

Author: Nao Wakasa  
Illustrator: ICA



# The Extraordinary, the Ordinary, and SOAP!

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### **Lucia Arca**

By appearances, an ordinary laundrymaid. Earnest, good-natured, and hard-working. Has a special magic called "Soap."

### **Celestino Clementi**

The famed Captain of the Third Regiment, known as the Dragonslayer. Despite his flashy looks, takes his responsibilities very seriously.

### **Nishime Maria**

A high school girl summoned to another world to become the Sacred Maiden. Has an incredibly willful personality.

## **CHARACTERS**

The Extraordinary, the Ordinary, and SOAP!

## Gaius Canalis

Assigned to the Fourth Regiment. A troublemaker who doesn't listen to his commanders. Often called a bear.

## Edoardo Hristo Banfield

Crown prince of the kingdom of Banfield. Potential fiance of the Sacred Maiden.

## Fernando Agliardi

Commander of the Kingdom of Banfield's Knights. Acts as Edoardo's assistant.

## Reynard Canalis

The Commander's Aide. Gaius's younger brother, who is surprisingly fond of him.

## Eric Acquafrasca

Academy researcher and master mage. Goes crazy when it comes to research and measurements.

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# Lucia Dreams

My body felt heavy; like I was stuck in the mud, unable to move even a single finger. Even with my eyes wide open, everything was one big blur. It felt like nothing around me held any meaning. I was just there, like a rock on the side of the road. Even if I saw flowers swaying or people walking by, I couldn't move. It was as if I was sleeping, but also awake. There was something I needed to do, but I just couldn't think of anything.

"Go ahead and scream, if ya can. But you can't, can ya? The Sacred Maiden is fast asleep beside ya, and I mixed some of that *Dreamin' Lamp* drug into the Prince's entourage's drinks, so no one'll be coming to save ya. I was thinkin' it's just about time I move on, so I'll be goin' with Gisella once they sell 'er off. So you'll be my last treat here. I mean, they'll probably go all-in on investigatin' after I go for one of the Sacred Maiden's companions, after all."

Someone was right here talking to me, but I had no idea what they were saying. I let my eyes wander absentmindedly, trying to discern what was happening. I couldn't tell what, but I had a feeling it was important.

"Huh, yer not out yet? Yer resistin' pretty well. Maybe one sip wasn't enough. I'd give you another dose, but ya spilled the rest of it... That's pretty expensive stuff, ya know?"

While the person kept talking to me, I felt like I was enveloped in something warm. *Who is this man, anyway? What is he saying?* The nagging feeling of forgetting something returned. Forgetting...something important. Forgetting...a promise.

"Ugh..."

"Hm? What, yer makin' me feel bad. Stop resisting. C'mon, let's 'ave some fun."

*Right... I promised.*

"Start with what you can do."

*“Don’t use that magic where people will see you.”*

*“When things get scary, hold my hand and show me those soap bubbles.”*

*“Please don’t make a wall between us.”*

I could hear someone’s voice. Yes, I’d made important promises with people. Lots of— *“I want you beside me.”*

Someone important to me said that and smiled.

*“Lucia!”*

It was like a soap bubble popped.

# Maria Gets Kidnapped Again

I shouldn't have tried to bring my tableware back.

"Sacred Maiden, may I speak with you for a bit?"

It all began when an aproned man approached me in the hall, after I'd gone to give my tray back to an inn worker. He had red hair like Eri-kun, and amber eyes. This twenty-something-year-old guy seemed kind of troubled as he looked at me from the shadows. Thinking back, I should've just ignored him. He was obviously sketchy. But I just waltzed up to him without a care. I blame it on him reminding me of Eri-kun, and being hot.

"What do you want?" When I got closer, he had this pained, but also still kind of happy, look on his face. After another step he blurted out, "I'm sorry!"

Immediately I felt like something slammed into my gut. *What the hell. Do you not know who I am!?* But my complaints never left my mouth as my vision blacked out. The next thing I remembered was being somewhere I'd never seen before. After being kidnapped to a different world, it looked like I'd been kidnapped *again*. Did kidnappings really happen this much!?

"Oh, you're awake." A man spoke up, as I opened my eyes. He wasn't the hottie though, but some gross old man. His extravagant clothing was, surprisingly, not gaudy. Must be because the colors were subdued. But he himself, with his plump body nearly ripping through the seams — or maybe it was his fat face — looked gross and vulgar.

"Who are you? Do you really think you can get away with this!? I'm not saving this world for you!"

"Heh, despite that delicate face, you're a strong-willed lady." It didn't look like the old man was gonna listen. After laughing at me, he started talking to someone on the other side of the room. Who were these people? "But really, Ronnie, I might have told you to bring me a girl that was prettier than Gisella, but I never told you to bring me the Sacred Maiden. I can't sell her."

“But the only one who fit your order was the Sacred Maiden...!” The person arguing was the hottie who’d kidnapped me.

“I’m not giving Gisella back,” the old man snorted.

“What!? That’s not what you said before!”

“I can’t sell something this eye-catching.”

“I hid myself before I took her! No one will think it was me. So if I take Gisella and leave, no one will connect the two missing persons cases!”

“That’s not the problem here!”

My kidnappers were, apparently, at odds. I thought I’d try to escape while they were distracted, but I very belatedly realized I was tied up. *That sure took me a while to notice.* Humans couldn’t take in that much information so quickly. *This is stupid. Maybe I should give ‘em a shot of my magic. I’ll take my revenge! It’s too late for regrets!*

“You’re both so dumb! You’ll regret kidnapping me! *Light Arrow!*”

But the arrow of light I was supposed to have conjured didn’t appear. Instead, a crystal on the desk broke with a loud shatter. The old man looked like he almost fell out of his seat in surprise, before his stupid smirk came right back. I bit my lip in frustration. *I’ll hit him next time!*

“It’s a good thing I put out a defensive barrier crystal as a precaution. Heh, Sacred Maiden, you’re having a bit *too* much fun, so have a little nap.” With a sarcastic grin, the old man picked up a goblet and stood up. Grabbing my jaw, he forced the goblet’s contents into my mouth. I tried to spit it out quickly, but couldn’t get all of it.

“Wha...!?” I tried to scream at him, but suddenly my tongue wouldn’t move, like it wasn’t mine anymore. *This is like that kind of anesthetic you get at the dentist! Just stronger!*

“Heh, you’re such a feisty young lady. Once it takes effect, I should give you a little more.” The old man shook the goblet in his hands, his smile wider than ever before. He looked like he was having fun tormenting me. “No... Maybe it’ll take using some *Dehorning Knife* to make you listen to me. Tch, that stuff sells

just as well as the Dreaming Lamp that I just gave you. Ah, but unlike Dreaming Lamp, the effect strengthens with use. Ain't it wonderful? People will want it so bad that they'll do anything to get more."

*Isn't that like a narcotic? This guy is a drug dealer!?* I wanted answers, but my body refused to listen to me. *Actually, I'm getting really sleepy... Wait, no, am I fully paralyzed? Don't use such dangerous drugs, you evil merchant!*

As if the old man knew how I felt, he said, "Heh, aren't you getting sleepy right about now? That Dreaming Lamp drug is a wonderful one that makes anyone feel like they're floating in the clouds. Now, good night, Sacred Maiden."

*He pisses me off!* Unable to fight off the drowsiness overcoming me, I lost consciousness.



"...It's over now. You don't have to be scared anymore. It's safe to wake up," came a distant voice. It was like a soft, gentle whisper overflowing with worry for me. No one worried about me in this world, but just one person stayed by my side. My important...

Next, I heard a disgusting gravelly voice, completely different from the gentle one. "...I decided ya were goin' to be the next one from the minute I saw ya."

Then, I heard the sound of something hard dropping. Next, the sound of cloth rubbing together, and another thump as something fell. *What? Wait, something bad is happening!* I struggled around trying to catch my breath.

"Stop resistin'. C'mon, let's 'ave some fun," the gross voice said again. He began to laugh, which pissed me off. *Wait, what are you talking about? Have fun?* The person laughing started to come closer. *No, stop. Stay away!*

"Ah, yer finally awake? Now the fun can begin."

The sound of something ripping apart woke me up completely.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

My fear and anger at the owner of the laughing voice made me search for him immediately, and I was relieved to find he wasn't right in front of me. I looked

around in surprise to see he was on the bed nearby, but that surprise soon gave way to a burning anger. There was someone else lying on that bed, and that man was straddling her while holding her down.

“Lucia!” I screamed, suddenly in a rage. I mean, it was bad enough some weirdo snuck into our room. But I couldn’t forgive that pervert for attacking my precious friend! “GET. OFF. HER! *Light Spear!*”

The magic I cast in an eruption of anger grazed the pervert and pierced the wall, exploding with a blast.

“Arrrrgh!” the man screamed.

“Lucia!”

He must have been terrified, because he fell off the bed, bleeding. But right now, I was worried about my friend, who wasn’t moving. Her blouse was ripped open, but she didn’t move an inch. She didn’t even react when I broke the wall with my magic. *This is too weird!* But then I remembered what that shady merchant said. They might have used the same kind of dangerous drugs on her! I began to reach towards her, and at the same time, the door was blown off.

## Maria Goes Into Defense Mode

A sudden gust blew into the room, along with the remnants of the door. I reflexively held down my skirt, and I didn't forget to hold down my friend's clothes either. Nice job, me! It was probably just a coincidence that none of the shards of wood hit us. Everything happened so fast.

"Lucia!" a voice yelled. The one who ran in, pale as a ghost, was the same person who broke the door—my incredibly handsome guardian knight. But the only thing he was looking at was his beloved. I might need to have a serious talk with him about whose guardian he is. *Okay, I'll do it later.*



“...And the Sacred Maiden!?” Celes gasped. His eyes widened as he saw me, but that only lasted an instant before he pointed his sword at the pervert cowering on the floor. “You attacked the Sacred Maiden!?”

He was finally acting like my protector, but his deduction was wrong. The man didn’t attack me, he attacked Lucia. But telling that to this lovesick idiot would be a pain, so I tried to stealthily pull Lucia’s blouse back together before he noticed. That didn’t get past him, though. It seemed as if his stupidly high specs kicked in just when I didn’t want them to, and he was watching me as he squared off with the pervert.

“...You bastard!” he snarled.

Between Lucia, who was unconscious, my actions, and the pervert on the floor, Celes was finally brought to the right conclusion. His expression this time was different. The way he swung his sword made even me freeze with fear.

“*Shield of Light!*” I yelled.

It was a miracle I even had time to cast my shield. To be honest, I was actually surprised by how quickly I was able to respond. *Wow, I’m doing good. I’ll get Lucia to praise me later. I’ll brag to Ed, too.* Yep. After deflecting Celes’s sword, the Shield of Light shattered like glass and disappeared. When I’d practiced it at the Academy, it could normally take multiple hits, but he would break it in one shot... *How strong is this guy? So scary.* But this wasn’t the time for me to be scared. I didn’t want Celes murdering people right in front of me, okay!? I might’ve been all for attacking the pervert earlier, but when someone else does it, I calmed down surprisingly quick.

“Forget killing him, saving Lucia comes first! This shady merchant was showing off some dangerous drugs, so it might be that! They were ‘something lamp’ and ‘something knife’!”

Mentioning Lucia had a dramatic effect on Celes. In an instant, he looked calm again, sheathing his sword and approaching the pervert. He grabbed the man’s shoulder and arm, and with a dull crack, the pervert started screaming. He deserved it. Maybe I’ll step on him later.

“What happened!?” exclaimed Reynard as he rushed in late, seemingly having

heard us. He looked kind of like he wanted to say something about the state of the room, but he was calm enough to start working quickly. Honestly, I didn't think I'd be able to handle hot-headed Celes alone, so I was glad Reynard came.

"Lucia, Lucia!" I cried out. Relieved by Reynard's entrance, I went back to clinging to Lucia as she slept, worried. You could feel the chill coming from Celes as he looked at the buttons ripped from her collar. But I didn't have time to deal with this lovestruck idiot. So, go Reynard!

Reading the room, Reynard asked Celes for a situation report. "This man works here at the inn, does he not?"

"I believe so. He's probably also the serial rapist who's been terrorizing Amarith..." Celes replied with a sub-zero tone. *Scary.*

Reynard apparently decided to ignore Celes's frigid demeanor, and checked on me instead. "But Sacred Maiden, are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine. Wait, why am I back at the inn? I was kidnapped, and drugged... Then I woke up to this. What happened?"

*Anyway, I'm the Sacred Maiden, right? Try to remember that, Celes!*

# Lucia is Happy and Maria is Safe

I was alone when I woke up. There was a nice breeze blowing in through the open window. *Where am I?* It looks like a room at the inn. I went through my hazy memories as I glanced around the room. I was slow to recall anything. We definitely got to the town of Amarith. So I was in Amarith's inn, right?

"...Miss Maria!" I exclaimed in a panic. Going through my memories, I remembered her and realized. That's right! How could I forget! We needed to go search for Miss Maria!

As I got up to jump out of bed, the door opened. "Eh...!?"

"Ah, you're awake. Are you okay? You don't feel sick or anything?"

The one who stepped into the room was none other than the vanished Miss Maria. She had a lovely smile on her face, but I was so confused. I thought she was kidnapped... Huh? Was I wrong? Was that a dream?

"Miss... Maria...?" I whispered.

"That's right, I'm Maria!" she replied, standing up straight. "Eri-kun woke up, so I figured you'd wake up soon, and I was just in time!"

She was speaking normally, and I couldn't see anything wrong physically. She was completely the same. *Was it really just a dream that Miss Maria was gone...?*

"What's that blank look for! Ah...is your memory fuzzy? I think Reynard said that might happen."

"My memory... Fuzzy?"

I blinked as Miss Maria petted my hair, and then filled in my missing memories. It wasn't a dream that Miss Maria had been kidnapped. The one who had kidnapped her was Ronnie, the inn worker who had gone missing at the same time. The Gorgonne, a local merchant family, had taken his lover Gisella hostage, and he tried to exchange Miss Maria for her. I was shocked that

Ronnie would kidnap someone like the Sacred Maiden who would save the world.

With a wry smile on her face, Miss Maria said, “Surprising, huh? I might be pretty, but I’m the Sacred Maiden, right? Was he fine with me not purifying the Cristallo Sacro? But he was at the end of his rope, and hadn’t thought that far, apparently. He actually thought I’d be able to save him! Hilarious, right?”

Shrugging her shoulders, she continued, “So they drugged me unconscious, but before they could sell me off, you, *Eri-kun*, Celes, and the bear came and saved me. The Gorgonne bosses were gonna try to shut the perpetrators up, but Fer came in and got them all arrested.”

“Drugged!? Miss Maria, are you alright!?” My face paled at the thought of her getting drugged, but Miss Maria just smiled and waved it off with a slender hand.

“I’m fine. You and *Eri-kun* got the same stuff, but for some reason it didn’t last as long on me. Instead of lasting until the next day, I woke up quick, with my memories fine to boot. I was talking with Ed, and he thinks it might have affected me differently because I’m not from this world.”

That must’ve been why my memories were fuzzy. The last thing I could remember was Sir Celes and the others going to search for Miss Maria, so the fact that my memories had been cut off bothered me immensely. But even if Mister Ronnie and the Gorgonne family were caught, what had happened to the missing Miss Gisella?

“Um, were they able to find Miss Gisella?” I asked.

“Ah, her? It looks like they got her location out of them and are on their way to go get her.”

Apparently that shady merchant wasn’t just dealing drugs, but he was into human trafficking, too — Miss Gisella had already been sold off to one of their regulars. The inn worker committed a crime by kidnapping Miss Maria, but he might be able to return here after he served time for it. And of course, the serial rapist was caught as well; he’d been buying drugs from the Gorgonne family and using them in his crimes.

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered that Sir Gaius and Lord Reynard warned me about that foul criminal. A chill ran down my spine at the thought that someone like that could have taken part in Miss Maria's kidnapping. *I'm so glad she's safe.* After hearing everything from Miss Maria, and being sure she was alright, I realized that I hadn't apologized to her. If I had realized this sooner, she would've never gone through such a scary experience. I was embarrassed, having told her that I would protect her.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to protect you, Miss Maria. It must have been scary to be kidnapped."

"I'm just *fine!* You guys came and saved me. So, thanks!"

She gave me a bright smile, and I couldn't help but cling to her; she hugged me tightly back. Miss Maria's sudden kidnapping debacle ended Amarith's string of kidnappings, and things went back to normal. After waiting for Miss Maria, Eric, and I to recover, we left the town.

## Lucia Approaches the First Cristallo Sacro

After the incident, I was made to ride in the carriage with Miss Maria and the crown prince. Being that it was for very important people, it was incredibly comfortable. The seats were covered in beautiful fabric woven with complicated flower patterns, and there were many fluffy cushions, but that didn't seem to be enough for Miss Maria.

"Carriages hurt your bottom, don't they?" Miss Maria asked.

As I slowly glanced around, I replied, "This carriage is actually quite nice. Wagons have harder seats, and shake more."

"Really!?" Miss Maria pouted. "Even forgetting the cushions, this carriage shakes *way more* than I'm used to in a car."

That reminded me, Sir Celes had once said that the Sacred Maiden had never ridden in a carriage before. I wondered if this "car" thing was what they used for transportation instead? Whatever the case, her world must be amazing to have something less shaky than even this carriage!

"What is a 'car'?" I asked.

"Hmm, how do I explain it... It's made of metal, and it's like a horseless carriage, kinda... It's hard to describe now that I think about it. The tires are made out of rubber instead of wood, so they vibrate much less."

"Eh, they can move without a horse? With magic?"

"My world doesn't have magic!" Miss Maria quickly shot back. "They run using engines. I'm not sure how they work, but they're faster than carriages, and they have air conditioning."

"Interesting, isn't it?" His Highness chimed in. "It seems they're handy enough that the Academy wanted to start development of them after hearing about them from Maria."

Her explanation included a lot of words from her world, so I couldn't quite

imagine what a car must look like, but it does seem like it would be quite handy. *I wonder if our world would become like hers if the Academy succeeded? That would be wonderful!* As we chatted, the carriage suddenly stopped. With the way it stopped violently, the atmosphere in the carriage suddenly became tense. We could hear the cries of the horses, and someone speaking roughly. What could have happened?

Before we could look out the window, Commander Agliardi knocked hard on the door and said, “Monsters! There are many of them, so please stay inside the carriage.”

Miss Maria’s face froze as soon as she heard the word monsters. I must have been making the exact same face; anyone would be afraid of monsters...

“It’s alright. I’m with you,” I said to Miss Maria as I reached for her hand.

“Yeah... Protect me, Lucia.”

We both clutched each other tightly for protection. You could tell how nervous she was from her cold fingers. Of course, my fingers were cold, too.

As we strained our ears to hear, His Highness, who was looking through the window, spoke to me, “Lucia, you said that your magic calms monsters. I want to see it. Can you go out and show me your ability in action?”

“Ed!” Miss Maria snapped. “Why does Lucia need to fight!?”

“We don’t know much about her magic. It won’t be any help to us if we don’t test it. It doesn’t look like the drugs from Amarith had any lasting effects, and she looks fine now. If she can go, I want her to go and show me.”

Miss Maria got up and grabbed the prince by his collar. “But Lucia isn’t a knight or a soldier!”

“Father told me to test her skills, so I’d like to see it,” His Highness coolly replied. “They said that it rendered a horde of ogres powerless. This carriage is currently surrounded by monsters. Eric can’t use any strong or large-scale spells while we’re in the forest; his affinity is for fire magic, after all. It will take time for Fernando and the others to cut them all down as well. If they take too long, other monsters in the forest might come for the corpses.”

“That’s...”

“Or will you defeat them with your light magic? That would end this quickly. But it looks like you can’t, can you?” His Highness probed further. “We sent the soldiers back, so we have to deal with them ourselves. Maybe we should have brought more of the Academy mages with us. They might not have intimidated you as much.”

Miss Maria, who was astonished to hear the truth, slowly lost her grip. As His Highness held her hand to comfort her, his emerald eyes focused on me. I swallowed hard. This wasn’t a situation where I could say no. To be honest, I was really scared, but not as scared as I was when I first faced monsters at Arldat Castle. After all, I’m not alone now. The strongest warriors in the kingdom are here... And more importantly, Sir Celes is with me! That truth alone gave me strength. *I’m afraid, but it will be fine. I need to do my best.* I promised Miss Maria that I’d protect her! And I need to work hard to thank her for protecting me in Amarith!

Having pumped myself up, I made a fist and stood up straight. “Alright.”

“Lucia!”

“It’s alright. I’ll protect you. Sir Celes and Sir Gaius are outside too. I’ll be alright!” I said, attempting to reassure her. “Miss Maria, please stay inside with His Highness. I’ve practiced with Sir Gaius on my way here.”

“It’s dangerous! Stay here!” she pleaded.

“Miss Maria. Please let me keep my promise. It’s not dangerous at all. Please excuse me!”

Leaving Miss Maria to His Highness, I opened the carriage door. Outside, I could see the deep forest — and quite a few monsters surrounding the carriage from behind the tree line. I couldn’t help but gulp at the sight of them. I had seen the horse-sized Phaian boars a few times before on my journey here, but the rest were a first. Both the flat-tailed, huge-teethed Afanc and the scaled blue horse-like Each-uisge were water monsters, so we must be near the water.

“Lucia! It’s dangerous, get back in the carriage!” Sir Celes yelled, having noticed I’d come out.

The instant I saw the sword in his right hand covered in blood, I got goosebumps. I couldn't get used to it, no matter how many times I saw it.

"*Fire Arrow! Thunderbolt!*" Eric cast spells while gripping the crystal on his chest. "Geez! Maybe it's since we're near the Cristallo Sacro, but there's no end to them! Can I burn the forest down? It'd be faster to use area magic to take 'em out!"

It looked like he couldn't use larger spells for fear of causing a large fire. It must have been difficult to fight like that.

Commander Agliardi responded to Eric's proposal, "You can if you can put it back out!"

"I'm not good with water magic!" Eric shook his head. "You okay with me flooding this entire place!?"

"You're useless, kid!" Sir Gaius snorted at Eric's reply, and Lord Reynard, raising his eyebrows, reproached, "Brother!"

"The bear is babbling! You're gonna make me wanna use area magic if you talk to me like that! It's not my thing, so the potency might drop a bit, but... *Vought!*" The moment Eric cast his spell, a large pillar of air smashed the monsters with a boom, knocking down many trees along the way. Looking at the various sized splinters and the splashes of blue all around, Eric called out in a satisfied tone, "Hey, aren't I strong?"

"Hey genius, you just blocked the road!" Sir Gaius shouted at the triumphant boy. It was true. The large fallen trees were now blocking the road. Just as the prince had said, Eric's magic wasn't suited for this kind of place.

"Gah, they're still coming!"

"It must be because we're nearly at the Cristallo Sacro. Celestino, behind you," Commander Agliardi warned.

"I know!" Sir Celes flashed the sword in his right hand and beheaded the Each-uisge that had been approaching him.

*Sir Celes... He's so skilled.* Just what you would expect from the Dragonslayer — but it was too scary to watch. At a glance, Each-uisge looked like horses,

but... It still had a severed head. As I just stood there and watched, I realized, I needed to help everyone! I couldn't just look on in shock.

Gearing myself up, I stepped down from the carriage. Then, I faced another horde of monsters and cast. "Soap!"

If I was afraid of being attacked, all I needed to do was calm them down before they could! As soon as my cast went off, I felt as if something left my body as a mass of soap bubbles appeared. The bubbles surrounded the monsters, shining like rainbows before popping. I watched and prayed. *Please, work...!*

My prayers were answered, because my soap magic cleansed the monsters' wills to fight. Despite wanting to kill us all a second ago, the Afanc, Each-uisge, and Phaians just glanced at us if we were stones on the road before walking away.

## Lucia Arrives at the Cristallo Sacro

“*Fireball*.” Eric shot out a blast of fire at the pile of monster corpses. We needed to get rid of them so more monsters wouldn’t be drawn here, but it was much easier to burn them all than it was to bury them. Unlike when I traveled with Sir Gaius and we had to bury every single one, I was glad that we could just cremate them. “This should do it!”

Looking away from a satisfied Eric, I looked up at the good-looking face above me. “Um... Please put me down. I can stand by myself now. I was only dizzy for an instant, I’m fine.”

My plea was met with a flat, “No.”

After I used *Soap* to scatter the monsters, I almost fainted, and Sir Celes was carrying me. Despite my protests of being fine, he refused to let me down and walked towards the carriage with me in his arms.

“I was worried when you almost fell.” Sir Celes gave me a stern look as he shot down my objections. “I thought you might’ve fainted from using your magic in a way you didn’t usually. You’re still pale, so I can’t put you down.”

