing its carnivorous teeth. Not a second later, Marialite’s field of vision was dyed bright red.



“**OH** dear...” Marialite sighed.

The seeds surrounding the topazios plants were growing and successfully flowering. However, something wasn’t quite right.

At first glance, they looked like normal, bell-shaped, red flowers. However, when Marialite peered inside them, she saw that the very middle was lined with countless white teeth. That in itself wouldn’t worry her too much—but the flowers were *eating each other*.

She was glad to see the plants she’d grown thriving. However, at this rate, she would only be left with one. Racking her brains for a way to prevent this battle royale of the natural world, she jumped when she sensed someone standing next to her.

It was a young woman with long brown hair covering her face, clad in a mud-caked, white dress.

“Oh. I recognize you...” Marialite reflected, trying to remember where she’d met the woman before. She quickly lost her train of thought when the woman reached her hand out towards the cannibalistic flowers, and they simultaneously stopped moving.

“Wait, what?” Marialite said in shock, looking between the woman and the flowers.

“I have put them to sleep for a short while. Before they awaken, I advise that you give them some fertilizer with a richer nutritional value. With that, they

should stop eating each other,” she explained.

“Wow, that’s great! Thank you so much!” Marialite beamed.

“What you just saw is a sort of symptom of what happens when plants go berserk. If you wish to quell that loss of control from the root cause, you must give them something other than raw power,” she enunciated in a detached tone.

Marialite couldn’t claim to understand what she was talking about, but she at least grasped that the woman was giving her a deep, meaningful explanation. She nodded in earnest, then opened her mouth as though she’d just remembered something.

“Oh, right! Sorry, I forgot to ask you your name,” Marialite prompted. She was certain they would meet again one day; in that case, she needed to know her name.

Responding to Marialite’s bright smile, the woman’s lips quirked upwards a little from beneath her long hair.

“I’m...”



“...—**lite**... Marialite! Wake up!”

She could hear Raven desperately calling for her.

“Raven...?” Marialite groaned, confused.

“Oh, you’re awake!” he sighed with relief. “Are you hurt?!”

“No...” she shook her head. “Sorry. I guess I was taking a nap or something.”

“You weren’t napping! You *passed out*, Marialite!” he said in alarm.

“What? Really?” she asked, propping herself on her elbows and squinting in confusion. *Why?*

And that wasn’t the only thing she had to be confused about. For some reason, she found herself surrounded by debris and rubble. Raven wasn’t the only one there, either; a group of soldiers were trying to shift piles of rubble to save the employees trapped underneath it. Other employees were casting

healing magic on those who were wounded.

However, amongst the confusion, Sirius was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Lord Sirius?” she asked, worried.

“...Over there,” Raven said, his gaze shifting over to a huge beam of light.

In the midst of the glow, the Phobos cat came into view, roaring with its hackles raised. A ring of soldiers and employees circled it, and among them, Marialite eventually spotted Sirius. He had his arms outstretched, as though he was using the light to keep the cat trapped.

“He’s trying to keep it inside that bubble of magic. If he didn’t, we’d all be dead right about now,” Raven explained with a grimace.

“What *happened*...? The last I remember, everything was under control,” she shook her head.

“Soooo... About that special power Phobos cats have? Looks like seeing Leonis again triggered it,” Raven said, clicking his tongue in frustration. “The more it gets hurt, the more magic it can absorb. Basically, it used the power it received from the two times Leonis attacked it to blow up the facility.”

“It stored that much power after only two attacks? That’s incredible,” she marveled.

“Well, we’re actually lucky that Lord Sirius put up a protective barrier around us so quickly,” he chuckled nervously. “But many of the soldiers cast *offensive* magic to try to save him, which only provided the cat with more power, and... now we’re in this situation.” Raven’s face went deathly pale; apparently, things weren’t looking good. The soldiers watching over Sirius had the same despairing, frightened eyes.

“We should get outta here,” Raven gulped. “We’ve called for backup, but who knows how long these guys can keep it up? If that cat runs riot, the fall of Celaeno would be a best-case scenario. We’re looking at the entire continent being destroyed, here—including the human nations.”

“You’re leaving Lord Sirius behind?” Marialite asked sorrowfully.

“...I’m under strict orders to protect you,” Raven admitted through gritted

teeth. “Right now, that’s my priority.”

Marialite pursed her lips, looking towards Sirius and his soldiers as they tried to keep the Phobos cat under control. They were all clenching their teeth and grunting, with sweat running down their brows. She’d heard that using too much magic could cause someone to enter an extreme state of fatigue, and things weren’t looking good for any of them.

“Eugh...guh...!” one of the soldiers coughed violently, bringing up blood as he collapsed on the spot. The sheet of light covering the cat flickered for just a second.

“*Mrowwww!*” the cat cried, breaking through the barrier and sending the surrounding debris flying.

The pieces of what remained then hovered, floating higher and higher into the air—until they suddenly came shooting down towards the group of people that had been keeping the cat restrained.

“Lord Sirius!” Marialite screamed, scrambling to her feet and sprinting towards him out of instinct.

“Stand back, Lady Marialite!” Sirius hollered, swinging his open palm in front of him. At the same time, the barrier was restored, keeping the cat under control once again.

Sirius was the only person left standing; the rest of them were on the floor after being hit with pieces of debris. Although Sirius was still standing, he was very obviously hurt. Blood was trickling down his head and arm.

“I’m sure my father will come up with something,” he grunted. “Until then... I’ll keep things under control...so please...run. Hurry...”

“We can’t leave you here,” Marialite insisted.

“Yes, you can. Don’t worry about me. Thanks to your holy powers, I still have plenty of magic energy left,” he countered, smiling despite his brow furrowing in pain. “Your powers grew the fruit I ate and fueled my magic without me even knowing. You’re the reason I’m still standing.”

“But—”

“No buts. I’m begging you—get out of here. If something happened to you...” he winced. “There would be no point in me risking my life here.”

“We gotta go, Marialite!” Raven said urgently, putting his arm around her and ushering her away.

Sirius watched on with a look of relief as their figures grew more and more distant, blowing a deep breath out. Then, he turned to face the Phobos cat.

“I genuinely feel sympathy for you,” he told it. “You’re a victim in this situation. This is nobody’s fault except my brother’s—and that’s exactly why I won’t let you kill anyone.”



THE light of the protective barrier grew smaller. The distance between Marialite and Sirius grew larger. She could do nothing but look back with dazed, forlorn eyes.

“I-It’s all gonna be okay!” Raven tried to convince her. “There’s no way that monster of a prince is gonna let himself be killed by one little cat.”

Marialite remained silent.

“I’m sure His Majesty will think of something...” he said nervously.

“If you wish to quell that loss of control from the root cause, you must give them something other than raw power...” she murmured.

“What?” Raven eyed her, confused.

“It’s what someone said to me in a dream I just had,” she clarified.

Raven came to a stop and peered into her face. She was *smiling* despite the deep peril in which they found themselves.

“Let me have a go at stopping that cat,” she said brightly.

“*St-Stop* it? How?! You can’t defeat something like that just by—”

“Like I said, I’m going to *stop* it. Not defeat it. We can use these,” she suggested, showing Raven a small drawstring pouch.

“What are they?”

“Flower seeds,” she explained. “Lord Sirius gave them to me.”

“You just...carry ‘em around?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, he told me I could use them in case of an emergency if Cornelia tried anything again,” she laughed. “Not that she ever did.”

“Okay, but...use ‘em how?” he asked. He was beginning to wonder if the fear of their impending doom was affecting her sanity.

Ignoring Raven’s dubious glances, Marialite dug a hole in the earth in front of her using only her hands. Then, she dropped one of the seeds from the pouch into it.

“Like this,” she said gently, covering the buried seed with her hands and closing her eyes.

In the next moment, her body was enveloped by a beam of light.



“**WHERE** are the reinforcements?!”

“They may be a little while as of yet. We’re dealing with a legendary Phobos cat, after all; it seems they want to draw up some sort of strategy beforehand...”

“We can’t *afford* to take things slow! Prince Sirius is expending his own life force in order to protect us!”

“We know that! Honestly, we do! But...if anyone acts recklessly when approaching the cat, we’ll only find ourselves in even deeper trouble!”

Arguments began brewing between the soldiers as they hid behind chunks of rubble. The longer the prince stood by himself desperately keeping the rampaging cat under control, the more panicked everyone else grew.

Under normal circumstances, they would be poised right behind Sirius, waiting for the moment his magical energy ran dry in order to get him to safety. However, under the circumstances, even that proved to be difficult; there was a chance their presence would only agitate the Phobos cat. According to the legends, its magical powers could feed on malice and hostility alone. If they positioned themselves as the cat’s enemies, the burden on Sirius would only get

worse.

“How are we going to defeat that thing?! We’re not even allowed to attack it!”

“Do we really have no choice but to keep it in a protective bubble until it runs out of energy...?”

“That won’t work. It can convert its magic into life force! It would never get any weaker!”

With no solution to work towards, their agitated voices carried on getting louder and louder, until one soldier stopped them.

“Wait...” he said, looking up at the night sky curiously. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“I just saw something white fall from the sky. Maybe it was snow or something...”

“Snow? It’s far too warm for th—” The soldier was quickly silenced when a small, white flake danced in front of his eyes.

Just as described, white particles were falling down from the sky, one after another. Indeed, it could’ve been flakes of pure white snow, but upon closer inspection, they were tiny fibers of cotton.

When they hit the ground, they immediately dissolved into the earth—then fresh, green verdure appeared in its place. The leaves climbed higher and higher before their very eyes, until they eventually culminated in a flush of small, yellow flowers.

The same flowers sprouted from between the piles of rubble, and within a mere few minutes, the ruins had been transformed into a gorgeous field of yellow flowers.

“What are they?” one soldier marveled.

“They’re called snowleas, apparently.”

The soldiers whipped around to see Raven standing there.

“Just like dandelions, they reproduce by apomixis; each seed is encased in

soft, cotton-like fibers, and they sow themselves as they're blown across the earth," Raven said wisely, as though he hadn't just been taught that himself. "We have Marialite to thank for turning this place into a field of snowleas."

"Saint Marialite did this? But why?"

"The plants have a special effect on felines. Whether the same goes for feline divine beasts, we're not sure, but—"

"W-Wait a sec! The beast's acting weird!"

Raven quickly turned to look at the Phobos cat.

The cat—that had been violently thrashing around mere moments before—was now calming down, even yawning as it stretched out its long body. Sirius looked around, conflicted as to whether there was any point in keeping his protective barrier up.

"What's going on? It seems to be...getting comfortable?" he remarked. That was when he noticed the swathes of soft, yellow flowers covering the ground. He recognized them as snowleas.

Just as he began to work out what had happened, he noticed his beloved fiancée running over to him.

"Lord Sirius!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad you're unharmed!"

"Lady Marialite?! What're you doing back h— No, I think that's quite obvious. I thought these flowers might be your doing."

"Yeah," she grinned. "The fragrance of this flower has a narcotic effect on felines, doesn't it? I remembered what you told me when you gave me the seeds."

"And that's why the Phobos cat is suddenly acting so docile..." Sirius realized.