Eric popped his head out from behind Sir Celes’s back and said, “Hey, how much mana did that use? Let’s measure it! Here, I’ve got mana restoratives!”

“I don’t need them!” I exclaimed.

As I shook in fear of that terrible taste, Sir Celes’s stern expression changed to a slight frown. “Master Eric... When are they going to improve those things?”

“Sir Celes, you’ve drunk it before?”

“The Commander and I can use a bit of magic, after all,” he said with a shrug. “Just some support stuff.”

“That stuff is gross, huh?” Sir Celes’s frown gave way to a wry smile. “I feel the same way!”

As Sir Celes approached the carriage, the door flew open. At the same time,

Miss Maria nearly fell out of it. “Lucia!” She hiked up her skirt and jumped down, running towards us. “Are you okay!?”

“Yes, I was just a bit dizzy. I’m alright now,” I replied, still in Sir Celes’s arms.

“Celes, give Lucia back!”

“Lucia still doesn’t look good, so I believe she should get some air first,” he insisted.

“She can get air if we open the windows! She can rest better in the carriage! This is an order from the Sacred Maiden: Give Lucia to me already!”

True, it would be easier to rest in the carriage. I was a bit tired, so I would gladly take Miss Maria’s suggestion. I’d like to avoid riding on Sir Celes’s horse, if possible, since I’d be too nervous.

“Sir Celes, please put me down,” I said, motioning downward.

“...Alright.” Sir Celes gently lowered me down to the ground.

“You dummy!” Before I could get a word in, Miss Maria clung to me, seemingly angry. “You shouldn’t have just jumped out like that! You scared me half to death!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t just smile at me, Lucia. I’m mad!”

“I must have let you down. Thank you for getting angry with me.”

*Miss Maria is so kind, getting angry for my sake.* Amidst our conversation, Lord Reynard came to tell us we were departing. “Now, you two, please return to the carriage. We’re setting off.”

“Ah, what about those trees...” I asked, glancing over to the side.

Eric, who had stood up by then, puffed up his chest and said, “I already smashed them all to bits! I worked hard, you know!”

“You make the mess, you clean the mess,” Gaius retorted.

“Shut up, bear! Who are you, my father!?” Eric was playing around with Sir Gaius, all smiles.

*Sir Gaius is so popular. I agree, he's just like a father!* I'd never tell him that, though.

After that, Miss Maria pulled me back inside the carriage. As we entered, His Highness smiled at us, crossing his legs elegantly. The door closed, and the carriage slowly began to move.

"I'm sorry for making you fight so suddenly," His Highness started. "It might have been from the carriage, but I did watch you. Your power is quite amazing. It looks like they weren't exaggerating about what happened with the ogres and the roc. Will you fight for us from now on?"

"Ed! Like I said, stop trying to make us fight!" Miss Maria protested once again. "We're not used to it! It's scary!"

"As a denizen of this world, it wouldn't be strange for her to help on our journey to purify the Cristallo Sacro. If we fail in purifying them, the world will be flooded with monsters, and humanity will soon fall. They've been spreading terribly in the last ten or so years."

"But Lucia and I are *normal* humans!"

"You and Lucia have special powers, Maria. The rest of us don't. Without you, we cannot purify the Cristallo Sacro." As the carriage rocked, the prince reverently took Miss Maria's hand and dropped a kiss to it. "My beloved Sacred Maiden, for the sake of your life, and all of ours, we need you to be prepared to fight."

"...Does it really have to be me? Can't someone else do it?"

"Normal humans cannot purify. You need to purify the Cristallo Sacro, and since Lucia has been sent to help fight, we need results."

"That's all good for you... I'm not here because I want to be."

*Oh no, this is beginning to sound like a fight!* But I agreed with Miss Maria. She was from a different world. She had no obligation to work so hard for our sake.

"Miss Maria." I didn't want to speak directly to His Highness, so I spoke to Miss Maria instead. "I'm alright. Thank you for trying to protect me. It's fine,

you don't need to fight. But please, just lend us your power for a bit at the end. Just if we can't purify the Cristallo Sacro ourselves."

"Does that mean you'll purify them for her, Lucia?" His Highness scrutinized me with his emerald eye.

"If I'm able to, I'll do my best. But if you truly need the Sacred Maiden for it, I'd like to ask you to let me follow up for her. I know I am being selfish, but I don't want to force everything on Miss Maria when she's so afraid. I ask you to please only do it after we do all we can first."

"...I see. Then go ahead and try." The prince gave me a composed nod. "It might not look like it, but I'm counting on you. Since you've shown us your powers, it would be a waste to leave you as a maid."

Thank goodness he agreed to my plea. I was afraid I'd be punished for cutting in.

"No, then you'll be the only one getting scared!" Miss Maria grabbed my hand and clung to me.

"You're so kind, Miss Maria."

"Wha, wait, that's not what we're talking about right now!"

"But it's true," I said as I patted her hand. "Thank you for trying to speak to His Highness so that I wouldn't be scared or troubled. It made me happy. I'll be able to do my best because you're here for me."

*I'll even drink those horrible mana restoratives for you!* As I gave her a smile, Miss Maria's face softened into one of her own. "Oh, you...!"

"It's our world, so we need to do everything we can for it before relying on the Sacred Maiden. So please, just lend us your powers for a moment, at the very end."

While we spoke, the carriage slowed to a halt.

"Your Highness, Sacred Maiden. We've arrived at the Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest." Commander Agliardi's voice from outside informed us that we'd arrived at our first destination.

# Lucia Attempts to Purify the Cristallo Sacro

The three Cristallo Sacro were each named after their locations, as The Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest; The Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn; and The Cristallo Sacro of Maynard. Because monsters were born where the Cristallo Sacro stood, humans never approached them. I couldn't see any monsters around the tree, but we encountered many on our way here. *I don't think anyone would want to approach it if they had to defeat that many to get here.*

This was my first time seeing a Cristallo Sacro; the clear branches of it twisted loosely, spreading as if to pierce the sky, and covered in hard, shining crystal leaves. Here and there, you could see large fruit-like crystals hanging, each with black smoke congealed within... *Is that where monsters come from?* I wondered. There weren't any around, but the thought that one could be born at any time sent a chill down my spine.

"What's that black stuff...?" muttered Miss Maria.

The Cristallo Sacro would have been beautifully bathed in light, but it was currently completely surrounded by a black haze. The ominous atmosphere was enough to make you cower. The haze swayed as if it were a living being — if you looked closely, it flowed toward the crystals holding the black smoke. No, rather than flowing, it looked like it was being sucked in.

"It's a miasma," Eric spoke up first. "They say the Cristallo Sacro sucks it in and makes monsters, but even the Academy doesn't know why the miasma appeared."

Commander Agliardi turned and said, "Sacred Maiden, please, purify this miasma."

Before anyone could act, Prince Edoardo cut in, bringing up my name instead. "Lucia is going to try first."

"Eh? Really!?" I gasped in surprise.

"That's... Your Highness, but why?"

“What about the Sacred Maiden...?”

“The little lady’s gonna try, huh?”

Everyone was dumbfounded by the prince’s proposal. Yes, of course they would be. I was surprised too. But since Miss Maria was afraid, we needed to do our best. *Just watch me, Miss Maria!*

“Eric,” I said, turning towards him.

“Yeah?”

“Would I be able to get a mana restorative?” As I asked, I tried my best not to remember what it tasted like. If I hesitated, I didn’t think I’d be able to drink it.

“You’ll drink it? Let’s measure your levels, then.” Accepting my request, Eric excitedly got his measuring device from the pack on his horse. At a glance, it looked like a stick of glass, but you could see a scale carved into the side of it. “What’d they measure your mana at back in the Academy?”

“They told me it was three thousand five hundred.”

“Wow! More than I thought. Let’s see...”

There was both a short and long scale, each displaying something alternately. *Maybe it can’t make very exact measurements?* As I held it in my mouth, the blue line started to move. How did this thing work?

“You’re between two thousand five hundred and three thousand.” Handing it back to Eric after the line stopped moving, he looked at the scale seriously. “I guess that magic from earlier took a lot of mana.” He was completely different from his usual smiling self.

“Really?” I asked.

“If that amount took a thousand, it looks like it’s pretty inefficient.”

“What does your thousand look like?”

“Mine is... Wait. Lucia, where’s your crystal?” After tilting his head and glaring at the scale, Eric suddenly turned to look at me with wide eyes.

“Crystal? I don’t have one.”

“What? You can use magic without one!? I can’t believe it, but... Maybe that’s

why it's so inefficient. It's similar to the Sacred Maiden's, then."

Now that I thought about it, Headmaster di Vaio was surprised too. I had forgotten completely, but maybe magic without a magical catalyst was rare?

"Then you should be good just drinking one vial," Eric said, handing me a restorative. "I don't have many with me, so hopefully you'll be able to try without drinking one next time."

*Okay, my mind is clear. I won't think while drinking it! I can't think!*  
Determined, I closed my eyes and downed the whole thing. As soon as I did, that outrageous taste spread, numbing my brain.

"Here, Lucia, water." Sir Celes worriedly handed me a bag of water to drink. My eyes were tearing up, so I gladly took it, writhing from that mixture of tastes.

"Thank you... I forgot to prepare first. I would have died without it. I nearly died *with* it." As I drank the water he gave me, I secretly decided. *Next time, I'll try to do it without drinking one. I won't be able to live if I don't! You can't get through that taste with just normal willpower!*

"Really, I don't want you pushing yourself," Sir Celes said, a deep worry in his tone.

"Sir Celes... But..."

"I know, it's you, so you're probably trying to take the load off the Sacred Maiden since she's from another world. I wish I could help, but I can't do anything about purifying them."

My heart ached at his words. *Sir Celes...so you're worried enough about Miss Maria that you'd want to help her purify the Cristallo Sacro.* As soon as I thought that, I bit my lip. Sir Celes was a Knight—protecting someone must be important to him. Really, I wouldn't like him if he wasn't kind. From the start, he wasn't someone who'd be alright with pushing everything onto Miss Maria when she's not of our world. With all this in mind, I sighed. *Really, what am I thinking about? I'm pitiful. This isn't the time to be worrying about things like that.*

"Lucia, are you alright?"

“Yes, I’ll try my best.”

Looking at it again, the haze around the Cristallo Sacro swayed ominously — part of me desperately pleaded not to get close to it. I turned and looked at Miss Maria, being supported by His Highness. She was looking my way, pale as a ghost, and looked like she’d faint at any moment. Seeing the prince gently holding her shoulder relieved me a bit.

*I have something I need to do, too. That thought kept me going. Even if I couldn’t purify it myself, Miss Maria was here. We could definitely purify this tree. Believing in my thoughts, I approached the Cristallo Sacro. The swaying haze was just like a stain on clothes. Getting stains out is my specialty. I’m just doing what I always do!*

With a deep breath, I concentrated on the Cristallo Sacro. *It’s okay, I’m gonna clean you right up!*

“Soap!”

The moment I cast it, that feeling I had at the castle came back and—my consciousness waned. As I fainted, I thought I could see a small white light at the edge of my vision.

# Lucia Meets the Baby Dragon

When I opened my eyes, there was something white that was so close, I couldn't make it out properly.

“What!?”

“Kyuwah!”

As I shot upright, that “something” fell onto my lap. It was — a dragon.

Though it was still just a tiny infant, it had proper wings attached to its pearly scaled body. Its toes had adorable, but sharp, crystal-like claws. On its head were similarly crystal-like horns, and there was a clear, elegantly draping fin running down its tail. As it wagged side to side happily, light reflected and scattered around it. The small dragon’s puffy tummy was pointed this way as its golden sun-like eyes opened wide. It was just like a baby, ignorant of the world.

“Kyu?” The baby dragon cooed, snuggling up to me.

*Huh? What’s happening here?*



“Lucia!”

“Yes!?” As I stared at the baby dragon in shock, someone slammed into me from the side. It was Miss Maria.

“I’m sorry!” she sobbed. “I’m so, so sorry!”

Miss Maria clung to me, squeezing her arms around my throat. *T-This is kind of bad...!*

“Sacred Maiden, please let go of her. She can’t breathe,” Sir Celes said, throwing me a lifeline.

“Eh? Ah, sorry!”

Once I could finally breathe again, I tried to piece together what happened. It looked like I had passed out and been brought inside of a tent. I was lying on a cushion with a blanket over me; on my lap was a baby white dragon; to my sides were Miss Maria and Sir Celes; and Eric was nearby, too.

“Um... I...”

*What happened to the Cristallo Sacro? Where did this baby dragon come from?* I wondered.

“Thank you, Lucia,” Sir Celes said. “It’s thanks to you that the Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest was purified.”

He stood up and opened the entrance to the tent, showing me the outside. Through the gap, I could see the Cristallo Sacro shining like an opal against the light purple dusk sky. I gasped at the magical sight. It looked nothing like it did before it was purified.

“After you used all of your mana to purify the tree, you fainted, and this dragon was born from its fruit, like it was an egg. We tried to pull it off of you, but it wouldn’t let go. We had to leave it...”

Sir Celes sighed, and Eric reached out to try to grab the baby dragon. But it clung to my leg, not budging an inch.

“See, just like that,” Eric whined. “And it’s not like we could attack it while it was on you.”

“I told you before!” Miss Maria quickly shot back. “It doesn’t look like a bad monster, so you should just leave it!”

“It’s a **dragon**! We have no idea when it’ll start attacking us!”

“How could you kill something this cute, you monster! You can’t be human!”

After Miss Maria was kidnapped, Eric had apologized for how he had treated her. Now they were close enough to argue like this... It was probably just my imagination that they did the same thing before.

“The only reason you can say that is because you don’t know how much damage the last dragon did!” Eric yelled.

Unable to back down, Miss Maria countered. “I can say it *because* I don’t know! Look at it! It’s not hostile at all! It likes us! It’d be wrong to kill something this cute! And it regenerated Lucia’s mana, didn’t it!? That’s a *good* thing!”

After she said that, it finally dawned on me; Miss Maria was right, I felt completely different than I did after fainting in Arldat. I wasn’t freezing, and I could move normally. It was like I had drunk one of those mana restoratives, but... Was this the little dragon’s doing?

“Did you restore my mana?” I asked looking down at my leg.

“Kyui!” The baby dragon squealed proudly, as if it understood what I’d said.

“Thank you. You saved me.”

“Lucia, let me measure your levels again.” Eric handed me the scale. As I put it in my mouth, the blue line shot right up. “It looks like you’re back to full. How, though? I’ve never heard of dragons being able to do something like that.”

Eric glared at the device, grumbling at all the new unknown information.

“This is bad. This is so *bad*! I want to experiment on it so much, but I haven’t got any supplies here to work with! Ahh, but we don’t know when it’ll start attacking, either...”

“Can’t we just have Lucia use *Soap* on it every once in a while? And how could you do something as cruel as experiment on something so cute. Eri-*kun*, you research dummy!”

“Hmm... That might actually work. It’s something to think about.”

While I watched on as Eric ignored Miss Maria’s attack, Sir Celes, on my other side, spoke to me, “Ignoring all that, how are you feeling, Lucia? Does anything feel weird?”

You could see in his blue sky-like eyes that he was worried about me. It made my chest hurt.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re really okay?”

“Yes, I’m alright. Just look!” I lifted the baby dragon, who was still clinging to me, into my arms and stood up. “See? I’m not dizzy at all!”

“Kyukyu!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did that hurt?”

“Kyuiiiii!”

I must have squeezed it a bit too tightly when I stood, because it squeaked in protest. Its golden eyes peering at me were like jewels. *Oh no, it’s so cute...! There’s no way we can hurt this little baby, right?* I understood why they’d want to get rid of it now before it grew into an awful adult dragon, but I couldn’t stand to hurt it after looking into its eyes!

“I see... That’s great,” Sir Celes said with a sigh. Relieved by my cheerfulness, he went back to his usual gentle smile. Unlike him, I haven’t been able to handle that smile like I used to ever since I started this journey.

*Oh, calm down, heart!*

# Lucia Tries to Save the Baby Dragon

Unable to take Sir Celes's smile, I reflexively looked down.

*Oh no, he's going to think I'm acting strangely.* I didn't mean to seem distant. I wanted to keep having fun talking to him, like we did in the castle's back courtyard. *I feel really bad.* It was like a heavy rock was crushing my chest.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, no, nothing's wrong! But what should we do about this little guy?"

"That's a tough question. Knowing how vicious they are, it's true that it'd be easier to kill it while it's small," Sir Celes said, clearly troubled. "But since it restored your mana, and we don't know much about dragons biologically, I think it's necessary that it's examined while it's still weak. After all, no one has ever seen a newborn monster before."

I poked the baby dragon in my arms.

"The Commander and Lord Reynard are discussing what to do with it with Prince Edoardo right now. I don't know what His Highness will decide, but from a Knight's point of view, they'll probably decide to nip it in the bud."

"So they'll kill it?"

Sir Celes went silent at my question.

"Pukyuuah!" The baby dragon looked up at me from my arms, and cooed innocently. I couldn't take it anymore.

While I was traveling with Sir Gaius, the fact that we were killing things that weren't even fighting back made me feel awful. I kept thinking that maybe if they wouldn't cause any harm anymore, we could let them live like a normal animal. But since we didn't know how long *Soap*'s effect would last, it was safer to kill them. I had made myself believe what I was told, but...

"Was the option of me casting *Soap* on it regularly brought up? Do we really have to kill it?"

“What do you mean, Lucia?”

“I mean, it would allow us to find out how long my magic lasts, and, like you said before, it would give us a chance to research dragons. I’ll take responsibility for it and make sure it doesn’t run wild, so can’t we let it live? I know dragons are dangerous, and I know how horrific monsters can be, but I... I can’t let this little one die when it hasn’t done anything wrong...” I trailed off. *If there’s something I can do, I’ll work as hard as I need to for it.*

“Then why don’t we go ask His Highness right now?” Eric chimed in. “We could keep them from killing it, I can research it to my heart’s content, and you and the Sacred Maiden will have saved it. Everyone wins. Plus, since it’s just a weak baby right now, it can’t do much damage, right?”

“That’s right! Let’s go ask Ed! Come on, Lucia, we’re going!” With her loud declaration, Miss Maria dragged me by the arm. She’s more active than she looks.

But this is just what I wanted. Miss Maria, Eric, and I all headed towards where the prince and the others were. Sir Celes tagged along as well, so that was extra reassuring!



“Oh? So you’ve all come to beg for the dragon’s life?” His Highness spoke with a bright smile, having heard our plea. “I didn’t expect you’d take a monster’s side, Maria. Not when you were so terrified of them.”

“But this one is cute...” she mumbled.

“That makes no difference. It’s still a monster. But I do admit, that’s an interesting experiment. We could get an understanding of both Lucia’s power and a dragon’s biology and abilities. If you can guarantee our safety... I suppose it would be alright to try it.” The prince continued, still smiling elegantly. “Especially for you, Lucia. Gaining an understanding of your powers is of utmost importance. Though they aren’t the same as Maria’s, they seem to work along the same lines. Your powers will surely be a valuable asset.”

“Ah...!” Miss Maria gasped.

Suddenly, His Highness stopped smiling, and looked at me with strong

conviction in his emerald eyes. “Lucia. You will tame this dragon, and make it react to your commands. You must also regularly cast your magic on it. Meanwhile, Eric will study its mana regeneration powers. In the event that it ever brings harm to anyone... We will dispose of it immediately. Understood?”

“Your Highness!” Commander Agliardi began to protest, but Prince Edoardo raised a hand to silence him.

“Fernando, if this goes well, it will be a boon to our country.” The prince said, his usual elegant smile returning. “None of the others can calm monsters. Now, are you all finished? Since Lucia is awake and came on her own two feet to argue with me, she must be fine. Then we should get going to the next Cristallo Sacro. Come here, Maria.”

“Okay...”

After being called by His Highness, Miss Maria quietly nestled close to him. *Hmm?* She'd just been as full of energy as ever, but something seemed to be wrong. I wonder why?

## Lucia Notices Something is Amiss

Though Miss Maria looked graceful and quiet on the outside, she was usually actually quite energetic and bright. She and the prince had also always seemed so intimate... But for some reason, now she looked depressed.

“Miss Ma—”

“Hey, Lucia!” Just as I had begun to call out to her, Eric interrupted me. “To go along with researching the dragon, I also wanted to check how much your mana usage would change using a crystal. I know it’d be best to get you your own, but we could use mine for now.”

“But His Highness just told us we were leaving.”

“I know, but we could do it the next time we stop! Please?” Eric tilted his head a little, staring up at me with his big amber eyes. The puppy dog look was too cute... It was too hard to say no!

“I guess it would be alright to try the next time we have a break or stop for the night...”

“Okay, you promised!”

With his bright, big smile, Eric looked just like an innocent child. *He must really love his research. I’m kind of jealous that he has something he is so into at his age.*

After promising Eric, I headed towards the carriage where the prince and Miss Maria were waiting.

“Did you make plans with Eric?” His Highness spoke to me as soon as I stepped into the carriage, as if he had been waiting.

“Yes. I’m going to try casting my magic using a crystal...”

“You don’t have one of your own, even though you can use magic? Huh, so you’re the same as Maria in that way, too. Could...”

“Hey, where are we going next?” Miss Maria cut in, interrupting the prince.

Something was definitely wrong. Though she was still sitting beside His Highness, it looked as if she was sitting a little farther from him than usual.

"Next is Foristarn. Kyriest is north of Arldat, but Foristarn is southwest of Kyriest. Our last stop in Maynard is south from there. Kyriest is within our country's borders, but Foristarn is in the Vatis duchy, and Maynard is in the Kingdom of Dal Canto."

"We're going overseas?"

"Overseas? All of our countries are on the continent. The sea surrounds the world, and drops into Hell. Didn't they teach you that at the Academy? Ah... but your country was surrounded by the sea, wasn't it?"

"That's right. My country, Japan, is...an island nation. It's different from here... Completely different..."

Seeing Miss Maria looking down weakly, even the prince noticed something was wrong.

"Maria, what's wrong?" he asked.

"I think it's motion sickness... I'm feeling sick."

"Are you alright? Let's have Lucia use her magic on you."

"I don't need it!" Over the course of our journey, Miss Maria had frequently asked that I use *Soap* on her, so of course His Highness would suggest it, but we were both surprised by her rejection. Her voice had been strong enough to make me stop opening the windows in shock.

"I mean, Lucia just passed out, right? I don't want to make her have to use it. So don't. I'm fine." The way Miss Maria spoke, it seemed that she was worried about me. But I had recovered thanks to the baby dragon, and Miss Maria was much more important, especially if she was sick.

"Miss Maria, I'm fine. My mana was restored thanks to the little dragon. You look much worse for wear."

"It's not that bad, so you don't need to use *Soap*. I'll just sleep it off. Ed, I'm gonna lie down on the other side."

"...Alright, if you say so. Have a good rest. Lucia, come over here. She can't lie

down with you there.”

Miss Maria wouldn’t be able to lay down properly with me sitting here, but I could never sit next to His Highness!

While I was flustered, Miss Maria threw me a lifeline, “Lucia, stay there. It’d hurt if I fell off the seat because of the rocking.”

Since she was acting strange, I prioritized Miss Maria’s request over the prince’s order. After declining His Highness, I moved the cushions so Miss Maria could lie down comfortably.

Although she didn’t look ill, I was worried about how depressed she seemed. Then I thought to put the baby dragon beside her. Maybe it would make her feel better, just like it helped me.

“Alright, I’ll be right here beside you. But please, at least let this little one lay with you. It might make you feel better.”

“Kyuu!” The baby dragon tilted its head innocently as I passed it over, and Miss Maria finally smiled.

“Yeah, maybe it will make me feel better. And we need to name this little guy. Is it male? Female?”

“I have no idea... I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Geez, you haven’t thought about it? Hey, buddy, are you a boy, or a girl?”

“Kyuwawa~” Miss Maria poked at the baby dragon’s puffy tummy, a soft look gracing her features.

“It’s not clear whether dragons have a biological sex.” His Highness said. “There aren’t many in the first place, and even if there were, capturing one alive is out of the question. I heard that they couldn’t find any reproductive organs in the one that was slain last year, so it could be that they’re not able to reproduce. If that’s the case, it might be asexual.”

“I see... You must be lonely, too. Being all alone.”

“Kyukyu! Wah~”

“It looks like it’s trying to talk, but I can’t understand it. Too bad, buddy.” As

Miss Maria laughed, you couldn't tell that she had been depressed moments earlier. "I wonder what its name should be."

"If you'd like, you can name it, Miss Maria," I said.

"Me? Hmm, I dunno. It's a dragon, so maybe we should go with something cool. But it's so cute." She looked gently at the baby dragon. The soft smile on her face suited her well. "Shiro. Let me call it Shiro. It's not fluffy, but it's cute, just like my Shiro."

"Kyuu!"

"Shiro is the name of my cat at home. He's white, with gold eyes, and he's adorable. I miss him..." Miss Maria said, a hint of loneliness in her voice.

*Ah, I understand now.* Those words put everything into focus. Miss Maria must be missing her world; the one she lost because of us. *I wonder what she thinks about our world?* She was brought here against her will and shipped out on a journey to purify the Cristallo Sacro, with no option to refuse. And monsters are frightening, and even using magic...

The more I wondered, the more shocked I became at my realization. The entire reason Miss Maria was summoned was to purify the Cristallo Sacro. But the one to purify the first tree...wasn't her.

# Lucia Thinks About Maria

“Lucia, hold my hand, ‘cause I might fall off.”

“Ah... Yes!” I gave Miss Maria my hand as she asked, and she smiled, a look of relief on her face.

“Watch me so I don’t fall, okay?”

“I’ll catch you before you do. I’m surprisingly strong.”

Holding my hand in one hand, while hugging Shiro with the other, she wearily shut her eyes.

And just like that, without having a proper conversation, we waited to arrive at our destination in silence.



Because we had lost time due to my fainting, we were unable to reach the next town that day. And so, today would be the first day on this journey where we all camped.

Ready to make dinner, I looked through our ingredients beside the carriage. There was hard-baked bread, pasta, oatmeal, barley, buckwheat flour, and wheat flour, all perfect for long journeys. Smoked meat, dry sausage, a jar of salt-pickled fish and olives. Root vegetables, dry fruit, and various nuts. Beans and pickles. And, most importantly, sugar, rock salt, butter, cheese, lard, oil, herbs, and spices.

Because we were traveling with the prince, it was quite an extravagant spread. *This is the first time I’ve ever seen so much meat, sugar, and spices!* You would never be able to carry this many supplies on a regular journey, but thanks to the luggage space at the back of the carriage, they were able to bring a lot.

Actually, it was my first time seeing a carriage with luggage space on the outside, as well. Wagons had nothing of the sort, and neither did the carriages I

sometimes saw in Arldat. It was handy, but it did look strange.

“Sacred Maiden, are you not feeling well?” As everyone else began pitching the tents, Eric slipped over next to me checking the food, and stood on his tiptoes to look inside the carriage’s open window.

“Go away, Eri-kun. I’m sick.”

“Really? Don’t push yourself. You’re a girl, after all. So, Lucia, you promised. Let’s go!”

Tossing a few nice words to Miss Maria, Eric turned and invited me. He’s been much nicer to her since the events in Amarith. As well, I’d promised him not too long ago, but...

“Not right now,” I said. “We can do it later. Everyone else is setting up the camp, so I think I should help.”

I knew it was quite a bad excuse. There was no reason for me to put it off. *But I can’t right now. I’m just—*

“Okay. I’m gonna help too, then. I’ll see you after!” Eric nodded, and ran back to where the others were working. He might have been able to tell from my face that I was feeling uneasy.

“Miss Maria, is there anything you’d like to eat?”

“I’m not hungry.”

After Eric left, I too got on my tiptoes and peeked inside the carriage’s window. Miss Maria was still resting in the same position she was earlier. She didn’t even move the arm that was over her face at all as she answered my question. *What should I do?* She might not want to, but she should still eat *something*. Or at the very least, maybe drink something warm.

As I worried about how to respond, Shiro chirped from where he was curled in Miss Maria’s arms, answering for her, but... That too was a problem. *What do dragons eat?* I looked away from the carriage as I considered the menu, and I could see everyone doing their own jobs. Sir Celes, Sir Gaius, and Lord Reynard were still putting up the tents, while Eric started the fire.

*Hmm? I don’t see His Highness or Commander Agliardi.* Now that I thought

about it, I remembered that the prince was still sitting across from Miss Maria when I left the carriage.

“Um, where is His Highness...?” I asked Miss Maria.

“Beats me. He went off somewhere earlier.”

*He went off somewhere!?* Hearing Miss Maria’s weak voice, I bit my lip secretly, so she wouldn’t notice. The prince was her fiancé! Where could he have gone while she was feeling sick?

“I’m gonna sleep a bit longer. I’ll be fine. Shiro’s here with me.”

Noticing that I’d gone silent, Miss Maria shifted her arm so she could look at me. Shiro seemed to realize he’d been mentioned, and let out a little cry as well. The way he spread his little wings out made it seem as if he was telling me he’d take care of her, so I left them to it.

“...Then I’ll get dinner started. Just rest for now. I’ll bring you something warm to drink later. Shiro, please take care of her.”

“Kyuuhah! Kyu~!”

Leaving Shiro to Miss Maria, I walked away from the carriage.

If she’d like to rest for a while in peace, I should hurry and get dinner ready. Although she had told me she didn’t need dinner, maybe she would be able to eat a bit of porridge. *Gruel won’t fill her up. Maybe I should make soup?* Though it was already the flowering month of Floréal, Kyriest was in the north, so nights were still chilly. It would be best to make something to keep everyone warm.

Thinking about what I wanted to make and what ingredients I would need, I went back to work. Even after I’d made my decisions about what to pick, His Highness had yet to return. While I still dwelled on that, I picked up the pot and moved towards the campfire. After filling it with water from a pitcher set with a water crystal, I put it on the fire.

While the water boiled, I started preparing the onions and potatoes. As I did, Sir Gaius walked over and peered into the pot. “Oh, you’re cooking for us, little lady? What’s for dinner? Have any drinks?”

“Sir Gaius, we don’t have any alcohol. It isn’t just the two of us traveling

anymore. You're going to get a scolding."

"Don't be so stingy! Leave that to Reynard and the Commander. You, at the very least, should let me have some." Sir Gaius chuckled as he ruffled my hair.

He truly did love his alcohol. *Is it really that good?*



“But you’re pretty good at that, little lady,” Sir Gaius praised my skills with the knife. “You’d be all ready to get married.”

I hadn’t done much cooking since moving to Arldat, so what he said made me a little bit happy.

“I cooked every day when I lived back in Hasawes, so I’m just average.”

“No way, you’re great.”

Though I spoke cheerfully with Sir Gaius, inside, I couldn’t stop thinking, *What if the reason Miss Maria is upset is because I was the one to purify the Cristallo Sacro?* I wouldn’t know how to face her then.

# Lucia is Afraid to Use Her Magic

In the end, Miss Maria didn't eat that night. Though she had a few mouthfuls of porridge and soup at my insistence that she needed to get something in her, she quickly retired to the tent that Sir Celes and the others had set up.

Because we were both women, I'd been told we'd be sleeping in the same tent, but because I hadn't yet thought of how to act around Miss Maria, I hesitated to enter. I kept thinking... *What if the reason she said she wanted to be alone was because she didn't want to see me?*

As I cleaned up after dinner, that thought lingering in my mind, Eric came by in a wonderful mood, scale in hand.

"Lucia! Time for us to do some fun experiments! First, we'll measure. Measure, use it normally, measure again, use it with my crystal, measure a third time... It'll be easy!"

I had no idea what I should say to him. I *did* promise, and I put it off before by using dinner as an excuse. Once I finished cleaning up, I would have more than enough time to go along with his experiments. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back to the tent just yet, but quite honestly, I was hesitant about using *Soap* right now as well.

Up until now, I had always made someone happy by using my magic — they would be happy that their clothes were clean. Their smiles as they said their thanks were all I knew. I had never thought that my magic could harm anyone.

For the first time, I was afraid of using my powers.

"Um, I'm—"

"If you use a crystal, you won't faint from purifying the Cristallo Sacro anymore! It'll be a big help. It'll be great!"

Eric was so excited about being able to experiment on my weird magic that he seemed to be speaking louder than usual. But he was right. It would be a good thing if purification wouldn't cause me to faint. Purification wasn't my job,

though. It was Miss Maria's. I wasn't the Sacred Maiden. She was the one summoned here to take that role.

After I thought more about it, what I decided to do was...put the problem off again.

"Eric...why don't we experiment some other time? I'm sorry for breaking my promise, but it's dark already."

I tried to refuse as calmly as possible. I hated how weak and ugly I was inside. Eric had been looking forward to it so much, but I just kept using excuses to hide my weakness. It was humiliating.

"Ah, you're right, it's getting hard to see. Yeah, it would be easier to observe if we did it in the light. We'll do it some other day!" Eric nodded, unaware of how bad I felt. He waved, before turning to walk back to his tent, and I sighed.

After cleaning up the pot and utensils, I had nothing to do. Then, I remembered there was a spring nearby. Usually I would have been worried about doing laundry when there was nowhere to dry it, but today, my self-loathing made me really feel like washing clothes. I couldn't just walk off without telling anyone, though, so I went to the campfire to tell Sir Gaius.

"Sir Gaius, I'm just going to go to the spring and do some laundry."

"Don't we have water here? It's getting dark; you should stay close. But anyway, that cream cheese dip was delicious! Make it again sometime!"

Surprisingly, Sir Gaius had a sweet tooth. I had mixed up some cream cheese with nuts and dried fruit as a dip for the hard-baked bread, and he ate more than twice as much as the rest of us. *He must really have liked it if he's requesting it again!*

"It seemed as if it fit His Highness's tastes as well, so I probably will," I replied.

"He's a picky one. He should just eat what us commoners do." Sir Gaius scowled, remembering how the prince refused to eat dried sausage and pushed his stir-fried vegetables to the side.

"He can't help it. They wouldn't eat preserved food in the palace."

"But I'll tell you, you're a great cook. And His Highness'll realize how good

dried sausage is once he can drink. Although the cheap stuff is still bad!"

I had thought it was strange that he would request a meal, but it seemed Sir Gaius was trying to cheer me up. It warmed my heart and made me happy that he was thinking of me. Sir Gaius was amazing at things like that.

"Thank you very much," I said with a smile.

"I haven't done anything you should thank me over." He gave an embarrassed laugh, and it made me laugh out loud as well.

"I'll be going then."

"Wait, wait, remember what I said?"

"I'll be fine. I'll be right back!"

"Reaaaaally? Hey, Cap'n!"

"Sir Gaius!?"

Arguing with him when he tried to stop me proved my undoing. Though I wasn't sure if he did it so I'd get a talking to or another reason, but he called Sir Celes over.

I clammed up as Sir Gaius smiled at his prank. "Y-You didn't have to call him over!"

"He'd want me to! I won't worry about you being alone, you can do your laundry... Everyone wins!"

"I can go alone!"

"As your guardian, I can't let you do that," Sir Gaius retorted. "There are fewer people walking around outside of towns because of the monsters, but some still do. I'd be worried if some weirdo got to you *again*."

I tried to refuse, but he warned me against it, using what happened in Amarith as an example. Being reminded of that incident once more, I did start feeling afraid of being alone.

"Couldn't you come along, then?"

"Can't. Too full."

“Alright, then...”

While I went back and forth with Sir Gaius, Sir Celes finally made his way over.

“D’you need someth... What’s wrong, Lucia?” he asked.

“Ah, um, nothing is wrong.”

I didn’t want Sir Celes to see how I looked right now, so I looked away. Since he was so straightforward and wonderful, I wanted to do my best in front of him, too. I didn’t want him to see how ugly I was. I wouldn’t know what to do if he found out... *Oooh, I shouldn’t have tried being so obstinate...!*

Since I went silent, Sir Gaius called to Sir Celes, “C’mere Cap’n!” Sir Gaius pulled Sir Celes’s shoulder close, and they started talking, facing away from me.

After they whispered to each other for a while, they seemed to come to an agreement, and shook hands.

“Thanks, Gaius!”

“Treat me to a drink when we get back to Arldat.”

“Definitely!”

Watching them shake hands, I was confused. What just happened between them?

For some reason, Sir Celes turned back to face me with a brilliant, shining smile, saying something awful: “Let’s go, Lucia.”

It seemed as though he was coming along with me instead of Sir Gaius. But I couldn’t let him do that.

“Ah, um... I’ll go with... Oh, no, I’ll just not go...”

“I want to go. Okay? Okay!?”

“...Okay.” I tried to resist, but I was no match for Sir Celes’s pushiness. Taking the crystal lamp from my hand, he grabbed my other one, pulling me along. *Hands! We’re holding hands! What do I do!?*

“You aren’t cleaning them with your magic, huh?”

While I was nervous at our closeness, Sir Celes just continued the

conversation as if nothing had happened. *I wonder if he's used to this...* I looked at our linked hands. It felt as if my heart was beating in my palm. Could he tell I was nervous?

"Lucia?" Sir Celes spoke up, having noticed my lack of response.

"Ah. Er... I just thought that it would be best to clean what I could by hand first. My magic is handy, but I'm afraid I'd become reliant on it."

"Haha, sounds just like you."

We walked along, just chatting like that. It was pitch black around us, but the crystal lamp we had borrowed let us walk without any issues.

*Oh, that's right.* A crystal lamp was a lamp with a fire crystal inside. Unlike a candle lamp, it lights up with just the flick of a switch. It was really convenient. I had only seen them used as street lights in Arldat, or lights in the castle, but using one myself showed just how nice they were. Unfortunately, though, fire crystals were expensive, so I would never be able to buy one myself!

Walking in the crystal lamp's light, it was as if the darkness was being erased.

"Crystal lamps are so convenient," I commented.

"Yeah, I've got one at home too. They're handy, huh?"

*He has one!*

"But..." As I was shocked by the difference in our worlds, Sir Celes suddenly stopped. "Lucia, look."

As soon as he said that, he turned off the lamp. The world slipped into darkness.

"See? The moon is beautiful," he said, looking upwards.

"Wah!" Looking up too, I saw the sky full of stars.



The sight of it took my breath away. I had looked up at this sky every day when I lived in Hasawes. But Arldat was bright at night, so I hadn't been able to see the starry sky since I moved there due to all the crystal lamps and watch fires.

"It's just like what you said before, Lucia. Magic is handy, but if you rely too much on it... You miss out on little things like this."

My heart dropped with a thump at his words. *Missing out on the small things...*

"That's... right."

Be it the stars. Be it small voices. Magic was convenient, but using it had made the important things nearly slip through my fingers.

I had been haughty. My *Soap*, that had only been useful for cleaning, was something that could purify the Cristallo Sacro that supported our world. And I had done just as I was asked. Even though there was someone else who should have done it, instead of supporting them, I had taken their place. The power that I tried to protect them with had instead hurt them. I thought that I had been careful, but before I knew it, I had become too used to using my magic. The realization embarrassed me.

My magic isn't just for doing laundry now. I should have thought more about how I should use it.

"What should I do..." I whispered.

"Lucia?" Sir Celes asked, having heard me.

"It's noth—"

"It's something." Sir Celes stopped next to me, and looked into my eyes. "Is it about the Sacred Maiden?"

He was sharp. I bit my lip, not wanting to respond. After a moment, I gasped, since he got it completely right.

"With that reaction, it must be, then."

"H, How..."

While I was lost for words, he continued, "The Sacred Maiden was summoned to our world to purify the Cristallo Sacro. We stole her world from her. The whole reason she's here is to purify them..."

His quiet voice overlapped with the murmuring of the stream.

"If someone being able to purify makes them a Sacred Maiden, you're a Sacred Maiden too, Lucia. A Sacred Maiden from another world, and one from ours... She was brought here against her will while someone else here could have done it. Of course she'd be conflicted. And the same would go for you, unexpectedly being the reason it happened. Isn't that why you're acting strange right now?"

## Celes Cheers Lucia Up

It was like my entire being froze up when he saw through all of my worries. I couldn't even muster a reply.

"Is there anything I, or any of us, can do for the two of you?"

All I could do was stare at his sun-colored hair glowing in the dim moonlight; his eyes looked grey in the darkness.

"Really, I'm embarrassed that I didn't realize what kind of position the Sacred Maiden was in before you came." Sir Celes closed his eyes as he thought about Miss Maria. "She's changed since meeting you. It wasn't your magic that did it, but how you treated her. And seeing how she changed brought to light what we had done to her, and how selfish we had been pushing it all onto her. We're really pathetic."

"...I should have thought more about it." As I looked at him, that slipped out of my mouth. And once I had started, I couldn't stop. I couldn't look at his face. I just stared at my feet as I continued. "I should have thought more about what would happen if I could do her job for her. I had spoken so grandly about protecting her, when really it was me being protected. I hadn't considered that I would end up being the one to hurt her the most. If only I'd thought about it more, I would've been able to see this."

If she was scared, I should have been beside her, holding her hand. I should have just cheered her on and watched her purify the tree on her own. *If I hadn't tried to do it for her...* No matter how much I wished, I couldn't change what had already been done.

I didn't know what I could do now. It wasn't something that could be forgiven with just an apology, but I also couldn't just stop using my magic. Now that we knew that my *Soap* could purify the Cristallo Sacro, it wouldn't be strange if we split into two groups to purify the remaining trees.

"I don't know what I should do anymore. I'm afraid of using my magic now.

When it was only useful for cleaning, I had never hesitated, because it made people happy. When it let me protect the people at the castle, I felt like there was something even I could do. But...now that I know it hurt someone, I'm terrified."

*I'm weak. Weak, ugly, and pathetic.* I didn't know what to do, and I couldn't handle it alone; so here I was, crying on Sir Celes's shoulder because he was nice. *I'm sorry, Miss Maria.* She was brought to our world against her will, told that she was needed, that only she could do it. And then I ended up showing her that someone else could do it.

"I've done something I could never apologize enough for. If we had known my powers could purify the trees earlier, she wouldn't have lost anything, and if I hadn't done it, she wouldn't have lost her place."

I had just been so happy that she was relying on me.

As I tried my hardest not to cry, Sir Celes's warm arms embraced me.

"S-Sir Celes...!?"

"Don't try to hold it all in alone." Gently holding me, he continued, "It wasn't you who hurt her first, it was us. We should have been with the Sacred Maiden; we should have understood how she felt. If we had, she never would have been confused about what to do, and you wouldn't have needed to try to do it for her."

Pausing, Sir Celes heaved a deep sigh above my head.

"She probably knows that, and that's why she doesn't blame you. I think she's just trying to sort it all out in her heart right now. Just a guess, though," he added in a gentle tone. "The Sacred Maiden thinks of you as a precious friend, so once things calm down, give her a smile."

"Sir Celes..."

"And this is just an idea, but once this journey is over, why don't we search for a way to send her back home? For all she's had to pay, and all she's done for us, I think it'd be nice if we could pay her back with another option other than becoming our country's Queen. Or, well...it'd be up to her to choose which, though."

I felt as if his suggestion stirred me awake. If we were able to send her back to her original world, would that let me atone for what I had done to her, even a bit?



*There's something I can do!* The thought of it made me feel as if I could try again. Though I was still afraid of using my magic, I was happy that I could help somehow.

I lightly pushed Sir Celes's arms away and looked up at his face. "Thank you for cheering me up, Sir Celes."

"No problem. I'm glad to help."

"Let's both send Miss Maria back to her own world."

As I smiled up at him, he smiled back at me.

But suddenly, his smile dropped, and he gave me a serious look. "Lucia, you said before that you were afraid of using *Soap*, didn't you?"

I remained quiet. I had forgotten I let that slip. It was something I wasn't supposed to say, but seeing Sir Celes's face weakened my defenses.

I looked down again, embarrassed, but he lifted my chin to make me look at him.

"You don't have to use it," he said, giving me a serious, piercing look, as if he'd see through any excuses.

"Eh?"

His gaze didn't waver when I flinched. For a second, I couldn't understand what he had just said. *I don't have to use it.* It took a while for what he meant to sink in.

"If you're scared, you don't have to force yourself. I'll protect you, so you don't have to use it if you don't want to. It's normal for you to be scared, since you never had to fight before. I'll do the fighting. I'll protect you when you're scared. You don't have to do it all alone anymore."

"Sir Celes..."

“So, just stay you. There are people you save just by doing that — like the Sacred Maiden, and me.”

*Ah... I understand how Miss Maria felt now.* Back then, I had been so desperate to protect her that I hadn’t realized. But now I know how warm a proffered hand and heart felt when you were at your wits’ end.

“You’re going to make me cry,” I whimpered.

“Huh?”

I smiled, remembering how Miss Maria had broken down crying. If I didn’t force myself to smile, I knew I would do the same.

*Hey, Miss Maria. I’m just the same as you. I’m happy enough I could cry, too. So this is how much of a relief it is to have someone protect you.* I had been on the “protector” side for so long that I had forgotten how it felt to be protected.

I was so happy I could cry, being told that I didn’t have to push myself — that I would be protected — it was like when my mother was still alive.

“Thank you, Sir Celes. That makes me really happy. I’m not scared anymore.”

He smiled happily in response. The cold, heavy muck that I had felt around my heart disappeared when I saw his smile. In its place was a warm, fluffy feeling. And that was when I finally realized: Why anything he said or did swayed my feelings so much; why I had been so shocked when I realized he loved Miss Maria.

I loved Sir Celes. I loved this man who gave me these warm feelings.

Really, I had noticed earlier. But I had looked away, not wanting to accept it. I didn’t want to face my feelings, so I ran, not giving them a name. But I couldn’t trick myself anymore. I knew that it would never be reciprocated — that I would never be a good fit for him. But my feelings wouldn’t stop. No matter what I’d do, there was no erasing it now that I’ve fully realized.

*It’s free to feel. So it should be alright if I keep my feelings secret, right?*

Once our journey ended, Sir Celes probably wouldn’t be called the “Dragonslayer” anymore. By then, he’d be the “Hero of Salvation.” It would be hard to see him or speak to him then. Having lunch together and chatting with

him would become an impossible dream. *But I should be allowed to talk with him closely while we're on this journey, at least, right?* I thought. *I'll do everything I can, so please, please allow me to stay with him, just until this ends.*

He's the first person I've ever loved, after all.

Even if I tried not to think about it, or even ignore it, I wouldn't be able to. Not while he was able to sway my feelings so easily. Was it wrong for me to want to stay beside him and make at least a few more memories together?

When I was young, one of the older girls in my village told me that your first love never comes true — that's why you remember it so vividly. If I have to leave this as mere memories, then I want to remember Sir Celes's smiling face. I want to be with him, talk with him, treasure every moment, and say goodbye with a smile.

“Sir Celes.”

“Yeah?”

*I love you.* I swallowed the words I couldn't say, and took the lamp from his hands.

“Let's get going. We'll be up early tomorrow, so we should sleep early too.”

# Maria Reflects on Her Circumstances

*Maybe I wasn't needed.* That thought had haunted me since the first Cristallo Sacro was purified.

I was afraid of monsters. I'd been fine when I was practicing my magic at the Academy, but the moment I saw a real battle, I was terrified. This wasn't a movie or a TV show. Sprays of blue blood, death throes that made you want to plug up your ears, the stench of burning flesh and corpses... The swords that they swung were real. They could cut monsters and humans alike.

I had always lived in peace. I couldn't handle it. Even if I understood it in my head, my feelings didn't match up. And that was when Lucia reached out to me. She was just a mass of good intentions, giving her all to protect me, be with me, and cover for me.

I ended up relying too much on her, not thinking about what that would mean.



Kyriest's Cristallo Sacro was purified by Lucia's magic. She fainted immediately afterwards, having used up all of her mana, but I didn't have it in me to be worried.

I'd finally realized it then. The Cristallo Sacro were the pillars of this world. The only one who could purify them was the Sacred Maiden, and these people stole me from my world to do it. Kidnapped. Abducted. I had no choice in the matter, and I couldn't go home. It was one-way.

But... I looked up at the beautiful crystal tree in front of me. The person who had cleansed this strange, sparkling tree wasn't me. Lucia was from this world — I wasn't. I was supposed to be the only one who could purify the Cristallo Sacro, but then she managed to instead.

*They don't need me, do they?* It was like all my luck had suddenly run out. If I hadn't realized it, I could have kept acting normally. But once I thought about it,

it was all I could think about. It looked like everyone appreciated Lucia, so why would they need me when I was this useless? Lucia was worried about me, but that just made me more irritated.

“Kyuu~”

The one thing that made me feel a bit better was this little newborn dragon. I named it after my cat at home, Shiro, on purpose. I was all alone in another world, so I used the name to try to make myself less lonely. I missed him dearly. But as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t go home. I couldn’t blame Lucia, though. It wasn’t her fault. Nor was it Ed’s fault for telling her to do it.

With nowhere to point my frustrations, I just anguished alone. Surprisingly, the one to admonish me for holing myself up was Fer.

“Sacred Maiden.”

That night, Fer had come to see me, clearly worried. Lucia must have been trying to give me some space, because she hadn’t come back to the tent yet.

“What do you want? It’s not very gentlemanly of you to come see me this late at night.”

Relieved that it wasn’t Lucia or Ed, I gave him a little sass. He just gave me a troubled smile back.

“Would you care to have a chat with me?” he said. “The moon is beautiful tonight.”