Cornelia was a feline demon. Sirius had provided Marialite with the snowlea seeds in the unlikely event that Cornelia tried to hatch any devious schemes as her maid, but he'd never stopped to consider that they might work on divine beasts, too. With a look of shock on his face, he finally lifted the protective barrier around the Phobos cat.

The cat wobbled, swaying as though it was fighting sleep. Almost

imperceptibly, its black coat seemed to change color, too; it seemed to be gradually fading to a gray color.

“What’s...going on? I feel kinda sleepy... Really sleepy...”

Marialite gave a sweet, fond smile when she heard that same young voice, quieter this time.

“That angry voice *was* you, wasn’t it?” she murmured.

“This human...isn’t scary at all. She’s kind...warm...and smells like flowers. She reminds me of my mother...”

The cat flapped its wings a little, and Marialite caught it in her arms as it floated down towards her. She stroked the top of its round head and spoke to it in a gentle, lilting tone.

“You’ve done a lot of shouting and crying, haven’t you? Of course you’d tire yourself out,” she smiled. “You should take a little nap and rest up, okay? Then, when you wake up...I’ll give you lots of tasty food. I used to do the same thing for someone else just like you.”

“*Okay...*” the Phobos cat relented, closing its weary eyes. As it did so, its body began to glow, turning its ashen fur into a pure, snow-like white. That wasn’t all, either—its thin, batlike wings were now covered in velvety, white feathers resembling a swan’s.



“Oh, how cute,” Marialite doted. “You were always very cute, though. Don’t get me wrong,” she laughed.

“The legends never recorded such an appearance, but...it’s very possible that this is its original form, before it...” Sirius suddenly trailed off, dropping to his knees where he stood. His limbs were trembling.

“Lord Sirius, are you okay?” Marialite fretted. “You look awfully pale.”

“How shameful...” he groaned. “I’m not yet at my limit, but...I suppose letting myself relax is the same thing as letting myself be weak.”

“It’s not shameful at all,” she countered. “You worked really hard protecting everyone.”

“If it weren’t for you...this Phobos cat and I would be...” he trailed off, his eyes suddenly going wide. “What’s wrong, Lady Marialite?!”

Her eyebrows furrowed, confused. It was only when he traced a finger along her cheek and it came away wet that she realized...

She was crying.

“Are you hurt?! Quick, call for a healer!” he panicked.

“Nope. You and Raven did an excellent job of protecting us, don’t worry. Maybe...it’s because I finally feel safe enough to relax, too. I haven’t been terrified like that in a long time,” she admitted, gripping Sirius’ hand and squeezing as he caressed her cheek. Her ever-present smile faltered, and her slender body began to tremble. “When I thought that you might not make it out of here alive...I was scared stiff.”

“Lady Marialite...”

“Please,” she murmured to herself. “After everything I’ve been through, don’t take this happiness away from me...” She hung her head, her voice hoarse. Sirius slid his injured hands around her back, soothing her.

Sirius always thought that things would be okay no matter what. Marialite had an incredibly strong will; she was strong enough that even if Sirius died, he was sure she would lead the demonic kingdom to prosperity somehow. He was sure that she would find someone else who was kind to her, and eventually find

happiness with them.

But he was wrong. Marialite didn't want to ever have to choose someone other than him.

In which case, he had no choice but to survive—no matter what it took. Both as the future emperor and as a typical, ordinary man. Now, he was determined to see this life through.



IT took a few weeks for all the divine beasts to properly calm down.

For one thing, Prince Leonis was imprisoned in the dungeons below the palace, and he was stripped of his title—leaving him as simply Leonis. Uranometria disowned him as soon as he returned to the capital, and he received punishment as any other ordinary citizen would. He managed to escape the death penalty, but using divine beasts to gain power was a very hefty crime indeed, and the price he would pay was just as heavy.

As for the divine beasts who had been affected by Leonis' misconduct, the innocent ex-employees of the Conservation Facility had been enlisted to care for them as they recovered. In stark contrast to their previous violence, the beasts were now very docile, eating properly and letting the demons treat their injuries. It was as though they could sense that Leonis wouldn't be around any longer. And, thanks to Marialite, they had plenty of fruit to go around.

As the divine beasts recovered one by one, they released them back into the wild. A large proportion of them even clung to their favorite staff members when it was time to leave, taking a bit of persuading to let go.

"There we go! I've finished making that flower crown for you, Snow," Marialite smiled. It was made from white flowers that she'd grown herself, and when she placed the small crown on the white cat's head, he mewled happily.

The Phobos cat was a special exception to the conservation program; the danger of it coming across a poacher or other harm in the wild was too great, hence he was now living a comfortable life at Celaeno Palace. Until they managed to find his mother, Marialite was taking on a maternal role. At first, he had joined the other divine beasts being treated by the facility's ex-employees,

but he didn't like to be apart from Marialite for very long, so she ended up taking care of him full-time.

Marialite couldn't decide on a name at first, so Sirius ended up giving him one: Snow.

"I can't hear any voices like I could before, though," Marialite pondered. Now, all she could hear were Snow's meows, purrs, and grumpy growls—just like anyone else could.

"Don't you think it was something to do with your powers?" Cornelia pointed out, gathering up the hair that had accumulated after Snow's brushing session.

"The story goes that Topazios, the original Jade Saint, possessed the ability to understand animals, too. Perhaps the pressure of the situation led you to use that ability somehow," she suggested.

"Lady Cornelia..."

"Wh-What?!" she responded in a shrill, defensive tone.

"Raven already told you this a thousand times, but...you can't keep giving Snow food just because he looks cute," Marialite giggled.

"I-I know that!" she tutted. "And I already told Raven I won't do it again!"

Evidently, Snow had also become a source of comfort for Cornelia as she struggled to get used to her life as a maid.