*Wow. Did he really just try that line on me?* I laughed, never expecting that he’d say something like that, and took him up on his offer. I’d been cooped up all day, so I really wanted to get some air.

I looked around after leaving the tent. Neither Lucia nor Ed were around. Actually, no one was outside at all. They must have been in their tents.

“Is it really okay for you to leave Ed alone?” I asked.

“His Highness is with Reynard.”

“Where... Where’s Lucia?”

“She isn’t alone, so she should be alright.”

Fer didn't actually say it, but I bet that dumb knight was with her. *Geez, he's cheeky for an idiot.* If Celes pulled that moon line on Lucia, I would have done everything in my power to get in his way!

He chuckled. "Please, be gentle. We wouldn't want to lose our strongest fighter."

"No can do. He makes me wanna tease him."

I didn't think I was the teasing type, but I'd been weird since I came to this world.

"My lady," Fer called to me softly, and his low voice was like velvet to my ears. "Do you regret undertaking this job?"

I blinked at his sudden question. *Job? This journey is my job?*

"Regret?"

"Yes." Fer nodded, and I looked up at the moon in the sky.

"I dunno," I replied. "What about you?"

"Do I regret it? Why yes, I've been full of regret since taking this job — I am plagued by thoughts about my lack of approach or methodology. But, in my position, I don't have the privilege of stopping. That's why I refuse if I'm going to regret something, or I'll look for a path I won't regret while doing that job."

Taking his eyes off the moon, Fer smiled at me. Normally, he looked the part of a Knight Commander, calm and collected. But when he smiled, he looked a lot younger. Maybe because it softened the wrinkles on his forehead.

"Sacred Maiden, I know you have your worries. The mission that you have been given is very grave. Unfortunately, we cannot take on your burden for you; only Miss Lucia can lighten your burden. But, my lady, you are still the only one who will be lauded as the Sacred Maiden. You are still the core of the Cristallo Sacro's purification. If you refuse to do so, Lucia can do it for you, but if you wish to do it yourself, no one will stop you."

I couldn't respond to him. I couldn't even read how he felt about me from his green eyes.

"The choice is yours. Please, choose a path that you won't regret."

# Lucia and Maria Make Up

“Good morning, Lucia.”

“Hey, little lady. What’s for breakfast?”

“Good morning, Sir Celes, Sir Gaius!”

I had been getting ready for breakfast that morning when Sir Celes and Sir Gaius came over. Both of them had taken off their uniform coats, leaving them in just shirts. Even though it was cold, their collars were wide open.

“Aren’t you two cold?” I asked.

“Ah, this? We were just sparring, so I’m actually pretty hot,” Sir Celes sighed. Now that I looked at him closely, I could see that he was covered in sweat.

“You’ll catch a cold if you don’t dry off. Here, this is still clean.” Reaching into my pocket, I took out my handkerchief and handed it to him. He accepted it with an embarrassed smile.

“Thanks. This’ll help.”

“Ooh, you made risotto?” Sir Gaius lifted the lid on the pot, peeking in. He must have been quite hungry.

“Please wait a minute while I get yours.”

“Put lots of bacon in it!” Sir Gaius gave me instructions while still hovering over the pot as I got my ladle. The way he did it was so childlike, I couldn’t help but laugh.

As Sir Celes folded the handkerchief, he noticed a small pot of soup to the side. “What about this?”

“It’s for Miss Maria. She seems to like soup more than porridge, so I thought she might not want risotto.”

“Your soup was great, Lucia. Ah, could I have some more beans?”

“Thank you, Sir Celes. Beans? Okay!”

*So he likes beans, huh? I'll put lots of them in his!*

"Hey, Cap'n," Sir Gaius spoke up. "Lucky you, being the only one to get to wipe off your sweat."

"What? You wanna use this too?"

"...Oh, you're so kind. Jerk."

"I know."

Listening to the knights arguing behind me, I put spoons in their bowls, which were sprinkled with shredded cheese. "Here you go... Hm? Is something wrong?"

"Nope? Thanks for the handkerchief, Lucia. I'll wash it and give it back."

"Oh, feel free to keep it."

"Really? Thanks." Sir Celes slipped it into his pocket.

As I scooped out the next bowl, I saw Commander Agliardi coming towards us.

"Is this for His Highness?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm getting it ready right now."

Commander Agliardi was the one who brought the prince his meals. I looked at the bowl on the tray. Unlike ours, carved from wood, His Highness's was silver, with beautiful decorations on the edge. *I wonder if the prince will like my risotto?* He ate the soup I made last night, and that was what I used in the risotto this morning. I was a bit worried, though. I might have put too much cheese or pepper on it. What would I do if he hated it?

"I'll bring it to him then. Ah, the Sacred Maiden should be here soon. I just saw her."

"I... I see."

*I don't know what I should say when I see her... I stirred the risotto mindlessly.*

"Morning, Lucia!"

"Ah—"

When I turned towards her bright voice, Miss Maria was standing there with a

smile.

“Sunny today, huh? Is that breakfast? Ah, there’s risotto too? Can you put lots of cheese on mine? I love cheese risotto.”

“Miss Maria...” Surprisingly, she was back to normal; smiling as if she had never been down.

“Sorry for worrying you. I’m fine now. I’m gonna do my best.” As I served her portion out, she whispered to me, “I was the one who chose this, after all. Fer gave me a talking to. He said that he understood why I was troubled about it, but that I should try since purifying is my job, not yours. He was right. I took this job, so I should be doing it.”

“I see...”

“This world isn’t mine, but now that I’m here, it’s useless to whine. I’ll work hard for my reward. I’ll do it for my easygoing hottie paradise life!”

*How much pain is she hiding behind her cheery voice?* I clung to her, unable to bear it.

“Oh, I wish you were a guy!” she exclaimed. “I would’ve given you the glorious position of top husband in my harem.”

“I’m so sorry, Miss Maria. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I wasn’t thinking either. We’re the same. If you wanna apologize, cast *Soap* on me!”

“Okay! As much as you want!”

“For my whole life — all of you need to take responsibility for what you did to me. In return, I’ll save your world. So you need to stay with me forever, okay?”

“Yes, I’ll stay with you forever!”

*Miss Maria is so much stronger and more graceful than I am.*

“You aren’t my attendant, you’re my, um...”

“I’m your friend, right?” I said, finished her thought.

“Oh!” As soon as I said the word “friends,” Miss Maria sparkled. “That’s right! You’d better be grateful! You’re my friend!”

“I love you, Miss Maria!”

“Ah, you’re so embarrassing.”

Despite saying that, she smiled at me, blushing bright red.



“What are you two doing over there?” Eric threw us an exasperated look while Miss Maria and I reaffirmed our friendship.

“Don’t be like that, kid. It’s hilarious,” Sir Gaius said with a smirk.

“Brother, you shouldn’t be like that... Sir Celestino is frozen.”

“That’s exactly why it’s hilarious!”

At Lord Reynard’s words, I looked at Sir Celes. He did look quite unhappy.



*That's right. He might like Miss Maria. Hm? Why is he acting like that when he should be happy that she's feeling better? Ah, does he think I'm taking her from him?*

I called out to him. "Sir Celes?"

"Fufu, too bad, Celes. I got here first." Miss Maria boasted to Sir Celes, her hands on her hips. "Serves you right for jilting me!"

"Miss Maria, you've got it wrong! Sir Celes—"

"Stay out of it, little lady." Sir Gaius grabbed me by the shoulders, with Eric chiming in too, "Yeah, you should just stay quiet and watch with this sort of thing."

"Does it make you mad? It's your fault for not doing anything sooner! You reap what you sow. Haha! It's all over when *I'm* the one telling you what for." Miss Maria laughed loudly while Sir Celes put his head in his hands.

"Sacred Maiden, you..."

*I'm sorry, Sir Celes. Have I become his love-rival?* I should bring up all of Sir Celes's good points to Miss Maria later... Ah, but what should I do if it became mutual? I doubt I could congratulate them any time soon.

"Don't mind them, Lucia," Eric spoke up. "Anyway, I came for seconds. Is there any left?"

"Ah, there is, but..."

"Let me clean up," Lord Reynard said "Have you eaten yet, Miss Lucia? If not, I'll serve Lord Eric his seconds, so you should eat with my brother and the others."

"Ah, okay," I said, relinquishing my ladle to him.

"Hey, don't put carrots in it! I want lots of potatoes!"

"Shrimp, you're gonna stay a shrimp if you're picky like that!"

"Better than being a bear!"

Eric and Sir Gaius were the cheeriest combination. It was strange. When they were together, Eric looked comfortable, and acted his age. It must be one of Sir

Gaius's natural qualities.

"Here you go."

"Thank you very much." Taking my bowl from Lord Reynard, I headed towards Sir Gaius and Eric.

"Let's get eating, then. We're heading to the border, right? We should get going."

When I glanced towards Miss Maria and Sir Celes, Sir Celes came right up close to me. "You're just eating now, too? Then let's..."

"Luciaaa, eat with me! Okay?"

"You're always with her, Sacred Maiden."

"Of course. Lucia is *mine!* If it bothers you so much, why not try harder?"

They do say that fighting is a sign of getting along, so... Did this mean they were closer now?

Miss Maria seemed to have started acting a bit strange towards Sir Celes since she had recovered, more relaxed. And even Sir Celes seemed to be having more fun.

"Great being popular, huh, little lady?"

*I don't think popular is the right word...* I didn't think I was disliked, but I really didn't know how he felt about me right now! At a loss, I looked up at Sir Gaius.

"Don't look so worried. Geez, the Cap'n is being so weak, just after I helped him out last night."

"Weak...?"

"Don't worry about it. It's just between me and the Cap'n. Forget about those two, c'mon."

"Lucia, you stay between the bear and I. Ignore the two lovebirds," Eric jeered.

*Lovebirds? It felt like Eric's words stabbed me. Sir Celes and Miss Maria do look close, don't they? That was good for Sir Celes, but... No, not being able to support the person I love's romance would be petty of me. I want Sir Celes to*

*smile.* Still, though, it hurt to see them so close right in front of me, so...

“Don’t worry. Their relationship is definitely not what you’re thinking.”

“Huh? No, I’m not...”

“Not like you to scowl like that.”

Sir Gaius poked me in between the eyebrows, and I realized what kind of face I had been making.

“Ah, youth. I miss my wife.”

“Your wife’s a bear too, right?”

“Don’t be stupid, my wife is beautiful. Really strong-willed, though!”

In the end, I ate my breakfast while sitting between Sir Gaius and Eric, while Miss Maria and Sir Celes chatted and ate directly across from me.

# Lucia Tries Using a Crystal

To get to the Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn, we had to head toward the Vatis Duchy, which was the homeland of Prince Edoardo's mother. Though she had passed away about ten years earlier, it was said that she had been very beautiful.

"The Vatis Duchy is a nice place. You'll like it, Maria," His Highness said, turning away from the window.

"Really?"

"Yes, the legend is that the Sacred Maiden who saved our world 1600 years ago was summoned there."

"Summoned..."

"The last Sacred Maiden was from another world, just like you."

His words shocked both Miss Maria and I, and we looked at each other. I had known that there had been another Sacred Maiden 1600 years ago, but I didn't know anything specific about her. His Highness was royalty, so maybe he was more familiar with the story than us commoners.

"What happened to the Sacred Maiden after that?" I asked him.

"I don't know. All that my mother told me was that she was summoned in the Vatis Duchy and that she purified the Cristallo Sacro... That's it."

I had hoped he would tell us more, but he adamantly refused to reveal any further information. Closing his mouth, he crossed his legs and looked out of the window again, clearly finished with the conversation. That meant they didn't know whether the Sacred Maiden was able to return home.

I bit my lip softly. If the last Sacred Maiden was able to go home, then Miss Maria could as well.

"You don't know anything else?" Miss Maria asked.

"I'm not from the Duchy — I'm from Banfield. That's all that's told there."

There's no way I would know anything more."

The prince had always spoken to Miss Maria so gently, but this time, he was cold — almost as if he didn't want to talk about the subject.

"So I really can't go home..." I could hear Miss Maria whisper that softly beside me.

A cold feeling spread through my chest. Being unable to return home was probably one of the first things they told her. If she could go back, they wouldn't have made her engagement to the prince public. She was brought here against her will with no way to return. This wasn't some oppressive fairy tale, but Miss Maria's reality.

"I see..."

Miss Maria went silent, looking away through the window. The carriage remained quiet after that.



"Okay, Lucia, you promised! Time for experiments!" When we stopped for a break and I left the carriage, Eric ran up to me, as if he had been waiting.

"Alright. I'm sorry for making you wait. I kept putting it off..." I apologized.

"There's nothing you need to apologize for. We can still do it now! First, we'll measure your mana levels. We still don't know how Shiro affects things, so he'll have to sit this out."

I gave Shiro, who had been peeking out from my apron pocket, to Eric. In return, he handed me the scale, and I put it in my mouth.

"Your mana is full right now. Try using your magic."

My heart jumped at the word "magic." *It's okay, it shouldn't have any effect on anything this time. This is just to see how much mana I use. It won't hurt Miss Maria.* But I was still afraid.

I glanced around, and locked eyes with Sir Celes, who had been looking my way. He gave me a strong nod, and I steeled myself. *It'll be alright. I can do it. I had decided that I'd do all that I could, hadn't I?*

Taking a deep breath, I cast my magic towards the sky.

*“Soap!”*

At my words, rainbow-colored soap bubbles appeared. They floated towards the sky, sparkling in the sun.

“It really is pretty, huh? So what’s the reading now... Ohhh, I see! Okay, hold this and try again.”

Eric casually tossed me the wing-shaped crystal that had been on his chest. I rushed to catch it with both hands. Usually, you couldn’t cast magic without a crystal to use as a catalyst, so this experiment was important.

By the way, people without magic could still use items that contained crystal pieces imbued with mana to use magic, so it really was quite strange that I could use magic without one. I had used magic since I was a child without knowing anything about needing one — it had just been normal for me.

*“Soap!”*

Holding the crystal, I cast my magic again. I watched the soap bubbles float away a second time while my mana was measured again, and—

“Huh, it didn’t change?” Eric’s voice rose in surprise when he checked the scale. “Okay, wait, let’s do it all again from the top.”

“Alright.”

No matter how many times we tried it, the result was the same. Whether I used a crystal or not, my magic used the same amount of mana.

“That’s weird. You’re using the crystal as a catalyst, so in theory, that should take some of the weight off you and lower the mana cost, but...”

“Aren’t I the same?” While we looked at the scale, Miss Maria spoke up.

“Miss Maria.”

“Yeah, you might be right,” Eric said, looking confused. “So both the Sacred Maiden’s and Lucia’s magic are similar? It’s different from how ours works.”

“Why can’t other people use magic without a crystal?” Miss Maria asked him, tilting her head.

“The Cristallo Sacro are made of crystal, right? Our magic resonates with the trees when we cast our spells. We don’t know much about *how*, exactly, but it’s said that crystals are catalysts because they’re seen as pieces of the trees, and therefore take power from them.”

“But why?”

“I dunno. As much as we want to study them, there are too many monsters around, so we could never get close.”

“Then how do you know that crystals resonate with the Cristallo Sacro?”

“There was a little bit of research done waaaaay back. That’s why I wanna restart it once the Cristallo Sacro are purified. Won’t that be an awesome undertaking?”

Eric held his crystal up into the sunlight, with a big grin on his face. While he was usually so mature, his innocent smile made him look his age. He must really love research.

# Lucia Takes Shelter From the Rain

In the end, it seemed that there was no change in my mana usage, crystal or not.

“I really thought using a crystal would’ve let you use it without fainting.” Eric pouted as he stared at the crystal.

“That would have been a big help...”

As Eric and I spoke, Shiro came back over to me, flapping his little wings.  
“Kyuu!”

“Oh yeah, holding Shiro restored your mana before, right? We should test that out too.”

“Gyuu!” Shiro did his best attempt at a scary growl in response to Eric’s suggestion.

“It looks like he refuses,” I said.

“Kyuah!” The little dragon squeaked, as if he was agreeing with me.

“Oh, geez, really? We’ve got nothing to lose here!”

“Yes we do. It’s called time.” Commander Agliardi popped his head into our conversation. “Now, Eric, it seems as if you’re done with your experiment. Breaktime is over.”

Eric pursed his lips. “Don’t you have some intellectual curiosity too, Commander?”

“I do, but purification comes first. You can do all the research you like once our journey is over. Or at least, you can if Lucia agrees.”

“Luciaaaaa...” Eric whined.

Shiro gave another little squeak in response. “It doesn’t look like Shiro wants to be researched, though.”

“Geez, you’re such a brat for such a little...” Eric leaned in, giving the happily

squeaking Shiro a look, when he was suddenly lifted up. “Uwah!”

“We’ve got all the littles together over here, huh? Come on, we’ve gotta go. The border isn’t getting any closer.” Sir Gaius threw Eric over his shoulder, walked over to his horse, and forced the struggling boy onto it.

“What are you doing, you bear!?”

With Eric promptly settled, Sir Gaius turned and called out to me, “You’d best get back to the carriage, little lady. We’ve gotta get going.”

“Ah, alright,” I replied.

“Why am I the only one you forced!?” Eric cried out.

“Because you wouldn’t listen to me even if I asked.”

“I don’t speak *bear!*”

“You might not speak ‘bear,’ but you speak ‘spoiled brat’ pretty well.”

Sir Gaius and Eric were as friendly as ever as they walked off. *Now, I should be getting to the carriage!*



The Vatis Duchy was actually quite far from Kyriest. Though it took us over half a month to get to the border, we were still a long ways off from the Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn.

“Oh, it’s raining.” We all looked up at the carriage’s roof when we heard the rain start suddenly.

“It rains quite a bit in Vatis,” His Highness said. “Since we’ve entered the meadow month of Prairial, it would just be getting into the rainy season.”

“Ed, does your country have a rainy season too?”

“The climate in Banfield doesn’t change all that drastically. But you had one in your country, didn’t you, Maria?”

“Yep. Rainy season starts in June — the sixth month — in Japan. Having it rain every day sucks!”

The carriage stopped slowly as we chatted, and soon after Commander

Agliardi knocked on the door. “Your Highness, I believe it would be best to stop at Admina Village up ahead due to the heavy rain. May we have your permission?”

“That’s fine. Do as you wish, Fernando.”

Looking out the window, I could see how hard it was raining. We were dry in the carriage, but the others must have been soaked to the bone. *I hope none of them get sick.*

“Is that the village he’s talking about?” Miss Maria asked as she pointed out the window. Since it was the only thing we could see coming up, I thought it must be, but the prince was the only one who knew anything about Vatis.

“I believe so, seeing as we’ve just crossed the border...” His Highness pulled out the map, spreading it on his lap. “Here is Kyriest, and... yes, we should be here. Admina is the only village in the area, so that must be it.”

The area near the border was seemingly empty. There were other towns and villages spotted across the map, but they were all blocked off past the mountains; getting to them would be rather arduous.

As we continued to peer into the map, we reached the village and came to a stop. Lord Reynard had gone ahead, and explained our situation to the villagers.

“Your Highness, Sacred Maiden, please come this way.”

Commander Agliardi opened the carriage door and escorted the two out and led them inside a detached house. Even though they were wearing rainproof cloaks, the rain just splashed back up off of the ground and soaked their clothes. After following them inside, I went to work using *Soap* to clean and dry everyone off — all our clothes were absolutely drenched.

“Thanks. That helps a lot.” Sir Celes gave me a smile in return. *Thank goodness!* I was glad to be of help.

The villager who had shown us inside brought another man to us.

“Welcome to Admina Village,” the man began. “I hear that you all are the Sacred Maiden’s party. I am the village chief, Belio.”

He bowed deeply to Miss Maria following his introduction, and started

speaking to Commander Agliardi. “Please, rest for today.”

“Thank you for your offer, but we haven’t got any time to waste.” Miss Maria refused the village chief’s offer, straightening out her back.

“Sacred Maiden?”

“We need to purify the trees as soon as possible, don’t we? That’s my job, after all. Am I wrong?” she said with a beautiful smile. “My companions and I will definitely purify all of the Cristallo Sacro. So please, just wait a little bit longer.”

“Oh, Sacred Maiden... What heartening words...!” Belio and the other villager both broke down in tears. “The fact that we were able to help you will be the pride of our village!”

As they both praised Miss Maria, His Highness glanced over them. Then, putting a hand on Miss Maria’s shoulder, he declared in a majestic tone, “My name is Edoardo Hristo Banfield. I am the first son of Elvira Vera Vatis, Princess of the Vatis Duchy, as well as the Crown Prince of Banfield. Like the Sacred Maiden said, we will certainly purify the Cristallo Sacro, and bring you a world without the menace of monsters. Please, allow us to stay here until the rain lets up.”

The villagers bowed deeply once again as the prince introduced himself. It made me realize once again how special everyone else was.

Miss Maria was the Sacred Maiden; Prince Edoardo was the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Banfield; Commander Agliardi was the Commander of the Knight Regiment; Lord Reynard was Commander Agliardi’s Aide-de-camp; Sir Celes was the Dragonslayer, and the Captain of the Third Regiment; Eric was a young genius mage from the Academy; and Sir Gaius was also a knight.

I stood out a lot, being largely an ordinary person, aside from my magic. *Even my clothes make me stand out*, I thought as I tugged at the slightly faded deep blue skirt of my apron dress. I hadn’t thought about it before, but I just looked so out of place, it was embarrassing. *Why on earth am I here?* What was His Majesty thinking, sending someone like me along with this elite group? All of them must have been handpicked.

It was true that my magic was unusual for being able to calm monsters, and, though I fainted doing it, it was also useful in helping cleanse the sacred trees. My powers might fit in, but I was just so plain that I spoiled the bunch. *Ah, I should change my clothes.* I had thought that my normal clothes would be fine, but I should be wearing my good dress if I was with everyone else.

I sighed softly, so no one else would notice. I was late realizing, but I was just no good. If I didn't spend more time on my appearance, I'd be the one who'd end up embarrassed.



When the rain stopped a while later, we thanked the villagers of Admina and headed back towards the horses and carriage.

"That rain was coming down really hard. You were soaked. Have you warmed up at all?" Once we left the building, I started chatting with Sir Celes.

"I'm fine. You dried us off. I thought we'd have to stay wet all day." He responded with his usual blindingly bright smile. "I mean, we do have changes of clothes, but it's not like we could all change in front of you ladies."

We walked along the path on the edge of a field towards where the horses were tied up. I loved peaceful places like this, and it was a change of scenery compared to what you'd find in Arldat.

"By change of clothes, do you mean you have another uniform?" I asked.

"Nope. I actually brought some normal clothes with me too. No chance to wear them, though."

"No chance?"

"You know how our uniforms were made in the Academy, right?" Sir Celes said, as he motioned up and down his armor. "You never know when we'll get attacked while we're traveling like this. Our normal clothes don't have any defensive enchantments, so we even have to wear our uniforms to sleep. The most we can do is take off our jackets, but that looks sloppy."

I was quite sure that Sir Celes would still look quite handsome no matter what he wore.

“Is that dress your favorite?” he asked.

*...Having the person you love point out that you only have one outfit feels terrible!* I should have bought myself more clothes.

“I, I do like it, but, um...” I turned away in embarrassment. “Clothes are expensive, and I wanted to pay off my debt as soon as possible...”

“Ah...”

Our conversation dropped off into an awkward silence. *Oh, I wish I could just crawl into a hole and hide!*

“Kya...!”

“Watch out!”

It seemed that the ground heard my wish, because it crumbled under my feet. If Sir Celes hadn’t caught me, I’d be covered in mud!

“I’m so sorry! The soil around here is mixed with sand, so it’s not very stable,” one of the villagers showing us the way back explained. “Sometimes the beaten path ends up collapsing where it touches soft soil after it rains.”

“I’m glad I managed to catch you. You didn’t twist your ankle or anything, did you, Lucia?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

Moving away from Sir Celes, I looked at the crumbled path. The edge had collapsed down towards the fields. It wasn’t actually that much, but it was enough to trip someone up.

“The crop yield around here still won’t amount to much even when the monsters are gone, but I’ll be thankful when we can leave the village without worrying about getting attacked. We’re all hoping for your success.”

## Lucia Observes Shiro

“It looks like we’ll be able to stop and stay in Eres tonight.” Inside the carriage, the prince murmured as he looked at the map.

“About when should we get there?”

“Hmm, sometime after noon, I think. After Eres, we’ll be crossing the mountains, so we won’t be staying at inns for a while.”

I glanced at the map, and he was right. After Admina and Eres, there were no villages to be seen. There was a mountain named Shnoh Mountain a ways off from Eres though, and on the other side was a larger town.

“Is there anywhere we can camp?” Miss Maria asked.

“There are plains at the base of the mountain. Why?” His Highness pointed his well-formed fingers at the spot on the map, with a confused look on his face.

“We’ve been going slowly because I was always whining that I didn’t want to camp out, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So I’ve been thinking, aren’t normal people afraid of monsters, just like I am? Then we should finish purifying the Cristallo Sacro ASAP, and that would mean we need to get there faster.”

The prince smiled, and nodded along with Miss Maria. She looked back at him, and started speaking loud and clear, “I’m fine with camping, so let’s hurry up. I’ll do my best. I won’t whine and say I can’t sleep anywhere but a bed anymore. I’m not alone in the tent, so it isn’t scary anymore.”

She glanced over at me, smiling awkwardly. Her shy smile was adorable.

“Huh, to think you’d say something like that. You’ve changed since Lucia came, Maria. Alright. If you want to keep going, we’ll keep going. It’ll be rougher than you’re used to, but that will be fine, right?”

“Yep. I can do it. I’m sorry for you, though.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. I actually quite like camping. It’s quite liberating.”

“Haha, a prince who likes camping! That’s hilarious!”

Miss Maria did seem like she had changed. It was if she had put things behind her. His Highness must have felt the same, because his happy smile never left his face.

“Fernando, Maria wants to keep going. We’re not stopping in Eres, but going straight towards Shnoh Mountain.” Prince Edoardo turned, opening the small window to the coachman’s seat, and loudly ordered Commander Agliardi, “From now on, we’ll head straight towards Hirsch, the capital of Vatis. Oh, and stop staying mainly at inns.”

“As you command.”

Confused by the exchange, Miss Maria spoke up. “The next Cristallo Sacro isn’t in that Hirsch place, though.”

“It’s in Foristarn. But both the Vatis Duchy and Dal Canto want us to meet their leaders, so we can’t head straight for the tree.”

It seemed there were some political issues.

“Being a prince must be tough.”

“Things to think about, things I need to do, things I need to decide... There’s no end to them. It’s all for the sake of my country, but...” His Highness’s eyes softened as he smiled at Miss Maria, and he whispered, “Before, I never would have hesitated to throw something away for the sake of Banfield.”

Deciding things not for himself, but for the country must be an incredibly heavy responsibility. *He said “before.” Does that mean he’s hesitating on something now?*

“Pshuu~”

“By the way, is that dragon getting bigger, or am I imagining things?” The prince changed the subject, pointing to Shiro, who was laying on my lap. His tummy was up in the air, and he was snoring as he slept peacefully. It was true, though... He was getting bigger. Now, he couldn’t fit in my pocket without

bursting the seams.

“What does it eat?”

“He eats anything, really... He *is* getting big, though.”

“And you use *Soap* on him every day.”

“Yes. He doesn’t seem to be becoming hostile yet.”

As I watched his tail twitch, I thought back on how he’d been up until then. He loved it when I used *Soap* on him, and was always so happy afterwards.

“Hmm. As long as he isn’t becoming hostile. Don’t forget to use your magic on him,” the prince reaffirmed.

“Yes, I will.”

“Kyua~h...” When I pet Shiro’s tummy, he gave a quiet little cry.

I’d have to keep using *Soap* on him every day, so he stays calm, and to protect him.

# Lucia and Maria Try to Cook

We made it to the base of Shnoh Mountain that day, just as Miss Maria had wanted. It was actually quite far past Eres, so we made good progress by skipping it.

“I would like to stop here for tonight. Please wait here while we pitch the tents,” Commander Agliardi called out.

“Ah, let me help!” I said.

“I’m gonna help too,” Miss Maria replied.

Surprisingly, even she wanted to help. While Commander Agliardi might have been used to me saying it, he was shocked by Miss Maria’s offer.

“What’s with that look, Fer? I can help too. Probably...” she said with a pout.

“But your dress will get dirty.”

“We’ve got Lucia’s *Soap* for that.”

The Commander looked uncomfortable at her pressing the issue. As to not deter the set up, I offered an alternative, “Miss Maria, would you like to help me make dinner?”

“Yes, that’s a wonderful idea.” Commander Agliardi beamed. “But please, be careful of the fire.”

“Okaaay.”

Leaving the heavy lifting to the men, we set out to do another necessary job. Together, we headed towards the fire that Eric had already lit. Luckily for us, the pot was already set up. I poured water into it from the jug fitted with a water crystal.

“It’s like cooking class, huh?” Miss Maria said as she peered into the pot excitedly when it started to boil.

“Cooking class?”

"Yeah. We had cooking classes in school. I was actually pretty good."

*Miss Maria was gifted enough to go to school? Amazing! In our country, anyone smart enough to become a scholar went to the Tower of Learning in Dal Canto, while people with talents in magic studied at the Academy in Banfield. School was a very special place. I wonder if it's the same in her world?*

"What are we gonna make today, Lucia?"

We chatted while getting things ready.

"We can only make what we have the ingredients for already, and we don't have an oven, so we can't make anything elaborate..."

While I was peeling some onions, Eric came up to us holding several fish.  
"Hey, hey, I caught some fish. Cook them!"

"Where'd you catch those?" I asked.

"There's a river close by, so I dropped a lightning bolt on it."

"You could have electrocuted yourself!" Miss Maria scolded him. "Why didn't you just fish like a normal person!?"

"It's a pain to actually fish. I'm a *mage*, you know!" Eric pouted.

"If there was anyone in the water, you would've killed them!"

"All I did was catch the fish that the lightning bolt hit. No one was there. Sometimes I don't get anything when I try it."

"That's an awful way to do it," Miss Maria reproached, looking away.

"It's a logical way to do it. You get more fish than you would waiting around for them to bite."

"That doesn't change the fact that it's dangerous. And I'm not touching those. I can't debone fish either." She crossed her arms indignantly.

Eric then turned to me, giving me those puppy dog eyes as he held his fish out towards me. "Hey, Lucia, can you do it? It's been so long since I've had fish. All you have to do is salt and cook them!"

"Eri-kun, can't you just cook it with your magic? Isn't fire magic your specialty?"

"If I tried cooking it with my magic it'd just burn it to a crisp. Actually, it might not even leave that."

"How can you call fire magic your specialty when you can't even control the strength of it?"

"I've never heard of anyone cooking with magic before. Hmm, but that'd be new." Eric mumbled as he tilted his head. "I've always practiced making my magic stronger, so it might be nice to try the opposite. It might be fun to verify it once I get back to the Academy... Wait, you distracted me! Fish! Cook me my fish!"

"Ah, okay."

Eric argued so vehemently that I just took the fish without thinking. I had planned to make pasta today, but maybe I could cut the fish open and fry it coated in breadcrumbs. We could eat it differently if we had tomatoes, but unfortunately, we didn't.

"Would it be okay if I fried them in breadcrumbs?"

"Anything is fine as long as I get to eat fish! Ah, but don't put carrots or beans in it!"

Sir Celes might have loved beans, but it seemed that Eric didn't share that fondness.

"I can't do fish, so I'll work on the pasta." Announcing that, Miss Maria started chopping the onions.

I thought it a little odd that Miss Maria could cook, seeing as how nobles usually didn't... Things must be different in her world. They had cooking classes, after all. *It's so fun thinking about how different the culture is in other worlds!*

# Lucia and Maria Go for a Night Stroll

That night, the others really enjoyed the meal that Miss Maria and I cooked. After dinner, everyone but Sir Gaius, who was the night watch, returned to their tents. Miss Maria and I stayed up chatting for a while, but our conversation eventually died off, and I fell asleep, wrapped in my blanket.

“Hey, Lucia,” came a whisper.

I was awoken from my doze by a gentle shake of my shoulder. When I opened my eyes, Miss Maria was looking down at me in the darkness.

“What’s wrong?”

While I rubbed my eyes, she continued, embarrassed, “I’m sorry. I need to use the toilet, but I’m kind of afraid to go in the dark.”

Unlike at an inn, going to the bathroom outside was more difficult. You had to worry about monsters, as well, let alone the darkness.

While Shiro slept on his back, snoring happily, Miss Maria and I quietly left the tent.

“There are so many things I hate about camping, like bugs, and the hard ground, and no baths, but using the toilet is the worst of all. I mean, yeah, they put up a little tent for it, but it’s still just a hole dug into the ground. It’s so gross and primitive. Why does it still suck so much when you have magic?”

As she described, camp toilets were just holes dug into the ground. Once you were finished, you used an earth crystal to cover it up so it didn’t smell. It all went back to the earth as manure, so I didn’t really see the problem, but... I guess it would be hard to adjust to if you were used to the flush toilets in the capital.

“Why can’t we just make it disappear?”

“If we made it disappear, we wouldn’t have any manure.”

“Oh...so you can’t just grow things with magic? Your world is still medieval in

some weird places.”

“Is manure different in your world?”

“They use animal stuff sometimes, but most of what I’ve seen has been chemical fertilizer. This world is way behind in terms of science. You guys rely way too much on magic.”

That was true. Our world was based on magic. All it took to get drinking water was a water crystal, so magic was indispensable to us.

“What would happen if you didn’t have magic anymore?”

“If we didn’t have magic...?” I repeated her question as I tilted my head. “Magic is convenient, but I think we’d still be able to live without it. You can get water from wells and rivers, and start fires with flint. You can wash clothes just fine by hand, and you can use candles for light.”

“That’s true... But I can’t imagine this world ever having as many machines as mine does. It’s so peaceful, I don’t think it’d ever have things like bombs and guns. There’s probably no gunpowder anyway...”

After a bit more chatting we finally made it to the toilet.

“Sorry, just wait a sec. Don’t go back without me!” Miss Maria cried out.

“Don’t worry, I won’t. I’ll just be waiting out here.”

I looked up at the sky. It was full of stars, just as it had been when I looked at it with Sir Celes. I wondered where all of the rainclouds had gone.

“I wonder if it’ll be sunny tomorrow...” I whispered.

Tomorrow, we’d be crossing the mountains. It would be too dangerous to do in the rain, so we might end up having to wait here for it to stop. We needed the blue sky to let us get to the Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn quickly.



Instead of returning right back to the tent, we decided to go on a walk. I’d woken up completely, and I wanted to see the stars with Miss Maria, since they were so beautiful tonight. As we made our way around the campsite, Miss Maria suddenly stopped.

“Huh, what’s wrong?” I asked, turning to her.

Miss Maria’s eyes were opened wide. Standing a bit away from the tents was Sir Celes; his uniform top was off, showing just the shirt underneath.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asked him.

“Not really.”

“That outfit actually looks pretty simple without the coat. Why’d you take it off? The coat makes it look more military-like with the collar standing up.”

“This is how I usually look when I’m not on night watch. It’s hard to sleep with that coat on.”

The low-key grey and black uniform he wore looked nice, but he looked handsome in his rough-looking shirt too.

“Where are you two going?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I made Lucia come for a walk with me. Wanna come with?”

“Alright. That’s a good idea.” Accepting Miss Maria’s offer, Sir Celes walked beside me. “The stars are beautiful tonight, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I thought it’d be cloudy because of all the rain, but it looks like it was just washed clean.”

As we walked, Miss Maria stopped abruptly again. “Isn’t that Ed over there? And he’s with... Fer?”

“It is,” Sir Celes replied, looking over to where the two were standing.

“What could they be doing so late at night?”

Though they were hidden by the trees, we could definitely see the prince and Commander Agliardi standing there. His Highness was wearing a hooded cloak, but he was turned towards us, so we could make out his face.

“Why are they doing, hiding out here in the middle of the night?”

It seemed they hadn’t noticed us. It looked as if they were discussing

something serious. *I wonder if we'd be able to hear it if we got a bit closer?*

“What are they talking about?”

Thinking back, I should have stopped Miss Maria before she got any closer. But we were distracted by the conversation, not even thinking what it would mean to us. We stayed quiet while watching, and they continued their conversation, without thinking they'd be heard.

“...That’s right. As long as we have a ‘Sacred Maiden,’ it doesn’t matter if it’s Maria or not. Though she’s lowborn, Lucia would be better as my Queen, since she’s so meek. No one will care, as long as my wife is the ‘Sacred Maiden.’”

The prince’s quiet voice ripped through the darkness much faster than any magic could.

# Lucia Chases After Maria

“Miss Maria!”

“Sacred Maiden!”

The moment she heard His Highness’s words, Miss Maria turned and ran.

“Maria!?”

“The Sacred Maiden!?”

Having heard our yelling, the prince and the Commander called out as well. But we didn’t have time to waste on them. Sir Celes and I chased after Miss Maria.

“Miss Maria, please, wait!”

I didn’t care what His Highness was thinking when he said what he did. Whatever it was, it had ended up hurting Miss Maria, and that meant more to me than anything else. She was my friend, after all. I couldn’t leave her alone when she was hurt. Being alone would just make it worse.

“Sacred Maiden, please wait!” Sir Celes called out to her.

He was faster than I, so he was able to catch up to her first. Though he tried to grab her arm, he must have done it too lightly, because she easily shook him off.

“No! Let go of me!”

“Miss Maria!”

She was crying. And as she cried, her heartrending screams drowned out even the nearby river rumbling nearby.

“What is *with* you people! Don’t touch me! You’re all so selfish!”

I pushed Sir Celes out of the way and ran up to Miss Maria. He backed off, seemingly leaving things to me.

“First you kidnap me, then, once I’d *finally* decided to start trying, you come

out and say that you don't need me! I don't get it! Why did you summon me, then!?"

"Miss Maria, we do need you!" I hugged her slender body close as she kept going.

"That's not what they said! You heard it, didn't you!? He can't use me, so he'll use you instead! That's horrible! They said I was the only Sacred Maiden! Told me to do my best *because* I was the Sacred Maiden!"

"There must be more to it—" Sir Celes tried to step in with a sliver of hope, but Miss Maria just shook her head. Her long black hair twisted, cutting through the wind.

"No, no way! You heard too, Celes! I don't need your self-serving kindness! Ed said he didn't need me, that he was gonna switch to Lucia!" Miss Maria's face warped as she pointed and laughed at him. "He's throwing me away for you! That's what your prince decided! Laugh at me! Tell me I'm pitiful! Oh, wait. You can't laugh at this. You get to be unhappy too. Serves you right!"

"Sacred Maiden!"

"This is so stupid! I hate all of you! I **loathe** all of you! Do you think I'm here because I want to be!? I've had enough of this!" After screaming at Sir Celes, she suddenly turned to look at me, her beautiful face twisted. "You... You...!"

"Miss Maria!"

"Why is it you, huh!? Why? I'm... I'm..."

"Miss Maria, surely this is all a misunderstanding. They wouldn't say something like that without reason. We only heard a bit of the conversation!"

"NO!" she screamed while shoving me away.

"Ah!"

The moment I hit the ground, it crumbled beneath me.

"Lucia!"

"Nooooo!"

Amidst the darkness, I could see the color drain from Sir Celes's face, and Miss

Maria's crying face so clearly. And, with the sickening feeling of my stomach being in midair, I fell off the cliff.



# Maria Cries

“Lucia!”

“Nooooo!”

We both screamed as Lucia disappeared over the cliff. I froze in place as the sound of the roaring water filled the air. *Why is this happening!?* While I was shocked, Celes immediately went into action, and leapt into the river below to save her. The river, swollen from the earlier rain, washed them away in a second. *How terrifying...*

They went over a cliff. And you didn’t need to look down to know how fast the river was raging, because you could hear it. And just like that, they were over the cliff and gone. The river raged on in indifference. We had no way of knowing if they were alright or not.

“Noooooooo! Lucia! Celes!”

But I wasn’t brave enough to jump in after them. As much as I wanted to save them, I couldn’t bring myself to move. No matter how much I bluffed, I was still a coward... All I could do was scream.

“Sacred Maiden!”

“Maria!”

The ones who heard my screams and came were Ed and Fer, the people I least wanted to see right now.

“No! Stay away! Lucia! Luciaaaaaaa!”

“Maria, wait, it’s a misunderstanding! Listen to me!” Ed pulled me close as I melted down. I slapped and hit him as hard as I could, trying to get away. “It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you! Calm down!”

He pleaded, holding my arms down, but I couldn’t believe him. I had believed him before, and that’s exactly why I couldn’t do it now.

“Sacred Maiden, what happened to Lucia and Celestino!?” Fer called out to

me.

At his words, I finally snapped out of it. It felt like I had just woken up.

“Lucia! Save Lucia!” I pleaded. “Celes, he— Go save Lucia!”

“Calm down! Where are they!?”

*Calm down? There's no way I can calm down. They fell. They fell down there, and it's dark, and it's cold!*

“I, I, I didn't mean to... What should I do— Hey, what should I do!? What if...what if Lucia dies! She fell in the river! The ground gave way...” I didn't do a very good job of explaining in my state, but Fer understood enough. His face changed in an instant. Ed must have understood too, because he loosened his grip on me to try to calm me down.

As I pulled away, he wrapped his cloak around me. When I looked up in surprise, he just said I'd get a chill, in his usual gentle voice. *Why is he acting normal? Why would he need to bother with me now?* But that wasn't important right now. What was important was making sure that Lucia and Celes were alright. At the very least, Ed and Fer coming might save them.

I watched hopefully as Fer held out his lamp and looked down the cliff, but I broke down again when his face fell.



After that, everyone came running after hearing my screams. Eri-kun swept around the area with his magic, while Reynard rubbed my back until I calmed down a bit. I used my light magic to brighten up the area, but we couldn't find any trace of them. *What should I do? What am I going to do!*

Back in my tent, I curled up under my blanket, shaking. In stories, this would be the moment where the heroine fainted in shock, but reality wasn't that kind. Being conscious meant not being able to escape that fear. I just kept thinking, *What if they never come back?*

*I'd be a murderer...*

The second that thought crossed my mind, I froze up. I hadn't killed anyone — anything — since I came to this world. I might've used magic to attack that

pervert in Amarith, but I wasn't trying to kill him. But now, the first person I'd ever hurt was my best friend!

I shook and cried all night, but that didn't change the situation one bit. Once morning came, Gaius and Reynard climbed down the cliff to search, but... They couldn't find a trace of them.

# Lucia and Celes are Lost

“...A..... Cia...”

I could hear someone calling my name in the distance. Who was it? My mother? I could hear how much whoever it was cared for me.

“Lu...cia...”

Who could it be? I know this voice well. It was the voice of the person I loved. Gentle and deep, pleasant to the ear...

“Sir Cele...”

“Lucia!” When I opened my eyes, Sir Celes was right in front of me, with his golden hair soaked and clinging to his forehead. He looked somewhat distressed. “Lucia, thank goodness...!”

As soon as our eyes met, he pulled me tightly to his chest in a hug. It was then that I noticed that it wasn’t just his hair that was soaked, but his entire body; not just him, but me as well.

“Huh, what? Where are... Ah, Miss Maria!”

It was dark out, but you could see one part of the sky getting brighter... So it must have been near dawn?

“Last night, the cliff crumbled beneath you, and you fell into the river below.” Sir Celes explained. “I jumped in to save you, but the river was so swollen, all I could manage was using wind magic to shield us. I’m not good enough to use much else but some support magic. Plus, since I couldn’t touch the crystal in my regiment emblem, I couldn’t make us float...”

“Where are we?” I asked, looking around again.

“I don’t know. I was just so afraid that you wouldn’t wake up. I thought I was too late,” he whispered, as his arms tightened ever so slightly. The fact that sounded as if his voice was quaking made my chest tighten.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. Thank you for saving me.”

“It’s fine... I’m glad I made it in time.”

Glad that I could feel his body heat, I put my arms around his back too. It should be fine for me to hold him like this, just for now.

“You’re warm, Lucia.”

We held each other in silence for a while, until he pulled away with an embarrassed smile.

“You’re right, it’s warm when we hug,” I admitted it honestly. *Really though, it’s so cold!* I just noticed, but we were both freezing!

“We’d better get dried off soon, or we’ll be in trouble.”

“That’s true,” I replied, leaning forward. “We wouldn’t want to catch a cold—Wait just a moment. *Soap!*”

*Soap* didn’t just clean, but dried things as well. It really was quite handy. *Ah, it dried out our hair, too!*

“Thanks, Lucia. It feels so much better to be dry.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“But anyway... Where are we?” Still staying close to each other, we both looked around. That was when we saw a few white wisps of smoke rising between some trees nearby. “There’s smoke...”

“Wouldn’t that mean there are people?”

“It’s along the river, so it might be a village. I didn’t think we had gotten swept that far away, but the river was flowing pretty fast... I don’t remember how long we were in there, so we should figure out exactly where we are first. Can you walk? Does anything hurt?”

Sir Celes helped me up, but I didn’t seem to have any injuries.

“I’m alright,” I said, dusting my clothes off. “Are you hurt anywhere, Sir Celes?”

“Nope, I’m good. Let’s get going, then. Everyone must be worried sick, knowing that we got separated like that, especially the Sacred Maiden. We need to get back to them as soon as possible.”

I thought back to just before I fell. My chest tightened painfully as I remembered Miss Maria's crying face. *Miss Maria... I hope she's not blaming herself. I wonder if she's okay? Shiro, Sir Gaius, Eric, Lord Reynard. Please comfort Miss Maria for me. She might act tough, but she's really quite gentle. Knowing her, she probably thinks it's her fault that Sir Celes and I got separated.*

Just as we were about to start walking towards the smoke, Sir Celes spoke up, noticing something. "Ah."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Lucia. We're in trouble." Heaving a sigh, he held his right hand up to his forehead. "We're penniless."

"Huh? What do you...?" For a moment, I didn't understand what he meant. Penniless. It means having no money, so... *Wait, what!?*

Once I realized what he said, I looked closely at both of us. I was in a simple dress that I used as a nightgown. Though my hair was usually tied up with the ribbon that Sir Celes gave me, I had taken it out before bed. Sir Celes was in his uniform slacks and the shirt he wore under his uniform top. He didn't have his armor, his cape, his gloves, or even the sword he always had on his hip. You couldn't tell he was a knight unless he told you. And neither of us had any of our belongings, so we had nothing we could sell.

"Let's just go towards the smoke and figure out where we are for now. We'll need to make some money to get back to the others. I mean, you can't walk around in that, and I can't protect you without a sword. I'm so sorry, Lucia."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. If you weren't with me, I don't know what would have happened to me. I'd be helpless. Thank you for being with me."

Just thinking about being all alone like this sent a chill down my spine. Being alone is scary. Not having anyone to rely on, you're just at a loss for what to do. I don't want to feel like that anymore.

I looked up at Sir Celes. A ray of morning light cut through the sky, illuminating his sun-colored hair. The person I loved was someone who was just like a spot in the sun.

"It's such a relief to not be alone," I said, smiling. Suddenly, he grabbed my

hand. "Sir Celes...?"

Sir Celes pulled the hand he grabbed hard. I lost my balance and fell into his chest.

"Hyah!?"

"Lucia." Before I realized it, I was in his arms. *I don't know what's happening. What is this?* "I'll definitely protect you. I won't leave you alone. So don't worry, and just stay with me."

I went silent as he hugged me tighter than when I first woke up. No girl could get hugged by the person they loved without getting excited. The same goes for me. It's going to make me think I have a chance when I shouldn't. To be frank, the last time I got excited about it, I just got let down. I shouldn't let myself get the wrong idea.

He knew I was an orphan. He must be trying to cheer me up because of that. That had to be it. Not wanting to embarrass myself by getting the wrong idea, I suppressed my feelings.

"I'm fine. I'm strong."

"You are strong and graceful, Lucia. Your strength has saved both the Sacred Maiden and I. Everyone relies on you. But you're still just sixteen. You can rely on others too. *I want you to rely on me.*"

Oh, why does Sir Celes always have to hit me where I'm weak. *This is bad. If I depend on him, I won't be able to do anything alone anymore.*

"...Let's go, Sir Celes. I'm used to being poor," I said, breaking away from the hug. "If we've got no money, all we need to do is work for it. If we find anyone, let's ask them if they have any work that needs doing. Okay?"

"Lucia..."

*I'm good at living without money! Just leave it to me!*

"The doctor back in Hasawes taught me about medicinal herbs. She did it because she said it'd be good for my mother if I could gather and mix them myself. I think we could sell herbs anywhere, so let's get back to Miss Maria as soon as we can. She has to be worrying about us. I want to see her and make

her feel better.”

“That’s true. We did leave her on a bad note. I’m doing a really bad job at being her protector.” He rested his head against my shoulder, sighing. “...Yeah. We’ll do it somehow. Let’s go, Lucia.”

“Okay!”

We started walking towards the source of the smoke. Though I was a bit sad that we had to separate, we had no time for hugs. *I’ll be back soon, Miss Maria!* I looked up at the brightening sky and took a deep breath. *Shiro, please give Miss Maria some comfort. Stay with her and protect her, so she won’t cry.*

## Celes Toys with Lucia

The source of the smoke turned out to be a small village — or maybe ‘settlement’ would be better? There were only about ten houses, all close together in the middle of a forest.

An old woman carrying a water bucket noticed us, and asked us with a dubious voice, “Who’re ye two?”