"Aaaaaaaaagh!"

A soldier's scream echoed from outside the palace.

The source of their terror lay in the knight-like topazios flowers. There had been a green orb buried between the two for a while, but all of a sudden, it flew out of the earth. Red veins emerged along the green surface, and it began to pulsate one beat after another...

Almost as if it were alive.

Epilogue

A small child sat in front of a table filled with a mountain of documents, his brow furrowed deeply. Judging by his outer appearance, a human might think he was six or seven years old, but in reality, he had been alive for more than seventy years.

He glared at the paperwork; it had no purpose other than to annoy him.

“Are you there, Raven?” he called out.

“Yeah. What’s up?” Raven replied, jumping down from one of the beams running across the ceiling.

Sirius pushed the pile of documents toward him, and Raven replied with a look of very obvious disdain.

“What have I done to warrant that face?” Sirius frowned. “I’m merely asking you to take care of these.”

“I can’t do that,” he sighed. “You need to take a look at it, at least.”

“...What is the point? I have no intention to marry.”

Raven gave him an exhausted look; he’d already said that a million times before. If Sirius didn’t like something, it was a painstaking process to get him to change his mind.

When Uranometria bestowed the right to the throne upon Sirius, the atmosphere around him changed drastically. Almost every day, a huge volume of family charts detailing women’s lineages showed up in his office. Each family that sent them took no effort to hide their ulterior motives, either.

Once upon a time, Sirius’ older brothers had regarded him as a convenient little workaholic who would do everyone’s duties for them, but now, they made an open show of hostility towards him. Even though Sirius had never wanted to be the future emperor. The stress of it all was nothing but suffocating to him.

“I know it’s not what you want, but if you’re gonna be emperor, you gotta find yourself an empress, y’know? How about Lord Elestial’s daughter?”

Sirius didn’t even bother to grace that suggestion with a reply. Instead, he shot Raven a cold, empty glare.

“Sheesh, I’m only kidding! It scares me when you do that.”

“None of them see me as anything other than a prince. I don’t want to have to choose any of these women,” Sirius grumbled. He was aware of how selfish he was being, but he couldn’t help but let his true feelings slip out.

He never chose to be the future emperor. He would have much preferred to leave that role to one of his older brothers while he took care of official duties behind the scenes.

Unfortunately, that simply wasn’t to be. Nobody had the power to overturn the emperor’s decision—no matter how much Sirius pleaded otherwise. He knew that he would have to choose a woman to marry eventually.

“Okay, Lord Sirius, I’ll find you a woman who *does* appeal to you. What kinda person are you looking for?”

“Well, I think I’d want her to be...” He paused for a moment.

“Yeah?”

“...Someone who doesn’t know who I am.”

“Uh...” Raven chuckled bitterly. “Sorry, but I don’t think she exists.”

Sirius knew that. But he could dream.



SIRIUS had been having a lot of dreams about his past recently.

As he blinked several times in an attempt to dispel the weariness hanging over him, he remembered that he’d gone to sleep sitting against a tree—and on his lap, a white cat named Snow was sprawled out on his back, napping to his heart’s content. His birdlike wings were fully stretched out, and Sirius had to wonder how on earth he was comfortable like that. He stroked a hand through Snow’s velvety wings, but he showed no signs of waking up.

The sweet, fresh scent of the fruit trees tickled his nose. The orchard that had been created in order to supply the divine beasts with food had become somewhat of a secret spot for Sirius. No one was permitted inside the grounds unless accompanied by himself or Marialite, thus giving him the perfect place to go for some peace and quiet when he needed it.

Even so, if he stayed there for too long, Raven would have a bone to pick with him later—and he wanted to avoid any additional stress. He decided to get up, cradling Snow in his arms as he thought back on what he had relived in his dream.

He wished he could go back and tell himself about his current life and tell him all about the woman that he thought didn't exist. He wanted to tell him how much she loved him, too.

"Excuse me?! It's almost time for afternoon tea! Now is *not* the time to take a detour!" the shrill voice of a certain cat-woman rang out.

"Oh, there's no need to make a fuss. We're only going to pick some fruit for Snow's dinner," a calmer, more gentle voice replied. Snow's eyes suddenly snapped open upon hearing the second voice and he swiftly flew out of Sirius' arms to go and greet them.

"Sorry, Raven..." Sirius smiled. "It looks like it's going to be a while until I get back."

I'm probably going to get lectured for it later, but...

With a spring in his step, he braced himself and strode over to the figure clad in white he could see in the distance.

When he knew there was a beautiful, kind saint just a short distance away, asking him to simply walk on by would be impossible.

Extra Interlude: A Flash of Light

“**COULD** I have a little of your time this evening, Lord Sirius?” Marialite asked bashfully, her cheeks slightly pink.

Sirius’ jaw tensed, and the quill he held in his fist snapped.

Taking that as a bad sign, Marialite laughed awkwardly, her eyebrows knitting together. “If you’re too busy, I’ll just invite Lady Cornelia,” she suggested.

“N-No! Of course not!” Sirius fretted. “I was just so excited, I forgot my own strength... I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Sure enough, his irises had turned red with raw emotion, and his cheeks were even more flushed than Marialite’s. He looked like a tomato, but there was no one there to witness it apart from Marialite—and she didn’t have the heart to tell him.

However, he quickly calmed down when he realized something.

“Hold on a moment...” he hedged. “Did you just say you could invite Cornelia instead?”

“Yeah. She loves Snow very much, after all,” she smiled.

“Snow...?” Sirius questioned, surprised to hear the divine beast’s name. Now that he had established that he’d gotten the wrong idea about what exactly she was asking from him, his body temperature swiftly cooled back to a normal level.