“We’re travelers,” Sir Celes replied.

“Don’t look much like travelers, carryin’ nothin’.” She gave us a look.  
“Where’re ye from? Who are ye?”

Hmm, it’s true that we looked suspicious with no belongings. Two people in light clothing with empty hands... We’re nothing if not suspicious!

“We’re on our way to the Vatis Capital, Hirsch, from the Kingdom of Banfield. We ended up falling off a cliff and into a raging river. I managed to dry us off with the bit of wind magic I can use, but we lost everything we had with us.”

“Really? What’re ye goin’ to the capital for?”

“To see a friend named Boccardo.”

It seemed that he was going to hide that we were members of the Sacred Maiden’s party. I would have to ask him why later.

The old woman didn’t seem to believe us, and walked slowly over to us after putting down her bucket. Being thoroughly inspected from head to toe didn’t feel very nice. “Hmmm? So this girlie is with you? Don’t look like siblings to me.”

“We aren’t.”

“Boy... Are ye a slave trader? Scary, havin’ one with such a nice face.”

*She thinks Sir Celes is a human trafficker! I was about to try to correct her, but Sir Celes stopped me. I guess he wants to do it himself?*

Putting an arm around my shoulder, he smiled and said, “She’s my wife.”

I looked at him, shocked.

“Doesn’t look like she knew that.” Apparently I had it written on my face, because she pointed that out meanly. *Ugh, she knows we don’t have our story straight!*

“We just eloped, so she’s still not used to it.”

“Ah, is that so. Must’ve been a difference in social status, huh. Yer wearin’ some nice stuff. Geez, if she’s yer wife, ye’d better get her some better clothes.”

“I want to, but I came and took her in the middle of the night. She’s still wearing what she was wearing then.”

*Sir Celes, that’s...not a very good excuse. I think we’d be more believable if we just told the truth. And saying we’re married? Really!? That is completely unnecessary! You should’ve just said that we’re half-siblings!*

Watching me dart my eyes, the old woman sighed, “Whatever. Neither of ye look good, so I can at least make ya some warm tea. Even if yer a bad guy, I’ve got nothin’ worth stealin’ in my house, and even if ye kill me, it’ll just mean I can see my dead husband again.”

Now that she mentioned it, I noticed that her hair was cut short above her shoulders.

In Banfield, women who died or were widowed had their hair cut short in order to give the dead something to trade on their last journey. *I wonder if it’s the same in the Vatis Duchy?* I heard that we all speak the same language, but it would be nice if small things like that were the same, too.

“Thank you. I’ll carry your bucket,” Sir Celes said, and I followed up with, “Thank you very much!”

“Alright, I’ll leave ‘em to ye, then. Ah, but can ye fill it from the well first? Yer a man. Help an old lady out.”

“Of course. Where’s the well?”

Thankful that we’d met such a generous old woman, we followed after her.

# Lucia Opens Up to Romina

“My name’s Romina,” the old woman said.

“I’m Celestino. This is Lucia.”

“Nice, nice to meet you...”

We had followed her to her house and introduced ourselves, but what followed was a weird silence. Missus Romina silently made us tea, and I looked up at Sir Celes, not knowing what I should say.

“I live alone. S’not much, but have some tea. Might not suit your city tastes, though.” She set the tea down in front of us. It smelled fragrant, and when I took a sip, it had a peculiar bitter taste, almost like medicinal tea. “So, ye wanna tell me the truth now?”

“The truth?”

“Don’t underestimate your elders. I’ve already lived a few of yer lifetimes.”

Missus Romina glared at Sir Celes, who seemed insistent upon hiding our identities.

“Sir Celes, let’s just tell the truth,” I implored. “Lying is just going to get more difficult.”

You couldn’t build good relationships on lies, and I didn’t think I could act naturally while lying. Saying that we were married... I knew anyone would be able to see through it with how awkward I was.

“...Lady Romina, please keep everything you hear here to yourself.” Sir Celes must have made up his mind. With a serious look, he corrected his posture and looked directly at her. “It’s true that we’ve come from Banfield on our way to the Capital. But, our final destination isn’t Hirsch, but Foristarn. We’re on our way to purify the Cristallo Sacro.”

“Purify?”

“You must have heard that a Sacred Maiden has been summoned from

another world to purify the trees. We are part of her party. But we were in an accident, and swept down the river to here.”

Missus Romina’s eyes opened wide, as if she couldn’t believe us. “Didn’t expect ye to be so important. So ye were tryin’ to avoid a scandal by hidin’ your position?”

“Not quite a scandal, but if other countries were to know that we had an accident on our journey, there could be trouble. The Sacred Maiden’s Journey must be perfect. That is what I was told when we set off, and that is why I hid our identities.”

“That’s foolish of ye. No reason to hide ‘em here. Maybe in a big town, but nothin’d happen if ye told the truth to the villagers. But I never got any schoolin’, so I dunno what the big shots’re thinkin’.”

*So that’s why he lied.* Pulling a small pendant from inside his shirt, Sir Celes showed it to Missus Romina. The small crystal hanging beside it sparkled in the morning light coming through the window.

“Let me reintroduce myself. My name is Celestino Clementi. I am the Captain of the Third Regiment of the Knights of the Kingdom of Banfield.”

“So you’re a Captain. That’s impressive. So who’s the girlie?”

*What’s my position? Attendant?*

“My name is Lucia Arca,” I said. Not knowing what to do, I just gave her my name. Since I wasn’t working anymore, it would be strange to tell her I’m a laundrymaid.

“Hmm, so the status difference was true. But you should keep up the married act. Here in Sherez, we’re starvin’ for young men. Even if you’re foreign, you’re young and attractive... Ye might never get to leave again.”

“Huh!?”

Both Sir Celes and I were speechless. *What does that mean?*

“This is a small village, and most of us are older. But there’s one house with a young girlie,” she explained. “Her parents came back from the city with her a few years ago, and she’s wantin’ a husband. She wants to go back to the city to

find one, and her family wants to keep her here. S'a pain. If they love her, they should let her go."

She was right. If someone was searching for a husband, and Sir Celes came along... He was a perfect candidate, so of course they'd go straight for him!

"Might still be dangerous, though, even if ye keep up the married act. I wouldn't blame ye, so the two of ye should get going, for your own good. Doesn't look like the Captain's lookin' for a bride, anyway."

"No, I don't need one. I've already got someone."

*He has someone...* When he said that, I felt like I had been hit by lightning. I thought that he loved Miss Maria, but... *He has a lover back home in Arldat, huh.* Ah, that's right. He was such a wonderful, handsome person, so naturally he had a lover.

Neither Sir Celes or Missus Romina noticed that I was reeling from my broken heart, and they just continued their conversation.

"But, as you can see, we're in a bit of trouble. Unfortunately, to get back to our party, we'll need the lay of the land, the means to leave, and traveling expenses. You said that this village was called Sherez? How far from Hirsch would you say it is?"

"Hirsch, huh... Wait a minute. I haven't got a map, but I can draw ye somethin' simple."

Missus Romina pulled a piece of charcoal from the hearth and began drawing on the corner of the table.

## Lucia Has A Broken Heart

According to the map that Missus Romina drew for us, Sherez was farther west than Shnoh Mountain. We were closer to Dal Canto than we were to Banfield.

“Should we use the town past Shnoh Mountain as a reference? How far is it from here?”

“Shnoh is about a week’s walk away, maybe faster for ye youngins,” Missus Romina said. “And then past that is, Rathay? Or was it Majido?”

Sir Celes stared at the map as he mumbled, “Once they climbed over the mountains, which village would they head to...”

Rathay and Majido were to the east and west once you were over the mountain. We wouldn’t know which one they went to.

“Lady Romina, which village is closer to Hirsch?”

“Beats me. I’ve never been to the capital. Might be about the same distance.”

“Would anyone in this village have a map?”

“Never heard anyone talk about havin’ one. But yer best bet is the family I was tellin’ ye about before. Even if they do have one, it wouldn’t be recent.”

Sir Celes paled at her answer and said, “We would really like a map for our journey, but... Even just a compass.”

“They’d be the ones with a compass, too. Their boy was a peddler, so he must have one. No one else here ever leaves, so they’d be the only option.”

So it would be difficult for us to get back to the others without stopping by the problem house.

“Ye’d better be prepared before ye get to Dario’s. They might help you if the Captain does a night’s worth of work.”

“No way!” he immediately exclaimed. “I couldn’t do that with someone I

didn't love!"

"Ahaha! You're purer than I thought! Ye probably have 'em lined up with your face. Lella takes after her mother, so she's a beauty. Havin' a go would be a treat to most men. Yer a disappointment!"

"Can we drop this, please..." Sir Celes was at a loss, and the sight made Missus Romina cackle happily.

She turned to me. "Girlie, you've gotta do your best, too, for the poor Captain's sake."

"Alright, but what can I do..."

"Ye just gotta get the newlywed act perfect. They'd go right for the Sacred Maiden bit, so ye'd better hide that, no matter how effective it'd be. Hehe, don't look so miserable. Can't ye work for the man ye love?"

"Lo...!" My cheeks went bright red. *The person I love... Wait, I can't let him know! It'd make it worse for him!* "Um, I—"

"What, I'm wrong?" Missus Romina looked like she was having fun watching me panic, but I just had my heart broken! And just a few minutes before, too! Please, be gentle!

"Y-You're wrong..." I managed to mumble out.

"Lucia." Sir Celes gave me a serious look. "Do you really hate the idea of us being together that much?"

"No, it's just... Um, I'd feel bad for your lover, so, um... Ah, but if we don't, you'll end up married, right? It'd be best for me to be your breakwater, huh..."

"Lady Romina, let's go with your plan," he said, turning back to her. "We need to regroup as soon as possible, so we don't have time to think of something else."

"Well, do ye best, Captain. It'd still be easiest for ye to just do it. Keep that in mind when ye get turned down."

"I'm already about to get turned down, so I'll try my best."

After their exchange, the two of them started ironing out the details. All I

could do was wrestle with my feelings as I looked at Sir Celes. *Even if he's about to get turned down, he'll work that hard for his lover...* I felt my heart creaking in my chest. It hurt so much. My stomach was also churning.

*No, I shouldn't be thinking about this.* I should be focusing on how to get back to Miss Maria. I couldn't think about Sir Celes. I needed to make sure she knew we were alright as soon as possible.

"I'll do my best for Miss Maria."

"Ah... I knew it... You would say that..."

Sir Celes was visibly distressed.



The setting that Missus Romina and Sir Celes thought up was this: He and I were a newlywed couple, on a knowingly dangerous journey to see his mother on her deathbed. We were attacked by monsters, and when we scrambled to escape, we fell into the river, where Missus Romina found us.

We'd be going to Mister Dario's home looking for a map to copy in order to get to his mother in Hirsch as soon as possible. But would they really believe it?

"The clothes yer wearin' don't match up with the girlie's, so wear some of my late husband's clothes. We can say that your clothes were in tatters. Girlie, mine might be old, but ye get changed, too."

Missus Romina grabbed some clothes from her drawers and tossed them to us.

"Thank you for all your help."

"Oh, nothin's too much for the heroes purifyin' the Cristallo Sacro. Everything'll change once the monsters are gone."

*I'm so glad we met Missus Romina first.* I changed into the clothing she lent me as I thanked our luck. Now I just needed to try my best at acting. Even if it hurt, I had to do it.

# Maria Realizes the Value of Companions

We searched for Lucia and Celes the next day, but we had no luck at all. The rain that day had swollen the river up, and it was flowing too fast. While it looked as if it was only one, it split in a few places later on, making our search even harder.

We spent two days searching, but...they were nowhere to be found. When Fer called off the search, exhausted, no one blamed me. In fact, they were all really worried about me. I knew that I had always been super selfish, so I couldn't believe that they would all treat me so kindly. Everyone was fond of Lucia, and Celes was their comrade and the strongest in the group. Even though it was my fault they were gone, no one blamed me at all.

"Sacred Maiden, you must be hungry. I'm actually quite a good cook, despite my looks. Please have some soup. The recipe is my sister-in-law's."

"That's right. You can't do anything on an empty stomach. My wife's special soup'll warm you right up!"

"Sacred Maiden, do you wanna ride behind me next?"

Since I really didn't want to see Ed or Fer, the other three were always beside me, protecting me from them. I finally had my harem, but I wasn't happy about it.

"Kyuu?" Shiro squeaked up at me, as if he was worried I was sad.

Since he couldn't fly well yet, he had always traveled in Lucia's pocket. Since she was gone now, I held him all the time instead. His tail, with its sparkling, veil-like fin, rubbed against my arm, comforting me. All I could do was look downwards and hug Shiro, unable to reply to their kindness. But I had to respond to the next voice I heard.

"Would you allow me to talk to you for a moment?"

It was Fer. He looked uncomfortable, but I couldn't feel bad for him. He might have talked big before, but he was lying to me. I couldn't forgive him, just like I

couldn't forgive Ed. It might be unjustified, but if they hadn't been plotting like that, none of this ever would have happened.



“No, she will not! Stay away, Commander!”

Though Fer had been trying to be tactful, Eric’s response definitely wasn’t. Even the two knights, his subordinates, stood beside the little Mage, silently intimidating.

*I’m being protected. But...it just feels so, so bitter.* After all, the first person to protect me wasn’t here anymore. Because I—

While I was at my limit, nearly ready to scream, Fer continued, troubled, “I know you may not want to hear it, but... Please, let us explain ourselves. It’s hard on both you and His Highness for this misunderstanding to continue.”



“Maria, I’m really... So sorry for hurting you. I should have apologized right after, but the search for the Captain and Lucia took precedence,” Ed spoke to me, lowering his head. Fer followed in suit.

I couldn’t say anything about how long it took for them to apologize. I was the one who avoided them and made searching for the two our priority. This was actually the first time I’d seen their faces in days.

Taking my silence as a good thing, Ed and Fer sat across from us, and raised their heads as they told us what circumstances they were under. The King had ordered that I be assassinated. While outwardly acting as if they agreed, they had been searching for a way to let me live. Once they finished, they bowed deeply to me again.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Gaius growled. He leaned forward, hiding me behind his back. “You think we’re gonna accept that apology!?”

There wasn’t even a trace of his usual brightness in his voice. I couldn’t think of how to respond myself, even though I was the one being apologized to.

“I thought the same thing with the little lady, but you big shots just think of people as pawns, don’t you!?” Gaius yelled. “That’s fine for us soldiers. That’s our job. But Her Sacredness and Lucia aren’t knights, or soldiers, or even Mages. They’re normal citizens, the people we’re supposed to protect! How do you get off hurting them for your own reasons, Sir Commander? And you, oh Crown

Prince, aren't you the least bit embarrassed!?"

Ed hung his head, a serious look on his face. "...You're completely right. No matter how we apologize, we can't take back the fact that we did something unforgivable."

Fer hung his head dejectedly too and said, "I understand that you won't be able to believe us yet. But both His Highness and I will do everything in our power to regain your trust. Sacred Maiden, we will do our utmost to protect and support you."

They were right. Even with their apology, I couldn't believe them. I definitely believed that they had been observing me, and that it was on orders from the King of Banfield. He honestly was really haughty. But the part where they said that they had been searching for a way to keep me alive. I didn't think I could believe that completely yet... But still...

*"Or I look for a path that I won't regret while doing that job."*

I remembered what Fer once said to me. That one line stuck, and that was what made me start to believe them. Some part of me may have wanted to believe them. I might not have wanted to think those days were a lie. If they had really been searching for a way to save me, even while ordered to do something so cruel... If I could really believe them... I felt like we may be able to become true companions, then.

# Lucia Goes to Dario's House

"Let's get somethin' in our bellies first. I can't make much, but I'm hungry. I'll make something for you too."

"I can help, if you'd like," I said.

"Alrighty. Then I'm gonna work ye. Peel that turnip for me. I'll make some porridge."

Once we finished planning, Missus Romina headed towards the kitchen. The small kitchen, just big enough for the two of us, reminded me of the home I had lived in with my mother, and I got a bit choked up.

"Oh, you're pretty good."

"I did it every day back at home..."

"Yer parents did a good job raising ye. The Captain'd be happy to have a wife like ye."

I nearly cried when she complimented my mother, but my tears went back in when she mentioned Sir Celes. I wouldn't be his wife... I was only acting like it, so I wouldn't do anything like cook for him... No, I had already cooked for him. But that was just cooking food while we camped. It wasn't cooking *for* him.

"Sir Celes will definitely find a wife that suits him."

"Oh, how cold. Kids like ye should be honest. Ye should only get crabby when yer an old lady like me."

It seemed that Missus Romina saw right through me.

After checking that Sir Celes was far away, I whispered to her, "...Well, having feelings for someone who has someone already is useless."

"Ye think that? You're still young, girlie, so ye don't see it. Or is that you're too afraid to look?"

*Afraid to look?* I looked at her, with the knife still in my hand. It was true that I

hadn't wanted to see my feelings for him, but was she telling me that I was still looking away from something?

"Everyone is afraid to be hurt. That's why they all wanna look away to protect themselves. But there are some things ye won't get if ye don't act. Happiness won't just drop into your lap. If ye really want something, ye've gotta go for it yourself," she said, smiling while she stirred the pot. "I could say the same thing to the Captain."



Mister Dario's home was a bit of a ways away from Missus Romina's house.

"I'm comin' in." Missus Romina walked in on her own, with Sir Celes and I walking nervously behind her.

"Well if it isn't Granny Romina. What do you need this ea... What's with this guy! Did he come for our Lella...!?" The moment the man saw Sir Celes, his eyes sparkled.

Inside the house, there was a middle-aged man with whiskers talking to an older lady with her hair cut short, just like Missus Romina. The house itself was much larger than hers, since she lived alone.

As he leaned in, Missus Romina put out a hand to stop him. "Unfortunately for you, Dario, he's married. His lovely newlywed bride is with us."

At her words, Mister Dario was visibly disappointed. "Romina, what's happening? Who are they?"

"They're travelers, Irma. Found 'em when I went to get water this mornin'. Anyways, you folks got a map? We wanna copy it."

"A map...huh. Dario, you had one. Go get it for them." The older woman with Mister Dario nodded good-naturedly. "You're a traveler without a map?"

"I apologize," Sir Celes said. "We were attacked by monsters and fell into the river. Everything we had got washed away."

"Pathetic!" Though Mister Dario seemed reluctant, it looked as if he was going to let us copy his map. Pulling the map out of a bag on the side of the hearth's shelf, he tossed it carelessly towards Sir Celes. "D'you even have any

paper?"

"Get some for them, Dario. You should be kind to those in need." He grabbed us some paper and a pen at Missus Irma's prodding. *Thank goodness.* "Oh, what a lovely wife he has."

"They're newlyweds, apparently. They're too hot for widows like us to even see."

"Romina, you're so mean. We were like that, once upon a time."

"That's true!"

The older ladies seemed to be close. I had been ready to get glares acting as Sir Celes's wife, but the atmosphere was much lighter than I expected.

"But he's a handsome one. I wish someone like that'd come here for our Lella... Hey, you. Do you have anyone you know? My granddaughter is a beautiful girl, but we've got no young men around here. We're too afraid to let her go across the mountains because of the monsters."

"I know of a single man in Hirsch, but..." Sir Celes answered Missus Irma's question. *Impressive! He even had friends in other countries!* "But he's a Knight, so it might be hard for him to marry into your family here. Good guy, though."

"You know a Knight!?"

"Yes...I met him when my mother moved to the capital."

Oh, right. We were supposed to be going to Hirsch to visit his ailing mother. *I need to remember, or I'll make a mistake somewhere!*

"We're on our way to Hirsch anyway, so I'll talk to him when we see him."

"Really?" Missus Irma looked like she could dance, she was so happy.

But Mister Dario didn't look pleased one bit. "Wait, Mom, I'm not letting Lella go anywhere. We're not gonna send her to the capital to get married!"

"But think about it, Dario. It would be wonderful to be the wife of a Knight!"

"While it might be nice, we're far from Hirsch. With the monsters, it'd be hard to ever go see her."

"But you moved to Setti to marry Flavia, didn't you?" she said, tilting her

head.

“But I moved back, didn’t I!” he shot back.

Oh dear. It seemed that we’d started a fight. As we worriedly watched Mister Dario and Missus Irma go back and forth, the door opened.

“We’re home... Oh, my!”

“Daddy, who’s that!?”

Two women walked in, clearly mother and daughter. The younger one must be Miss Lella. Missus Romina was right, she was beautiful enough that she could be a servant in the castle.

“Did he come for Lella...!?”

“Welcome home, Flavia, Lella. These two are travelers that Granny Romina took in. Unfortunately, Flavia, he’s already married.”

They had been so excited when they saw Sir Celes, but they wilted at Mister Dario’s words. But Miss Lella still looked quite taken with Sir Celes. She roughly tossed the basket she was carrying on the table, and came rushing over to him. The green peas and fava beans that were in it fell on the floor, but she paid them no mind.

“Oh, he’s so handsome! Um, my name is Lella. What’s yours...?”

“My name is Celestino. This is my wife, Lucia.” Introducing himself, he didn’t forget to introduce me too as a bulwark against her.

“Nice to meet you.” I introduced myself, too, but she was so stuck on Sir Celes that she barely paid me a passing glance.

“Mister Celestino. What a wonderful name!”

With red cheeks, she looked up into his eyes, spellbound. Though the shade was different, she also had blue eyes. I recognized this look. Jeanne had the same one when she talked about her lover, and the ladies who always talked about “the Dragonslayer” in the dining hall all had it too.

Sir Celes just smiled at her praise, and pulled me close by the waist. I was surprised by the sudden touch, but I was supposed to be his wife. I smiled,

though it might have looked a bit forced. My heart was pounding.

“Flavia, Celestino says he’s going to introduce our Lella to a Knight in Hirsch!”

“Mom! I told you, we don’t want that! I’m not letting her go to Hirsch!” he hissed.

“Honey, is it true that he said he’d introduce her to a *Knight*?”

“A Knight wouldn’t marry into our family, Flavia. Are you gonna send our only daughter away?”

When Missus Irma brought up the Knight option to Flavia, Mister Dario didn’t wait to shoot it down. It looked like the women were all for introducing Miss Lella to his friend. Even Miss Lella herself looked interested, even though she was still hypnotized by Sir Celes.

“Can you really say he would go for it?” I whispered to him quietly, and he nodded back.

“Of course. Boccardo was already looking for someone to marry. Last time I saw him, he told me to introduce him to a girl once everything was over. So it’s probably fine.”

It looked like he was all for hoisting Miss Lella onto his friend instead. *I wonder if it’s really okay?* Though I was worried that he’d trouble his friend, I was more worried about the conversation continuing further.

“Mister Celestino, what’s this Sir Boccardo like?” Miss Lella spoke up.

“He’s a good guy.”

“I mean, what does he look like... That kind of thing.”

She seemed interested in Mister Boccardo’s appearance. Of course she would be, after seeing Sir Celes. He’s too handsome, after all!

“He’s a super nice guy. More considerate than most anyone I know, and he’s great at cooking, too. Miss Lella, don’t you think that what’s inside is most important when being with someone?” Sir Celes continued, giving Miss Lella a perfect smile. It seemed he really didn’t want to talk about what Mister Boccardo looked like...

“T-That’s true!”

Entranced by Sir Celes’s smile, Miss Lella was easily tricked. Knowingly using his smile as his best weapon against women... He was kind of scary.

“Isn’t that right, Lucia?”

“Yes, you’re right!”

Sir Celes didn’t let me go, even while they were talking. He must have really wanted to show how close we are to keep her away. I needed to do my best, too... I just didn’t know how.

*If we’re a close couple, it would be weird for me to call him “Sir Celes,” wouldn’t it? I thought. What should I call him? Just by his name? Ugh, I don’t think I could do it. I’ll just stay back for now. That would be for the best.*

“So, your name is Celestino, yes? Have you just stopped into the village, or are you staying the night?”

Sir Celes’s face soured at Missus Flavia’s question. We had nothing. We’d need at least some food and water to go anywhere. We couldn’t leave without making any travel preparations.

“We’re...”

“We’ve got trouble!”

Just as Sir Celes was about to explain, we all heard a man’s voice screaming outside. It definitely wasn’t normal, so starting with Mister Dario, we all turned towards outside.

“Hey, what happened!?” Mister Dario opened the door, asking the person outside.

“A monster got Giotto!”

“A what!?”

# Maria Sees the World

After Ed and Fer's apology, we restarted our journey, albeit awkwardly. Our first destination was Hirsch. It was quite large and bustling, as you'd expect for a capital city.

When we arrived at the castle, the impressively armored soldiers came flying right to us. "You must be the Sacred Maiden of Banfield, and His Royal Highness Edoardo's party! We've been awaiting your arrival!"

Apparently, Reynard sent a letter ahead to let them know we were coming. There was a huge line of people waiting to get inside, but the soldiers cut us in ahead of all of them.

"I can't say I like jumping the queue much," I said. But while I was uncomfortable butting in line, everyone else said it was normal.

"The procedures for state guests are different, Sacred Maiden" Reynard asserted. "We would cause a ruckus if we were to wait outside."

With that, I had to reluctantly accept their warnings. Before, I had always wanted special treatment. But now, I realized how terrifying it really was. The title of "Sacred Maiden" was incredibly heavy. For the people of this world, I was their hope — their absolute protector. On our way here, I'd seen just how much they prayed and wished for me to purify the trees, and what other selfish demands they had.

The reason for all of it was because of the legend of the Sacred Maiden, passed down to the people of Vatis. Tales were recounted of maidens of the past traveling around and righting wrongs. It had been blown up so much that everywhere we went, people were coming and piling their problems onto me. Honestly, if it weren't for our traveling party, I'd have gone crazy already. I might have been a bit hard on myself after losing Lucia, but the constant demands were putting a stop to that! *Let me rest! I'm not a doctor, I can't cure diseases. I can use light magic, but I can't bring back the dead!*

I couldn't count how many times I ended up making a fist. If it hadn't been for the others, I would've either ran or tried to beat someone up. Shiro's cuteness healed me, Gaius the bear consoled me, Reynard taught me coping methods, Eri-*kun* complained with me, Fer admonished me, and Ed shielded me.

I might have been worshiped in Banfield too, but they didn't push anything on me. I mean, aside from the whole journey of purification, at least. With all of the hits to my conscience, when I couldn't actually help them, Vatis took a toll on my mentality. *Lucia. You really don't want this "Sacred Maiden" job.* I spoke to her, even though she wasn't here.

Everyone was so selfish. They thought the "Sacred Maiden" was all-powerful. But I was just a normal human. The only thing I had going for me was the fact that my light magic can purify monsters. Not everyone actually thought about me like you did. Well, our companions — err, yeah. At first, I'd only thought of them as members of my harem, but now, they were definitely my irreplaceable companions. They're protecting me in your place, so don't worry.

Lucia may not have been there anymore, but I could still feel traces of her on our journey. My dear friend, who saw me for me, and protected me. I could even see traces of her through my companions who took on her job of protecting me. Before, they'd been colder. Even though they were nice, and they fussed over me, it had all been out of duty. We only saw each other as pawns. Of course we wouldn't get close that way.

But things were different now. We could treat each other as people. After meeting Lucia, my world changed. *I'm doing my best, Lucia. And I'll keep at it for as long as I can.* Thinking about her still made me cry. But it didn't stop me. Even if the tears blurred my vision, even if I was criticized for not granting everyone's wishes, I would keep going. With the dear companions that she, my precious friend, gave me, in their world.

# Lucia Gets Denied

“Monsters!?”

With that one word, everyone in the room tensed up. Rushing out of the house, we found a man collapsed, terrified.

“Manolo, what happened...” Mister Dario called out, reaching him first.

Mister Manolo looked up, pale as a ghost, and said, “A Fungus... A Fungus got Giotto!”

Fungus were mushroom-looking monsters that were common in farming areas. They attach themselves to a human and use them as nourishment to grow. The only way to survive being infected is to keep eating, which also speeds up the growth of the Fungus. Left unchecked, they become really large in size, almost tree-like.

“Where is he!?” Mister Dario softly patted Mister Manolo on the shoulder and slowly helped him up.

“He’s closed himself in the shed by Grampa Robbie’s house! No one lives near there, but ...”

“Si— Um, Celes... Is there any way to get rid of a Fungus?” I stopped myself from adding “Sir” to keep up appearances.

“Fungi are difficult. Once they attach, they won’t harm anything else, just suck the person they latched onto dry,” he said. “If you attack them, they’ll release spores from their caps, infecting the attacker too. You’d need to use fire magic from a distance to burn them up, or to just wait until the host dies and it shrivels up. All it can do without a host is just die.”

Sir Celes gently put his hand on my back, and shook his head. *So does that mean that we can’t help somehow?*

“It’s unfortunate, Lucia, but there’s nothing we can do...”

“Dammit! There’s gotta be something! He’s gonna leave poor Dahlia on her

own!"

The men bit their lips in frustration, while the women shook and clung to each other.

"Who is Dahlia?" I asked.

"Giotto's granddaughter," Missus Romina replied. "She's only seven years old. Her mother died a year ago, so it's just the two of them. Her father was a foreigner. He only dropped by here once, so he wouldn't even know she was born."

Hearing that, my heart just felt like it was being crushed. If that was the case, then we needed to save him no matter what. *What, what can I do...*

"...No."

"Eh?"

While I was doing my best to think, I heard Sir Celes whisper something beside him. When I looked at him, he had an incredibly troubled look on his face.

"...Nothing."

Noticing my look, he smiled down at me, but he seemed really off. I felt like I shouldn't take his word for it. Maybe he thought of something we could do, but it would be difficult. *What could it be?* I racked my brain. The only way to save someone hosting a Fungus was to either burn it or wait for it to wither. Burn... *Erase?*

It dawned on me. Maybe I could use *Soap* and erase it, just like I did with the miasma around the Cristallo Sacro?

"My *Soap*—" I began.

"No." Sir Celes immediately shot it down, as if he had predicted what I was thinking. "Not a chance, Lucia."

"But..."

I could tell from his low whisper that he was serious. *But someone's life is on the line. I should at least try...*

"I know it's too bad for both Giotto and Dahlia, but...we have no choice, Manolo," Mister Dario consoled. "There's no coming back from getting a Fungus stuck to ya. We can at least bring him food, and figure out where Dahlia will be going. That's all we can do."

"Dario..."

Both of the men sighed deeply, signaling the end of the conversation. Mister Manolo trotted off, shoulders slumped, while Mister Dario turned back towards his family. "Flavia, us men'll bring Giotto his food. You go check on Dahlia. Lella, don't go anywhere near Grampa Robbie's shed. And, oh, the guests. You heard all that, so don't go looking. You've got your map, so you'd best be off as soon as possible."

"...Thank you for your warning."

We nodded to him, but he remained facing his family. And with not even a look behind them, they retreated back inside their house. In the end, we were left with Missus Romina.

"Ye two, come back to my house for now," she called out to us.

"We appreciate it."

"Thank you for your hospitality..."

She must have realized we were still in trouble, so she invited us back with her. As we were about to leave, Missus Flavia called out to us, "Ah, wait just a minute! I'll bring you both some food later! Thank you so much!"

"Ye don't think I can cook, Flavia?"

"Oh, you know what I mean, Granny Romina! You know! Thank you so much, Mister Celestino!" She took both of Sir Celes's hands and shook them up and down before turning to follow her husband.

"Well, let's be off, then," he said to me.

"Alright..."

And so, we left Mister Dario's house.

# Lucia's Heart Pounds

When noon came around, Missus Flavia sent over some lunch, just as she said she would.

"Mister Celestino! I brought you some lunch!" Miss Lella was the one who delivered it, though.

"You came, huh, Lella?" Missus Romina sighed.

"Yep! Grannie Romina, can I leave it here? Oh, *I* made the soup! I hope it's good... Do you like fava bean potage?"

"Yes, I do," Sir Celes said. He looked like he wanted to sigh too, but refrained from it.

"Ahhh. He's so *handsome!* Um, um, I'll plate some out for you!"

She was only looking at Sir Celes. I was right beside him, but she didn't even give me a glance. She was ignoring Missus Romina too.

"Oh, you don't need to do so much. Thank you, though."

"Um, my mother told me to come and ask you some things." She pulled a chair out for him, as if it was her own house, and then sat down right beside it. "Tell me all about everything! Just sit right here!"

"Everything... You mean about Boccardo?"

"Huh? Ah, yes! But I want to hear about you, too."

"I'm not that interesting. And I can't speak much more about Boccardo than I already have."

"What town did you come from, Mister Celestino?"

Miss Lella really did want to hear all about him. She didn't seem to care that he was "married" at all. *I could never act like that.* Sir Celes hadn't sat down, so she put her hand on his arm and looked into his eyes. I was so intimidated by her that I could only watch.

That is, until he called for me. “L-Lucia!”

This was bad. A married woman wouldn’t just leave her husband like this. Or at least, the married women I knew wouldn’t.

“Celes... Um, I...” I managed to squeeze some words out, but I couldn’t get between them. Miss Lella’s piercing glare was terrifying.

“Time for lunch, then. Yer leavin’, *right*, Lella?” Missus Romina threw us a lifeline.

Even with Missus Romina telling her to go home, Miss Lella pretended she didn’t hear her, and smiled. “Grannie Romina, I’m gonna eat here today. It’s fine, right? They’re this entire village’s guests!”

“Don’t ye forget that he has a wife, Lella. Yer disrespectin’ her,” Missus Romina chided her. “Ye won’t become a good wife like that.”

“But!”

“No buts, Lella. If they’re yer guests too, yer bein’ rude.”

That managed to sour Miss Lella’s mood. Biting her lips, she glared angrily at me. “Why’s this ugly cow got such a good man!? She’s plain and boring, she doesn’t deserve Mister Celestino!”

The first one to respond to her comments was actually Sir Celes. “Miss Lella. I might be a pretty mild-mannered guy, but I’m not nice enough to sit here and have you insult the person I love. Lucia is important to me, and irreplaceable. I don’t want anyone else.”

“Ah...!” My face turned beet red. I could tell it was burning hot, without even touching it. My ears were probably scarlet, too. *I know it’s just an act, but...um... This isn’t good for my heart. It almost sounds as if he actually loves me.*

“Wh—”

“I don’t need anyone but Lucia. Go look for someone else,” Sir Celes said with a smile.

I’d never seen him smile so coldly. I wondered if it would count as cruel. His handsomeness just intensified the blow.

"Now, ye get goin', Lella. Thanks for lunch." Missus Romina herded Miss Lella out of her house.

"Wai..."

Honestly, I was glad, but that was a secret.

# Lucia Breaks Her Promise

Both Sir Celes and I were exhausted after Miss Lella's explosive exit.

"Sorry 'bout that. Dario and Flavia had her late in life, and spoiled her. Sometimes she gets bratty," Missus Romina apologized.

Oh, no... I couldn't say I wasn't still hurt, but it was true that I was plain, so I couldn't argue about that.

"So what're ye two gonna do? Ye got yerselves a map, so will ye be on yer way?"

"Not yet. It would be too hard to travel without getting food and water first," Sir Celes said. "Also, a weapon would be nice, if possible. Are there any jobs we could do for you?"

"If yer okay with bein' paid in kind, I do."

"That's fine."

"Alrighty, then. Can I get ye to chop some wood for me? My old back's been actin' up."

Missus Romina and Sir Celes started talking about our future plans. It was true that we needed to get ourselves traveling supplies in order to make our way back to Miss Maria and the others, so we couldn't dawdle. But I was still worried about Mister Giotto. Sir Celes told me not to, but I wanted to at least try to save him. At this rate, little Dahlia would be left all alone. I didn't want anyone else to feel lonely like that. Being alone was scary.

*I'm sorry, Sir Celes.* I apologized to him in my mind. I needed to sneak away from him somehow and go find Mister Giotto. I knew that he said no, and that I was being selfish and doing it for my own self-satisfaction, but I just couldn't leave it. Even if I ended up infected by the Fungus, Miss Maria would still be able to purify the Cristallo Sacro. And Sir Celes had the important job of protecting her, so I couldn't get him involved.

As I watched him head out the door to chop wood, I decided for myself.



That night, we ended up staying at Missus Romina's house.

"Ye can see how small my house is, so I've got no spare rooms. If it's alright with ye, Captain, would ye sleep in the shed? There's some straw, and we can put some sheets on it. Since the girlie can't sleep with ye, she can sleep in my bed with me."

"That would be fine, thank you."

"Thank you, Missus Romina. I'll go put the sheets in the shed." Taking the sheets from her, I headed to the shed beside her house. It had been used back when her husband had been well, but now she was using it as a storehouse. There were lots of vegetables and bales of straw lying around.

I moved some of the straw to an empty corner and put some sheets over it, making a simple bed.

"...He wouldn't notice if I snuck out overnight, would he?" I whispered to myself.

There weren't any windows in the shed. I didn't think he would be able to notice if the door was closed. And luckily for me, it was a full moon. I'd have no problem finding my way, even without a lamp. I didn't know where Mister Giotto was, but the village wasn't very big. I would probably be able to find it if I searched.

"It's okay, I can...I can do it."

I took a deep breath to calm my beating heart. I was still a bit afraid of the Fungus, it being a monster and all, but not as much as I had been before. Now that I knew that *Soap* could calm them down, it wasn't scary anymore.

I looked down at my palms, and the place where he would sleep. "...I'm sorry, Sir Celes."

The reason I was scared then must have been because a little girl might be left all alone if I failed. I knew that if I didn't pull through, both he and Miss Maria would be disappointed with me. Forcing the issue wasn't really an option. I

might not be able to keep traveling with them if I got infected.

*I might never see Miss Maria again.* My chest hurt as the thought crossed my mind. My resolution wavered. I wanted to see her. She was my friend. I want to get back to her, and keep traveling with her. But... I put my palms together, as if praying. That little girl would be terrified if she lost her only family. I might fail. But if I failed, at least I tried to do something. There was no way I would give up now.

# Lucia Tries Being Selfish

After checking that Missus Romina was asleep, I softly slipped out of bed. My biggest problem was the door — I had to open it without Sir Celes noticing. Slowly pushing it open, I was surprised to find that outside was much brighter than I'd expected. Full moons really were something. Though, the shadows under my feet were still dark.

Taking care not to make a sound while closing the door, I looked towards the shed where Sir Celes was sleeping. I couldn't hear anything from it, so maybe...he was asleep? While I was slightly relieved, I stayed on guard, stepping as quietly as I could.

The village had sunken into the night. None of the houses had any light coming from them, so everyone must be asleep. I was tired too, honestly. Sighing, I looked up at the moon. Shining brilliantly, it dyed my surroundings white-blue. *I need to find Mister Giotto before Sir Celes notices I'm gone.*

As I walked around the village, I found one house dimly lit. Rather than a house, it was a shed...and a very beaten-up one, at that.

“Could it be...”

I slowly approached the shed. Just like Missus Romina's, there were no windows, but with all the cracks in the walls, you could see inside. Looking in, I could see a man sitting curled up. On his head was a large black mushroom, with the cap freshly spread. His back was to me, so I couldn't see his face, but he must have been Mister Giotto.

Just as I was about to call out to him...I felt a hand cover my mouth from behind.

“.....!”

Shocked, I turned around to see who it was, only to feel the blood drain from my face.



"So, what are you doing here in the middle of the night, Lucia?"

Even though his voice was flat and emotionless, I could tell he was angry. But I knew it was my fault for doing something to make him mad.

"I figured you'd try something the moment you were out of my sight, and I was right. You did the exact same thing in Amarith. You've come to try to get rid of the Fungus, haven't you?"

Cold sweat ran down my back. *What should I do? He knows everything.* I should have expected it, though, since he's the Captain of a Knight's regiment.

Pivoting both of us around, he said, "We're going back to Romina's house."

"No!" I snapped.

Knowing that he'd force me back, I ripped his hand off of my mouth. I couldn't go back without trying anything!

"Who's there?" a hoarse voice called out to us. I must have been too loud. "If someone's there, go home. It's dangerous here."

Sir Celes grimaced. "You're right."

"I said no!"

"Lucia!"

Seemingly on guard now, the person called out, "...You aren't from the village? Who are you? Reveal yourself."

Unable to hide his sour expression, Sir Celes begrudgingly opened the door to the shed. "We're sorry for bothering you in the middle of the night. We're travelers."

"What? We never have visitors. Look, I've got a monster growing on me. If you don't mean harm to the village, leave. But if you *do*, then I'll take you both out with me."

Mister Giotto seemed older than Mister Dario. He looked exhausted, most likely from the Fungus sucking out his energy. The mushroom growing on top of his white-haired head looked heavy.

"...Grampie?"

The little girl laying with her head on his knees looked up at him sleepily. She must be Dahlia. Mister Giotto adjusted the blanket covering her, and gently patted her on the back. But, having seen us, little Dahlia didn't go back to sleep, but instead sat up while rubbing her eyes.

"Who're you?" she asked.

"I'm sorry for waking you. You must be Dahlia. My name is Lucia."

The little girl tilted her head. "Lucia... You don't live here. Are you a visitor?"

"That's right," said Mister Giotto. "If you're visitors, why're you walking around the village this late at night? What do you want?" Setting the curious little girl on his lap, Mister Giotto glared at us with his brown eyes.

"Um, I can use some ma..." I started, but Sir Celes cut me off saying, "Ah, you must be Giotto. Please don't mind us. Come on, Lucia."

Ignoring him, Mister Giotto looked straight into my eyes. "Girl, what did you come here to do?"

Sir Celes tried to usher me out before I could respond, but I broke away from him.

"I'm sorry, Sir Celes. I can't just abandon him. Please, let me try. I don't want Dahlia to feel like how I felt. I know I'm being selfish, but I think it might work. Please, I can't just ignore him and leave!"

# Lucia Tries Using Soap

I had my head down, but he didn't respond. *I'm scared.* I knew it was me forcing this whole thing, but his silence was still scary. Did my magic really need to be kept secret that much, though? Was it wrong for me to want to save people? I couldn't save my mother, despite my very best efforts. I didn't want to be told I shouldn't try to save someone when I finally got the chance.

"Lucia, did you come to help Grampie?" Dahlia broke the silence, looking up at me with her big brown eyes.

"I want to... Please, Sir Celes!" I pleaded.

He sighed, "...That's not fair."

I jumped at his response. *Not fair?* That may be true. I was the one making a scene because he was so nice. He must have been fed up with all this.

"I have one condition. And I'm not letting you do anything unless you accept."

"Alright."

Dahlia and Mister Giotto watched us silently.

"Once you use your magic, you run away. Okay?"

"Huh?"

His condition was way too simple. Was that really enough? Did he just want me to stay far away, since it's dangerous up close? Almost disappointed, I accepted, not realizing what he actually meant.

"If you think you can do it, I'll believe in you. Dahlia, it's dangerous, so you should stay far away. Giotto, please keep the details of what she's about to do a secret. Understood?"

"U-Understood. But are you sure about this? You're gonna attack a Fungus..." While Mister Giotto looked unconvinced, Sir Celes smiled at him silently.

"Okay, Lucia. You stand by the door. Once you cast it, you're gonna run."

“What about you?”

“I’ll be outside the shed too. Now, if this is going to happen, hurry it up. Dahlia, we’ll call you when we’re done, so can you go over where you’re upwind?”

“Okay!”

Why did he accept so easily when he was so against it? He said he’d believe in me if I believed in my magic. The words just rolled around in my head as I watched Dahlia move away from her grandfather, just like Sir Celes asked.

“Lucia, go to the doorway.” Sir Celes put his arm around my shoulders, leading me outside of the shed. “Remember — whatever happens, you need to run away once you use *Soap*. Just run to where Dahlia is. Don’t go downwind. I know you can do it.”

He touched my face, and I was shocked at how cold his fingers were.

“Go ahead.”

“Ah... Okay.”

I turned to face Mister Giotto. I was worried about how Sir Celes was acting, but I had to focus on Mister Giotto for now. Still looking unconvinced, Mister Giotto turned to look at me. I took a deep breath while focusing on the Fungus growing on his head. *I can save him. This is different from what happened with Mom. I’m not as powerless as I was then.*

“*Soap!*” I exclaimed.

“Run!”

The moment I cast it, Sir Celes pushed me from behind. Seeing the rainbow-colored bubbles in the corner of my eye, I did as he asked, running away.

“Lucia!”

Once I had made it to where Dahlia was waiting, I turned back towards the shed.

“...Sir Celes!” I called out to him.

He wasn’t behind me, but instead still at the shed holding the broken door

shut. *Why!?* I was so confused. *Why didn't he follow me!?*

“Don’t come back, Lucia!” he shouted.

“No... Sir Celes!”

“Lucia, it’s dangerous!”

His sharp voice felt like he hit me with a whip. Hearing it, Dahlia clung to me, stopping me from running. *Was that what he meant by believing in me!?* *Why? Why couldn't he have run with me!?* Leaving us behind, he opened the shed door and walked in.

“Sir Celes!” I shouted back at him. “Dahlia, let go of me!”

“No! He said not to go!”

Both of us were pale as she clung to me. Dahlia held my hand with her cold ones, and it reminded me of what Sir Celes had just done. *No. I didn't want this!* The moment felt like it lasted forever. All I could think about was him disappearing through the door while my ears rang in the silence.

Then, Sir Celes’s calm voice cut through the quiet of the night, “Lucia, Dahlia, everything’s fine... You can come over now.”

Seeing his golden head looking out the door, with nothing on top of it, made me sigh with relief. He was okay. He didn’t get infected by the Fungus!

“Lucia?”

Holding back my cheers, I came back to reality when Sir Celes called for me. “Sir Celes!”

“I’m sorry, Lucia. But everything’s fine. Giotto’s waiting.”

# Celes Scolds Lucia

“Grampie!”

“Dahlia!”

Dahlia jumped, clinging to Mister Giotto’s neck while he cried. The big black mushroom that had been on his head was gone. Looking around, I spotted something white and dried out on the ground nearby.

“That’s what’s left of the Fungus.” I looked up to Sir Celes, who had put his hand on top of my head, and saw that he was smiling gently.

“Sir... Celes...”

“Sorry for worrying you, but we’ll talk later. Giotto, we’ll be heading back for now. We’re at Missus Romina’s house, so we’ll see you again tomorrow.”

“Thank you!” Mister Giotto said to us, tears in his eyes. “Thank you so much... I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

“Thank you, Lucia!”

With that, we turned to leave, and Sir Celes said, “Let’s get back. We need to talk.”



“Lucia, I’m angry with you.”

“...I know.”

After walking back to Missus Romina’s house, we stepped into the shed, and Sir Celes started speaking.

“Even though *Soap* has worked on monsters up until now, it didn’t get rid of them, did it? It might not have attacked us, but what if it had? It’d be too late to do anything. Just like no one can replace the Sacred Maiden, no one can replace you either. You need to think more about what your powers mean!”

What he was saying was painfully true.

He continued, “Lots of people could replace me on the journey. But your magic is rare. Even if there was something that the Sacred Maiden couldn’t do on her own, we wouldn’t be able to do it in the first place. We can defeat monsters, but the only ones who can purify them are you and the Sacred Maiden.”

Reprimanding me for my thoughtlessness, he scooped up a lock of my hair.

“But, knowing you, I knew you couldn’t leave him alone... Sorry for yelling at you. I must have scared you.”

“Why...why did you do that? I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you...” I got choked up just thinking of him holding that door, defenseless. Nearly crying, I rubbed my eyes quickly. *I can’t cry right now!*

“Fungus infects people with their spores, so I thought to try and keep them inside the shed. I figured your magic would work. You’d defeat it, and worst case, if I got hit with the spores, your magic would probably get rid of it before it sprouted.”

*So that was what he meant by believing in my magic...* Finally understanding what he meant, I was so relieved.

“Thank goodness you’re alright,” I said with a great big sigh.

Sir Celes smiled at me. “I’m glad too. Glad that you’re alright. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you. Ah, hey, Lucia.”

“Yes?”

“Take more care of yourself. You’re important to a lot of people. If you don’t treat yourself well, me, the Sacred Maiden, everyone, all of your friends at the castle — we’d all be sad.”

His eyes were serious, lit by the light of a candle. I thought of Miss Maria and everyone back at home. I was embarrassed for thinking that I was alone, and that no one would be upset if I was gone. But I wasn’t alone.

“You’re right... I wasn’t thinking.”

“I guess I still haven’t said enough. Lucia, I couldn’t live if anything happened to you. Knowing that, would you still try something like that again?”

"Wha, what...?"

"And I'm talking about me, personally. Not because of my job. You're important to me. I couldn't bear to see you get hurt, or disappear."

It almost sounded like a confession. Blushing, I shook my head to bring myself back to reality. He was mad at me. It wasn't the time to think of romance.

"...You still don't get it? I don't know if you're too meek, or just too stubborn..." Sir Celes scratched his head with a troubled smile. "Lucia, I know it's kind of weird to say right now, but if the reason you act like that is because you're lonely, I want to stop that. I don't want to leave you alone."

He took my hand and kissed the tips of my fingers. He'd done it before, but I still blushed. I put my other hand to my chest. My heart was beating so loud that I was afraid he'd hear. *No, I shouldn't read into it too much. There's no way someone like this would feel that way about me... That only happens in fairy tales.*

"Lucia. Look at me. Listen to me. I know you probably don't feel the same, and I may be a bother to you, but—"

His blue eyes stared me down.