Maybe another time.

“If you’re with me, I’m sure that’ll make Celestine and Liffey very happy, too,” she sang contentedly, holding up a green feather.

Apparently, she’d been gifted one of the teleportation devices, too. The green was a soft, pale hue that very much suited her personality, and before Sirius could even mention it, she’d already grabbed his hand and teleported them both to Celestine’s workshop.

“Why, if it ain’t His Highness. I can understand why you’d want to attend, though; it’s not every day ya get to witness something such as this. Very special,” Celestine greeted them.

“Nobody’s told me what’s happening,” Sirius admitted, slightly alarmed.

Celestine looked up from his cauldron of boiling medicinal herbs, raising a puzzled eyebrow at him.

“You agreed to come along despite being unaware of the situation?” he snorted.

“Lady Marialite was the one who asked me. I assumed it wouldn’t be anything of a dubious nature.”

“Is that so?” Celestine quipped with a smirk. “Well, tonight, we’ll be ascending a mountain.”

This was sounding more and more dubious by the second.

In Celaeno, night never *truly* ended, but that referred only to the color of the sky. A demon’s concept of time was still no different from a human’s. There were some Celaenians who slept during the day and awoke at night, but Sirius had never heard of people climbing mountains specifically at night.

Liffey chimed in, noticing the utter confusion on Sirius’ face. “Have you heard of Mount Caelis? That’s where we’re going,” she said.

“No, I haven’t. I can’t say I’m all too knowledgeable about the mountains. Is it special in some way?” he asked.

“A rare, legendary flower grows on the summit,” she beamed. “If you boil it and drink it, your magic will be more powerful than you could ever dream of! It strengthens your physical abilities, too! And you’ll become so attractive, you’ll be able to woo anyone you ever set eyes on! And you’ll get rich!”

“That *has* to be an exaggeration,” Sirius immediately countered.

It was too good to be true. If a flower like that really existed, he wouldn’t even be impressed; he’d be *scared* of the power it possessed.

“I reckoned the same,” Celestine said with a smirk.

“But, if Phobos cats really exist, there’s no reason why the flower shouldn’t, too!” Liffey persevered, balling her hands into fists.

Sirius had never expected Celestine to go along with something like this; it appeared he had a soft spot for his assistant.

“I agree with Liffey,” Marialite grinned. “Plants are incredibly diverse, and you never really know what you might find.”

“Well...if Marialite’s okay with it, then...I’ll come,” Sirius decided.

Marialite was the personification of possibility; his love for her wasn’t the only reason that he felt like he could believe in her.

“If His Highness is in agreement, let’s get this thing underwa—” Celestine cut himself short as a pillar of red light appeared next to Marialite.

And everyone knew who *red* meant.

“Halt!” a voice called out as a maid with long, red hair and cat ears emerged into the workshop. She held Snow in her arms, who was yawning. “I’m coming, too!”

“Lady Cornelia!” Marialite gasped excitedly. “Have you decided to join us?”

“This little cat told me everything. If something happened to you, I would fail in my duty to protect the saint, and everyone would berate me! Therefore, no matter where you go, I shall follow!”

“Eeeek! You’re Lord Elestial’s daughter!” Liffey exclaimed with a grimace on her face. “What’re you planning this time?!”

“Don’t worry, Liffey,” Marialite reassured her. “Lady Cornelia doesn’t like being on her own, that’s all. She probably just felt left out.”

“O-Oh, really? Hmm... Okay, then...”

“Oh, *do* spare me the pitying eyes!” Cornelia snapped, unable to take Liffey’s warm, sympathetic gaze.

Sirius glanced at her and sighed. “*Why* did you give her a teleportation device?” he asked Celestine, exhausted.

“At first, I laughed her off when she asked for one, but then she awarded me

a large sum of money,” Celestine shrugged. Evidently, the temptation of riches wasn’t something that weakened with age.

“Is it really okay for her to come?” Sirius asked, uneasy.

“Doesn’t affect me whatsoever. With the saint around, even a fully-grown tiger acts like a kitten,” Celestine laughed.

“We’ll have to bring enough supplies for one more person, then. Does that work?” Sirius asked.

“By all means. At this point, bringing an extra person or two doesn’t really make a difference,” Celestine said, brushing him off with a flippant wave.

While Sirius wondered if it was truly safe to be so nonchalant about this whole situation, he brought up something that had been niggling at him for the past few minutes.

“What did you mean when you said I’d get to witness something ‘very special’?”

“Curious, are we? Well, you’ll just have to wait and find out,” Celestine grinned wickedly, heading over to where his assistant was being chased around the room by an enraged Cornelia.



MOUNT Caelis was in the southern region of Celaeno.

It was lined with bare, lifeless trees, and not a single blade of grass poked through the mounds of dirt. As there were no plants to be consumed as food, the area was also completely devoid of wildlife.

It was no wonder the barren, soulless mountain had come to be known by another name: Mount Desolation.

“Why on earth did you invite Lady Marialite to such a dangerous place?!” Sirius barked.

“I couldn’t have put it better myself! Were you just trying to see if it was possible to scare her?!” Cornelia shrieked.

For once, they agreed on something.

Now that they were actually on the mountain, it was plain to see that something wasn't right. That much was undeniable. There was absolutely no sign of life, and the frosty wind that whistled through the air chilled them right through to the bone.

No one admitted it aloud, but they all got the impression that there was no turning back now that they had stepped foot there.

"Uh...when was all this arranged? No one told me we'd be climbing a *mountain*," Raven commented fearfully, staring at the desolate mountain in shock. Sirius had brought him with them without explaining anything. He'd been tasked with looking after Snow, who was nestled between his arms and his chest.

"I thought everyone might get hungry, so I brought some sandwiches! One of the maids helped me make them," Marialite announced.

"*Woohoooo*! A saint's homemade sandwiches!" Liffey rejoiced.

Marialite simply held out her basket with a smile; she didn't seem even the slightest bit scared. It would take more than a dusty old mountain to frighten her off.

"She's tougher than all of us put together, that saint. She could turn anything into an occasion for a picnic," Celestine guffawed.

Sirius and Cornelia had no words—probably because it was true.



"**WHEN** I was working in my own country, I often climbed mountains such as these," Marialite remarked, using her tremendous leg strength to make her way up a particularly steep mountain path without breaking a sweat. Looking at her, no one would ever guess she possessed such brawn.

Liffey was the first one to throw in the towel, wasting no time before pestering Celestine to carry her. Naturally, he ignored her completely.

"Impressive. No wonder you have so much stamina," Sirius nodded.

"What about you, Lord Sirius? Are you holding out okay?" Marialite asked.

"Yes. Demons are far slower to physically tire than humans," he assured her.

“...Apart from *her*, it seems,” Cornelia tutted, shooting an icy glare at Liffey as she staggered up the path.

“Liffeeeeey? Are you okay?” Raven called out in concern from where he rounded up the party at the back.

“Ngh... I’ll be fine...” she groaned.

“She’s usually holed up in the workshop with me, so she probably doesn’t get enough exercise, y’see. It’s a waste of all that youth,” Celestine sighed gruffly.

“Then explain why *you’re* not out of breath! You’re hundreds of years older than me...old man...” Liffey huffed. Celestine simply replied with an impish grin.

Up until that moment, Snow had been carefully surveying their surroundings, but he suddenly began to struggle, wriggling free from Raven’s arms.

“*Meoww!*” he cried out, flying over to Liffey. Celestine studied him with amused eyes.

“Did you know that carnivorous birds identify creatures on the verge of death before making them their prey?” he chuckled.

“I dunno how you can laugh about that,” Raven frowned. “That’s your assistant you’re talking about, there. What if she really did get eaten?”

Snow opened his jaws and swooped down to latch onto Liffey’s collar—not her throat, thankfully.

“Wha—?!” she cried out. “What’re you doing?!”

“*Hrmff! Mrrww!*” Snow chirped, flapping his wings and slowly hauling Liffey up into the air.

“Wow, Snow!” Marialite praised him, clapping. “You’re so strong!”

Snow closed his eyes and flapped his wings harder, clearly proud of his efforts.

“Aww, thank you, Snow! I’m so glad you came,” Liffey grinned as she glided through the air.

“Really appreciate that, little beast,” Celestine nodded. “I didn’t intend to pass my work off onto you as well, but it’s good to have ya around all the

same.”

Sirius and Cornelia turned to share a glance with each other; there was a specific word that didn’t pass either of them by.

“*Work?*” they said suspiciously.

“Mm-hm, that’s right,” he smiled. “Hey there, Saint—could ya hold this?”

“What a sweet little pigeon!” she marveled, looking over the small stuffed toy as Celestine placed it in her hand. It was about the size of her fist. However, it didn’t look like a normal pigeon; instead, it was pale green in color.

“Is this another one of your devices?” Marialite asked excitedly.

“Indeed. If you walk along with this in tow, you’ll be immediately teleported back to Celaeno Palace if you happen ta run into any danger. I reckon you’ll be safe with His Highness and the Hellcat around, but if on the off chance something *were* to occur...”

“Stop right there, Celestine!” Sirius bellowed. “What *exactly* are you planning?! You’ve brought us all the way up here, and now you’re giving Lady Marialite something to teleport back to safety?! What do you know?!”

“And what do you mean she’ll be safe with us around?! Safe from *what?*!” Cornelia yelled, pressing him for answers.

“*Eeeeeek!*” Liffey squealed all of a sudden, pointing ahead of them as Snow carried her along. The color drained from her face. “L-Look...”

Among the darkness, some strange-looking figures came into view. They had branches for arms, while the bottom halves of their bodies were made of roots. Their forms suggested they were women, but their torsos were so withered and mangled that they were more reminiscent of corpses than people.

Hostility radiated from them as they became alerted to the party’s presence. Whether they were angry about being disturbed by trespassers on the mountain or whether there was some other reason for their displeasure, nobody knew. However, one thing was for certain: they weren’t going to just stand there and watch as the party walked past.

“Wow, those people sure look strange!” Marialite admired them.

“They’re the creatures that inhabit this mountain,” Celestine explained. “Unless we do something about ’em, this’ll be the end of the road for us.” He gave a pointed look at Sirius and then at Cornelia.

“Your Highness, Hellcat—you’re up!” he announced gleefully.

“How dare you? I’m not laying a finger on them until you agree to fight with us!” Cornelia demanded.

“Eh, I’m too old for that nonsense. I’ll sprain my back conjuring up a single blow,” he sighed gruffly.

“And climbing a mountain doesn’t?!” Cornelia scoffed in disbelief, her ears pricking up in anger. “Just look at your assistant!”

“Lady Marialite...” Sirius approached her gingerly, afraid of how she was going to answer. “Could it be that Celestine was the one to invite you here? Rather than choosing to come yourself...”

“That’s right! He said it would be a great learning opportunity!” she said with a dazzling smile. Sirius slapped both palms to his forehead.

That was when he fully understood the situation they were in. The reason Celestine invited Marialite was to use her as bait—so that Sirius and Cornelia would agree to come and end up doing Celestine’s dirty work for him. He was using them as his personal soldiers.

“Oh, I’ve had enough of this! We can defeat those things easy peasy! Let’s just get it over with,” Cornelia grumbled, rushing over to the group of monsters and shooting large, sharp icicles at them.

“Celestine, your research funding will be cut by ten percent this month!” Sirius barked as he followed suit, shooting balls of lightning at the monsters.

“I’ve already received plenty of funds from the Hellcat, so you’re free to deduct as much as you wish,” he grinned.

“Curse you!”

Surprisingly, the monsters fled and scattered in response to their attacks rather than trying to retaliate. Marialite studied their reactions curiously.

“You know...I think they actually wanted something from us,” Marialite

suggested.

“Really?” Raven replied, nibbling at his bottom lip. “But they stared at us like they wanted to murder us...”

Still, with the monsters out of the way, they could continue their journey to the summit. Liffey was still low on energy, so Snow kindly continued carrying her.

“I only brought the beast to rope the Hellcat into coming, but we’re very lucky to have him, eh?” Celestine quipped.

“*Meeeeeow!*” Snow cried out joyfully, seemingly pleased by Celestine’s *compliment*. Unfortunately, this also meant that his mouth fell open, leaving Liffey to tumble to the ground.

“Ack!” she yelped, dirt sticking to her back.

“Lady Marialite...please stay close to me,” Sirius implored her with a grave expression as he surveyed their surroundings. “The creatures from earlier are still roaming the area, watching us.”

“I wonder why that is...” she hummed in reply.

“To kill us, obviously,” Cornelia muttered. “Your Highness, perhaps it would be wise to raze this whole mountain to the ground before anyone can get hurt.” Judging by her haphazard plan, the watchful eyes of the monsters were beginning to bother her.

“Finally. We agree on something,” Sirius smirked.

“Nuh-uh, that sounds like a terrible idea,” Raven jabbed. “Do you guys have worms for brains or something?”

During their bickering, Snow had hauled Liffey back into the air, and she now had a good view of the party. That was when she noticed Celestine restlessly checking the pocket watch he was carrying.

“Why do you keep looking at the time?” she asked.

“If we don’t reach the summit by dawn, this will all have been for naught,” he said cryptically.

“Right...” she replied unsurely.



WITHOUT any further incidents, the party safely reached the summit of the mountain.

“I had a feeling it might turn out this way, but...I don’t feel like we’ve achieved anything whatsoever,” Cornelia grumbled. Everyone—apart from Marialite—nodded in agreement.

Usually, they would at least be able to enjoy the breathtaking views that came with reaching the top of the mountain, but Mount Caelis was different; it was surrounded by nothing but dust and darkness. The capital was so far away that it was no more than a vague haze of light on the horizon, and there was no other civilization in the area to see.

They had gained absolutely nothing by coming here.

“Aren’t you all hungry? We can have our supper here,” Marialite suggested, taking no notice of the gloomy atmosphere as she spread a picnic blanket out on the dusty ground.

“Now, now, Saint. Hold your horses. You’re gonna want to see this,” Celestine said, turning the palm of his hand towards her.

“Is something going to happen?” she asked.

“That’s right. Just as dawn comes to pass...” he said, watching as the minute hand joined the hour hand on his pocket watch.

A second later, a flash of light enveloped their surroundings. It was possible to see across the land even without the help of Sirius’ magic.

They looked up at the sky to see it turn from dark black into a delicate, faint blue.

“I...” Sirius trailed off, letting the orbs of light surrounding them disappear. He was speechless.

“As of yet, I’m unsure what causes the phenomenon, but...” Celestine began to explain. “Once a month, on the summit of Mount Caelis, you can see the other sky for about two hours after dawn.”

Meanwhile, his assistant was swiftly running from place to place, carefully studying the ground beneath her. She was moving so quickly that it was difficult to believe she was the same girl who moaned and complained because of how grueling their hike was.

“Ohh, floweeeeer? Where are youuuu?” she called out.

“Mrow?” Snow mewed curiously.

“Hey, Snow! Could you help me look for a rainbow-colored flower? It’s about this big!” she said, gesturing with her hands. “It’s gotta be somewhere around here!”

“Mew!” Snow said with a nod. She had no trouble enlisting the divine beast’s help.

“A flower which enhances your life in every way...” Sirius pondered. “If something so lucrative truly existed, everyone would have far fewer obstacles to overcome... Lady Marialite?”

She’d stopped busying herself with setting up the picnic and was now staring fixedly at something, completely frozen.

A thin beam of light peeked through the gap between two mountains, blessing the sky with a warm morning glow. Marialite whipped around to look at Sirius and smiled unreservedly.

“Just look at it, Lord Sirius! I’ve never seen such a beautiful dawn before,” she said, pointing at it with eyes full of childlike wonder.

“Oh...yes. You’re quite right,” he replied, clutching at the left side of his chest.

Sacred. Precious. Beautiful.

Those three words rushed through his head over and over, until eventually, tears began to spill over his bottom eyelashes. He couldn’t help but cry.

Cornelia and Raven watched him with looks of displeasure on their faces.

“He has got to be one of the strangest princes I’ve ever met,” Cornelia snorted.

“Meh, don’t think about it too much. He’s always like this when Marialite’s

around,” Raven shrugged.

“Wait, everyone...” Marialite hushed all of a sudden. “Don’t you think the mountain seems...different?”

The group looked around curiously to see the dusty ground change before their very eyes. The dull, drab scenery was gradually overtaken by leaves and flowers, turning gray and black to green and brown. The withered trees sprung back to life, and grass covered the ground where they stood as flowers bloomed.

“Ah, I meant to tell you, but it musta slipped my mind,” Celestine nodded. “For these two hours, and these two hours only, the mountain comes alive.”

“Yesss! I know it’s here! The flower’s *got* to be here!” Liffey exclaimed with newfound enthusiasm. It seemed like there’d be no stopping her, but only a moment later...

“Eeeeeek!”

She let out a scream and retreated back to hide behind Celestine at an astounding speed.

“What’s the matter? Did you see some sorta creepy crawly?” he asked.

“No! Look over there! They’re back!” she pointed towards a large tree, where some of the monsters from earlier could be seen hiding in its shadow, watching them. However, something was different; dresses made of ivy covered their branch-like bodies, and flowers of all different colors bloomed on the top of their heads. Reds, yellows, oranges, purples, whites... They were gorgeous, and the change made the monsters seem a lot less threatening than before.

“Ooh, even they’re covered in plants. How intriguing,” Celestine noted.

“But why’re they still following us?” Liffey wondered. “They’re not even trying to attack us, so...maybe there’s some other reason?”

That was when the monsters stepped out from behind the tree. Sirius and Cornelia were immediately poised for battle, but soon relaxed when they noticed something: a single monster was grimacing sadly, and its head wasn’t covered in flowers like the rest of them. The others were all looking to

Marialite, silently willing her to do something.

“To me, it looks like they want Marialite to grow some flowers on that monster over there—the odd one out,” Raven suggested.

“...You think so?” Marialite said before going silent, withdrawing into her own thoughts to give it some careful deliberation.

A minute later, she stepped forward and approached the monsters with a huge smile on her face. Sirius and Cornelia followed after her with fear-stricken expressions.

“Cornelia,” Sirius said gravely. “If they try to harm Lady Marialite in any way, we will decimate this mountain.”

“I’m tired, hungry, and losing my patience. I’ll be happy to assist in any destruction simply to blow off steam,” she cackled.

There was a dark, troubled aura emitting from the two demons as they approached, causing the monsters to tremble in fear.

“...She looks sick,” Marialite said with concern as they drew closer to the monster with no flowers.

“Really? How so?” Sirius asked.

“Well, since awakening to my powers, I also gained the ability to tell how a plant’s feeling just by looking at it. I’ve seen quite a lot of sick plants,” she explained.

“Interesting... And, can you cure them?” Cornelia asked.

“Of course! Just give me a moment,” she said, walking closer to hold her hands over the sick monster’s head. A pale glow emitted from the palms of her hands, its light slowly cascading down the monster’s entire body. Then, a large bud sprouted from the top of her head.

“Oh!” Liffey called out with a gasp as the flower’s petals unfurled, revealing a brilliant pink.

The monster had a dazzled, amazed look on her face as she reached up to touch the new addition to her head, and her friends and family smiled with relief.

“There. You’re okay now,” Marialite assured her with a beaming smile on her own face.

Tears welled up in Sirius’ eyes once more.

“Whoa,” Raven grinned. “I sorta had the impression that monsters were a ferocious bunch, but I guess even they get worried about their friends.”

“That’s ’cause they always have a proper reason for getting all upset and bothered,” Celestine commented. “To protect their territory, to seek food... None of it’s done outta spite. That’s a big difference between monsters and people. In a way, they’re much purer creatures.” He fished a piece of candy out of his pocket and popped it between his lips before sucking on it casually.

Liffey stared at him with a puzzled look on her face; it was always a surprise when he came out with those little tidbits of wisdom.

“*Oh!*” she suddenly exclaimed again.

“What is it now?”

“Look, look!” she whispered. “The monsters just gave Lady Marialite some kind of flower...”

As they left, the monsters handed a single flower to Marialite, seemingly as a token of their gratitude. However, as touching as their exchange was, Liffey’s train of thought was far from considering the bond between humans and monsters.

It was a *rainbow*-colored flower—the exact flower that Liffey had sent herself into a frenzy searching for.

“It...it really exists! *Woohooooooooo!*” Liffey shrieked in excitement. Her cry echoed back and forth between the mountains, a seemingly infinite scream of “*Woohoo!*” repeating over and over.



“...**C’MON**, young’un. Cheer up.”

“Don’t worry, Liffey! You’ve still got plenty of opportunities ahead of you in life!”

“I kinda get how she feels, though...”

Just as Celestine claimed, after exactly two hours, darkness befell the mountain once more. Grass turned back to dust, and the trees dried and withered before their eyes.

Until then, they’d enjoyed their time on the summit by partaking in Marialite’s picnic, stuffing themselves with the delicious tea and sandwiches she’d made. She’d even made special fruit sandwiches for Snow, who gobbled them up as though he were starved. Hence, they’d begun their descent down the mountain with a spring in their steps.

Liffey’s bout of sorrow came after that—when the mountain was enshrouded with darkness once again.

The flower that Marialite had given to her for safekeeping suddenly wilted, its rainbow coloring dulling to a dark brown. Eventually, by the time they reached the foot of the mountain, it had withered completely, becoming nothing more than a dry husk.

That was how short life was on Mount Caelis. Having been faced with that harsh reality, Liffey turned into a hollow shell of a girl. Despite her show of energy at the summit, Snow ended up carrying her back down the mountain, too.

“My magic...my strength...my looks...my riches...” she muttered, lamenting her loss.

“Fool that you are,” Celestine sighed. “It’s preposterous to think that drinking a cup of tea made from one measly flower would give you all that.”

“But what if it *did*?!” Liffey protested. “That’d be so awesome! You think so too, right, Lady Marialite?”

“Hmm, well...” Marialite said, looking around at everyone else before replying. “Personally, I’m already extremely happy just spending time with my loved ones.”

The stunned look on their faces suggested that her words had pierced each of their hearts one by one. As she skipped away, humming contentedly, Sirius began to wail. He bawled his eyes out, unable to suppress the lump in his throat

any longer.

Later on, he had to drink buckets of water to replenish all the tears he'd lost that night.



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