"I love you."

My world went white.

# Lucia Loses to Celes

I must have heard that wrong. Was I just dreaming? This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening.

"No running." Having noticed I tried to pull my hand away, he grabbed my wrist, and looked into my eyes. "It looks like you don't believe me. Am I really that far out of your options..."

"Eh, ah— Um, no..."

"But even if you didn't think of me like that before, you will now. I won't give up until I have you in my arms, and if you don't believe me, I'll say it as many times as I have to."

His face got close enough that I could feel his breath, and I started panicking. *Wait, please wait! I haven't accepted reality yet!*

"I love you, Lucia. I've loved you for so long. Do you know how much I looked forward to sunny days after meeting you again? I didn't want you to be intimidated, so I hid who I was. And even though my entire regiment wanted to thank you, I kept you secret, so no one could get ahead of me... I was so disappointed when I learned I had to leave on this journey, but do you realize how happy I was when you showed up?"

He raised his other hand to touch my face softly.

"I was so jealous when the Sacred Maiden was keeping you all to herself. And I was seething mad when His Highness said he might take you. You didn't know, did you?"

Of course I didn't know! I'd thought that he loved Miss Maria. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that he felt that way about me!

"I love you. I'll stay with you forever, if you want. I won't leave you alone. If you don't have anywhere to go home to, we can just make somewhere, together. So — will you take my hand?"

By then, my head had finally started to accept that this was reality, not a dream. *It's not a dream. Sir Celes saying he loves me isn't just a dream. This is reality. Sir Celes says that he loves me.* The moment I realized, tears started dropping from my eyes.

“Wha...Lucia!? Um, is it... Are you so upset that you’re crying...?”

“No...no, it’s not that. I’m not cryi...”

Sir Celes was flustered, but I didn’t want him to misunderstand. I tried my hardest to hold back, but I couldn’t stop the tears. Nothing would change if I cried. There was something I had decided to do instead of crying.

“I’m sorry, please don’t cry.”

“No...I’m just so happy.”

He said I wasn’t alone anymore — that he’d be with me — that he’d give me somewhere to go home to. The person I loved more than anyone said all that to me. I could barely contain my happiness. But was he really okay with me? I wasn’t beautiful, or smart. I had no family, and more debt than money. There was nothing good about me.

“Am I...really okay?” I stuttered.

Sir Celes answered immediately, “You’re fine. I don’t want anyone but you.”

I didn’t think I suited him. But even so. Just like he said he wanted me, I wanted him. He said he didn’t want anyone else but me, and I felt the same way. He said he loved me, and I loved him back. I didn’t want anyone else, and I didn’t want to give him to anyone else. I wanted to tell him how I felt, but the words got stuck in my throat.

Still sobbing, I covered his hand with my own. No. I didn’t want to see me while I was so pathetic. *My eyes must be red, and my face messed up with tears.* I was so embarrassed, I wanted to disappear, but I was afraid that this would just be a dream if I did — so I gathered up my courage.

“Sir Celes.” Wiping my eyes roughly with the hand he wasn’t holding, I looked straight at him. I needed to breathe, and calm down enough to talk to him. You have to properly face people who look at you sincerely. “I’m okay with you too.

I don't want anyone else but you. If you're alright with me, can I stay beside you?"

After I used all of my courage to squeeze out my very first confession, he smiled like the sun.

# Lucia is Asked the Impossible

In an instant, I was in his arms.

“Oh man, I can’t believe it actually went so well... Am I dreaming? Is this a dream!?” Sir Celes exclaimed. Hearing that he felt the exact same way as me, I laughed. He was right. You would think it was a dream.

“I thought it was a dream too. But it’s real. Look, we’re touching.”

Putting our palms together, I interlocked our fingers.

“Yeah... You’re right, Lucia. But it still doesn’t feel real. I feel like if I go to sleep, I’ll just believe this was all a dream tomorrow.”

“...I might, too.”

We looked at each other and laughed. It felt just like we were back in the yard in Arldat.

Running his fingers along my cheek, he smiled dreamily at me. “I’m so happy, I could die...”

“Don’t die! I don’t know what I’d do without you!”

“I won’t die. Not before you.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. I wouldn’t leave you alone. You get lonely too easily. I wouldn’t want another man to sweet talk you.”

*It’s not fair how he slips outrageous things in so easily!*

“You’re bright red, Lucia.”

“It’s your fault, Sir Celes. And you have a higher chance of going for someone else.”

“No way. I’m devoted to you. How long do you think I pined over you for?”

He laughed, poking at my blushing face. *He’s being mean! Really!*

“But anyway, Lucia.” Once he finished laughing, he looked at me with a sweet smile on his face. “Are you not going to call me ‘Celes’ anymore?”

“Hm? But I am.”

Sir Celes’s real name is Sir Celestino, but I’d always used his nickname... What did he mean?

As I tilted my head in confusion, he kept talking, smiling embarrassedly. “I don’t mean like that. I know it was for the act, but I was really happy when you dropped the ‘Sir’ and just used my name. It felt like we were closer. Can you still? Or is it too much?”

“That’s...”

*That’s impossible!* I knew it was just taking off a title, but it took a lot of energy to change. And, more than anything, I was embarrassed. I had managed it before because I was acting, but changing it for real because we love each other... *Completely impossible!* It wasn’t logical, but getting over the emotional part was just too embarrassing!

I was struggling, but he wouldn’t give up. He just stared at me silently, so I decided to try. “Ce...Celes...”

“Good.”

“Sir.”

“You don’t need to add that!”

“No way! Please, at least give me some time!”

*My heart will stop if I keep going like this! Stop giving me that sparkling smile!*

“How about we practice. Every time you add it, you get a penalty.”

*Sir Celes, how can you say something so scary with such a nice smile!?* He moved closer, blocking my way out.

“I, I can’t do it!”

“You’re just too cute, looking up at me with tears in your eyes. It’s having the opposite effect.”

*Did his personality change!?*

He must have found me panicking hilarious, because he burst out laughing. “Hahaha. Sorry, that was a lie. I just wanted to tease you. But I really do want you to call me just ‘Celes.’ I’ll wait, so try to do it someday.”

He smiled while wiping the tears from my eyes, but suddenly looked serious. For some reason, I got goosebumps. *Huh, why?*

“But I won’t be able to wait for this... Can I kiss you?”

He didn’t wait for a response. His fingers tipped my chin upwards and — our lips met.

# Lucia Hears About the Past

“Nnngh...”

Being kissed so suddenly was much more difficult than I’d thought. It almost felt as if he was going to gobble me up!

As my mind blanked in panic, I realized something. *I...I can’t breathe!?* I mean, I did try to breathe through my nose, but I didn’t manage very well. And my mouth was occupied, so I couldn’t use it. *Wait, am I going to suffocate? Is kissing really like this!?* *Oh no, my chest is hurting! I’m going to die!*

“Lucia?”

It seemed that kissing was far too high a hurdle for a beginner like me.

The next thing I realized, I was back in Missus Romina’s bed.



“A dream, huh...?”

Because I’d woke up so normally, that was the first thing I thought. Was that a dream? That had to have been a dream... *But it felt very real for a dream. Sir Celes and I loved each other, and we, um... We kissed. What a thing to dream about. I’m so embarrassed!* I covered my face with my hands reflexively. My face was burning. How was I supposed to face him!

I ended up laying in bed for a while, worrying up a storm, before I finally gave up and got out of bed. Missus Romina was already gone, and the morning light coming through the curtains was quite bright. Since we were guests, I couldn’t let myself sleep in, so I needed to get up soon.

Putting on my boots, I left the bedroom, straight into the connected living room.

“Oh, yer awake?”

“Ah... Good morning. I’m sorry for sleeping in.”

"Good mornin' to you too. Had a busy night, huh? I've got a lotta questions for ye, but for now, have yerself some breakfast." Missus Romina greeted me with a gentle smile, and served me some porridge out of the pot. "That's milk fresh from the cow this mornin'. Use as much as ye want."

"Thank you for the food. It's been a while since I've had milk with my porridge." Taking the wooden bowl and spoon from her, I thanked the earth for its blessings, and ate. Something was missing, though. "Um, where is Sir Celes?"

While it might have been awkward to see him, not seeing him at all also worried me. Was he still sleeping?

"The Captain's out fixin' both the roof and well. It'll be good for him to cool his head. How are you feeling, girlie?"

"I'm feeling fine."

Physically, I was feeling refreshed. Mentally, though...

"That's good." Missus Romina's eyes softened. "Heard ye saved Giotto. Thank you so much. Word's all over Sherez." "

Hearing that, the memories of last night came flooding back. Mister Giotto and Dahlia; the white Fungus falling on the ground; and...what Sir Celes told me.

"So that wasn't a dream..." I muttered.

"What're ye sayin'? You were the one that did it, Sacred Maiden!"

"Sacred Maiden!? Oh, no, I'm not the Sacred Maiden!"

"No? Word is ya did a miracle, just like the past Sacred Maiden did in the stories."

My eyes widened, and Missus Romina's did the same in response. Her deep green eyes were just like a child's.

"The past Sacred Maiden from another world — who came to us 1600 years ago?"

Around the time that we heard rumors about Miss Maria being summoned, there were also rumors of the previous Sacred Maiden, who was summoned to

our world, and purified the Cristallo Sacro with her powers. But I had heard that most of the details about her had been lost over time...

“When I talked to the Captain this mornin’, I heard that ye don’t know much about the last Sacred Maiden in Banfield. Maybe it’s because she was summoned here in Vatis.”

“Yes, we know that there was a previous Sacred Maiden in Banfield, but we don’t know any details. All we know is that she was summoned from another world to purify the Cristallo Sacro...”

“That’s a shame. Ye don’t know nothin’, then. She didn’t just purify the trees, but also saved towns and villages on her way, exterminated monsters, and did all kinds of work for the people.”

*What a charitable Sacred Maiden!* Hearing about her predecessor, I thought of Miss Maria. I wanted to get back to her as soon as possible and comfort her. She’s kind, so she must be worried sick.

“I heard that the people back then were all so disappointed when she was sent back to her own world.”

“Huh!?” I felt a shock run through my body. *She was sent back...to her own world?* “Is that true!? She was really able to go home!?”

With a chuckle she replied, “The Captain was shocked when I said that, too. Funny how ye both reacted the same way.”

Missus Romina might have been laughing, but I was far from it at the moment. *She can go home. She can go home! There’s a way to send her back home somewhere in this world!*

“Missus Romina, please tell me more! In detail!”

## Lucia Thinks of the Sacred Maiden

Missus Romina answered my frantic question with a quiet voice. “She was summoned to the Remora Temple, and after purifyin’ the Cristallo Sacro, she was sent home from the same temple.”

“The same...temple?”

That meant that she had to go back to the same spot she was summoned — in Miss Maria’s case, the Castle in the Kingdom of Banfield — to go home again.

My heart was beating so fast. I didn’t know all the details of how, but once I did...I would be sad to see her go. But since she was brought here against her will, I had to find a way to send her back!

“Do you know exactly how she went home!?”

“Exactly? I don’t know that much. I already told the Captain, but ye’d probably be able to find out if ye went to the temple yerselves. But yer country really didn’t know how to send her back? Ye’d think they’d wanna know before summonin’ her in the first place.”

*I wonder...* Could His Highness have known how to send her home all along, but just said nothing? I didn’t know, but Miss Maria’s face when we last saw each other was the only thing I could think of. I wasn’t sure how His Highness felt about Miss Maria, or why he needed a “Sacred Maiden.”

“I’m back...” Sir Celes came in the door behind me.

“Ah!”

“Ah...”

The moment we saw each other, our faces both went red. *I-It’s hard to look him in the face!*

“Oh, welcome back. Have ye cooled yer head a bit?” Missus Romina gave him a cold glance, and Sir Celes gave her a sour-faced nod back.

“...Yes. Thank you for your consideration.”

"Really, ye gotta calm down. What're ye doin', jumpin' her the moment she loves ye back? This is the problem with men. Usin' the wrong head."

"I can't argue with you."

Listening to her scold Sir Celes, I realized. He loved me too. *So that really wasn't a dream.* But...how did Missus Romina know? I looked at her questioningly — because I was still too embarrassed to look at Sir Celes.

"Don't give me that look," she cackled. "I asked the Captain all about it when he carried ye back inside. But ye did well, sneakin' out. I didn't notice at all. So ye snuck out, got rid of the monster, became a couple with the Captain, *and* fainted while ye kissed. Ye had a busy night, girlie."

"P-Please stop..."

Hearing it all again was so embarrassing! *Stop, please! I just want to run away!*

While I sat there worrying, Missus Romina laid back into Sir Celes. "Now, Captain. Don't ye have somethin' ye want to say? Do it quick. Once yer done, I'll take ye to Ezio's place."

"Ezio?"

"Sherez's chief. Ye need money and supplies for travelin', don't ye? If the whole village gets together, we could pull together enough for the two of ye."

So we were going to ask him for help? I didn't really understand, but I nodded anyway.

"Lucia."

"Yes!"

Looking nervous, Sir Celes came over to me. "I'm sorry about last night... I didn't mean to force you like that. I was just so happy. I'm really sorry!"

"Eh, ah... No, um..."

"I won't try to rush anymore, or force you into anything, so will you forgive me? Or...am I too late?"

Why was he apologizing? I tilted my head in confusion, but then remembered

that I had fainted because I couldn't breathe. So that was why he was apologizing!

"You don't need to apologize. I just couldn't breathe very well. I'm sorry for surprising you like that. I must have fallen right asleep afterwards."

"Ye couldn't breathe... Girlie, why not?" Missus Romina cut in.

"I don't know... I just couldn't breathe in."

"Ye know, ye gotta breathe out to breathe in. Were ye doin' both?"

"Um..."

I realized once Missus Romina pointed it out that she was right. *You need to breathe out before you could breathe in again. Was I breathing out?* My memories were fuzzy, so I couldn't remember well, but I don't think I was.

"Well, whatever. Now that yer done breakfast, let's get ye goin'."

# Lucia Gets Thanked

Mister Ezio was part of a family that had been taking care of the village for years. He had a white mustache, and was both dignified and kind.

"I see, so you're the one that saved Giotto. I heard all about it from him. Now, my home may be small, but please, come in."

Softening his amber eyes, he invited us inside. When we went in, Mister Giotto was there, sitting with Dahlia on his lap.

"The Sacred Maiden!" Mister Giotto shot up as soon as he saw me, while Dahlia slipped off his lap and ran over to me. "Lucia!"

"Oh, I'm not the Sacred Maiden! She's a different person." I corrected Mister Giotto.

I had to deny it. My *Soap* is too boring for me to be the Sacred Maiden! I only found out it had another use a while ago!

"You are to me," he said. "If not for you...I would have died, leaving Dahlia all alone. I could never thank you enough, but still, thank you. You saved my life."

"Yeah, thank you for saving Grampie, Lucia! Thanks to you, they said I can live with him again. I'm so happy!"

While I was flustered from being thanked, Missus Romina laughed and patted me on the back to calm me down. "Ye definitely saved both Giotto and Dahlia, girlie. Now, Ezio. These two need supplies for a journey. I know we can't offer them money, but we can at least get 'em some things."

"You're right, we can. I'm sorry, travelers, would that be alright?"

"Yes, that would be a great help." Sir Celes readily agreed. "We'll take you up on your offer for food and water, thank you."

We still needed money, but it was good that our food problems would be solved.



With blankets, rope, a knife, towels, first-aid kit, a change of clothes, soap, water, and food — everything we needed for our journey was piling up on Mister Ezio's table.

"Uwah!" Suddenly, something was thrown over my head, blocking my vision. Surprised, I pulled it off, and then saw that it was a light yellow dress.

"You can have it." Turning around, I saw that it was Miss Lella. "You're wearing Granny Romina's clothes, aren't you? You shouldn't be wearing old lady clothes like that when you're with Mister Celestino! You're already so plain, after all."

"Miss Lella."

"Ah, that's not what I meant to say. I came to apologize to you..." Grimacing to herself, she turned to face me straight on, and bowed her head. "I'm sorry for being horrible to you yesterday! I did it because I'm having trouble finding someone to marry, and seeing you so happy bothered me, but I was wrong. Once I got home, Granny got super mad at me, and I realized what I'd done. I'm sorry it took so long for me to apologize."

"Ah—"

"I can't change the fact that I hurt you, but I can at least try to help you get on with your journey. That used to be Cara's. A long time ago, we made some dye from apricot leaves. It looked really nice, so we both made dresses from it. Mine would be too tight on you, so you can have hers. She'd want you to have it."

"It was mommy's?" Dahlia spoke up while I was wondering who Cara was.

"Yep, your mommy's. It was given to me after she died. Lucia saved Uncle Giotto, and made sure you wouldn't be lonely. So your mommy would want to thank her, too. So thank you. Because of you, Dahlia won't have to cry anymore."

Miss Lella called Dahlia over and gave her a big hug.

"Thank you both, Miss Lella, Dahlia!"

"Hey, we're the ones thanking you here!"

“Thank you so much, Lucia!”

Holding the dress I got from Miss Lella close, I smiled with both of them.

## Lucia and Celes Journey On

At the entrance of the village, Missus Romina called out to us, “Ye be careful on yer way!”

“Thank you so much for everything, Missus Romina,” I said, waving to her.

“I’m the one who should be thankin’ ye. Ca...Celestino, right? Keep her safe.”

“Of course. Thank you for everything.”

Seen off by the entire village of Sherez, we set forth.

“Are we going straight to the temple? Um... Remora, was it?” I asked Sir Celes while trying to think back to what Missus Romina told us.

“Yeah. Everyone else should be stopping in Hirsch before going on to Foristarn, so we’re going to head to Remora before continuing there. We can send a letter ahead of us if we pass through a big enough town.” Sir Celes replied while spreading our map out. Sending a letter. Even if we’re too late to join them, we needed to at least let them know we’re alright.

“We can pick up work along the way. I can at least be a wagon guard.” He lightly slapped the longsword strapped to his hip. Mister Dario had given it to him, in case we ran into monsters. “I’m sorry that you have to walk, Lucia.”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Walking is my specialty. I can walk forever!”

Though he looked apologetic, I was much more used to walking than traveling by horse. Adjusting the bag on my shoulder, I set off walking in high spirits. Honestly, though, I was just trying to hide how awkward I felt.

“Let’s get going! We’re going to waste the daylight like this.”

“You’re right. Let’s go.”

And so, we restarted our journey.



The awkwardness between us went away as we traveled together, and soon

we were talking normally again. While I say normally, we touched a lot more and Sir Celes was...um... ‘sweeter’? He’d always been nice, but his smile and tone of voice seemed different.

I’d been embarrassed at the beginning, but, maybe because we were alone, I got used to it quickly. When I thought about Miss Maria, I knew it wasn’t the time to be getting caught up in this, but honestly, I was kind of really happy about it.

“It looks like we’re coming up to a town.”

“Really?”

Sir Celes checked the map as we walked beside each other. “Yeah. It’s called Iosca. Remora is east from there. See, here. And then you’d get to Hirsch from this road.”

“Where’s Foristarn?”

“Foristarn is, um... Ah, here. It’s closer to Hirsch than Remora is.” His finger glided over the map. Following it with my eyes, I saw the spot labeled Foristarn. “Iosca is closer to Remora than Hirsch. But it’ll still be a ways.”

“Do you think they’ll get our letter in time?”

We’d passed by nothing but villages so far. Since none of them were on any wagon paths, we wouldn’t be able send any letters from them.

“It’ll probably cost a lot to send a letter, so we’re going to have to work for some money first.”

“That’s true...”

Since monster attacks were becoming more frequent, people were traveling less. For merchants like Mister Dario, even if they had some skill in fighting, they’d still always need to carry an expensive barrier crystal from the Academy. Because of that, sending letters had become a rare thing. Because I’d been born after the monsters got bad, I’d never even seen one before.

“It’d be a lot cheaper if we were in an area where governmental wagons passed through. But we might find a private one too, so we should be ready for both.”

“We’ll need paper too. But who would we address them to? Would it really get to them?”

“It’ll probably be okay if I press my Knight’s seal on the wax. All of us knights have one as identification, and we can use them like signet rings.”

Sir Celes pulled out his pendant-shaped emblem from his shirt to show me. It was the one that he’d shown to Missus Romina back in Sherez. The design was a longsword and crown on top of a shield — it was the same one that was embroidered onto all of the knight’s uniforms.

“Vatis might be a foreign country, but they’d know this emblem.”

“But how fast would it get there?”

“I’m not sure. We can send another letter ahead to the fort near Foristarn, just to be safe.”

If we were stopping in Remora first, I wanted to let everyone know that we were alright. But sending a letter was much harder than I thought.

# Maria Pumps Herself Up

Once we got to Hirsch, the capital of Vatis, we got an amazingly warm welcome. I had been treated well in Arldat, but it always felt bad. Everyone was my enemy, so I was always on edge. I realized now that it was partially my fault. I had been super angry.

In the palace at Hirsch, none of the servants were snappy with me. *Wait, was that all because of Ed and Celes!?* They didn't make demands of me like the townspeople on the way had. Because of that, I had an easier time accepting their welcomes. But, they were so long!

Neverending welcoming parties and banquets. All of the wasted time pissed me off. Without Lucia with me, all I could do was play the perfect Sacred Maiden. And that's why I'd promised myself that I'd do my best in purifying the Cristallo Sacro. Which is why I wanted to leave — ASAP! Honestly, it was far more comfortable in the castle than it was getting requests from the people outside. But I couldn't stay here forever! I needed to save the world!

Luckily, it seemed like everyone understood how I felt. Ed went to his uncle, the Grand Duke, to stop the endless stream of parties. Both he and Fer had changed drastically after promising to do their best to earn my trust back. They covered for me publicly, shared information as soon as they got it, and discussed things. I couldn't trust them that easily, though!

Oh, that's right. I heard something unexpected while we were in the palace in Hirsch. The Sacred Maiden from 1600 years ago went back to her home, and the method by which she went home had been passed down through the temple in Remora. Everyone was happy when they heard that. I myself was overjoyed that I could actually return home. But before, I would have been even more excited.

Things were different now, though. My happiness didn't last long. After all, there was something I wanted to find much more than the way back home. Also, it turned out that Ed knew about the Sacred Maiden returning home all

along. And the reason he'd hidden it was to surprise me... Not. It was because he didn't trust that he remembered it well enough.

Everything he knew had been told to him as fairy tales as a young child by his mother, who had been the princess of Vatis. So while he might have remembered details of her adventures, he couldn't remember much about how she went home. He was a little boy, though, so I couldn't really blame him.

In Banfield, whether by chance or choice, information about the Sacred Maiden was scarce. The Sacred Maiden from 1600 years ago purified the Cristallo Sacro, and that was basically all of what they passed down. It was horrible, and definitely intentional. Whoever controlled the information was unforgivable. The only thing the monarchy knew was how to summon me. Which means it was their fault. 100%.

After apologizing to me for keeping things hidden, Ed had changed a lot. He didn't always look composed anymore, instead was being gentle and a bit more friendly. He might have always been tensed up because he was the Crown Prince. I kind of felt sorry for him.

I think I'd changed a lot, too. Before, I had dresses and a carriage. I didn't fight, and I didn't even watch. I had refused to camp. But now, my hair was in a ponytail, and I'd changed into a dress that was easier to move in. I still wasn't brave enough to travel in the carriage with Ed, so I traveled by horse — and by that, I meant that I immediately realized why Lucia said it hurt so much, and moved to the coachman's stand with Reynard! I started agreeing to camp too, since stopping at inns was wasting time.

Ed and Fer were doing their best to get our trust back, but I wasn't going to lose to them in doing my best. Everyone was working hard for me, so I had to do everything I could. If Lucia could do it, I could do it too! I won't do anything that'd make it hard to face her anymore. *I'm gonna work hard, so that I can be proud to tell her what I did when we finally meet again.*

# Lucia Heads to the Temple

We managed to make enough money doing short jobs like dishwashing and guarding important people to send letters from losca. Although there was a festival in town while we were there, we left immediately, heading towards the temple town of Remora. The layout was slightly strange. In the center of it was the temple, devoted to the sacred trees, while shops and homes for the priests surrounded it.

*We might find a way to send Miss Maria home somewhere in this town.* I couldn't stop my heart from pounding. Would we be able to find one? I really wanted to. Whether she chooses to go home or not, it would still be better to give her a choice.

"Let's go. We'll head to the temple first and ask," Sir Celes said stiffly, while offering me his hand. He must have been thinking the same thing.

"Alright!"

And so, we headed to the temple gates.

"You'd like to learn about the past Sacred Maiden...?" the priest asked, giving us a suspicious lookover. Granted, the first thing we did upon meeting him was show Sir Celes's crest and ask a bunch of questions.

"Yes. We'd like to know how the Sacred Maiden was able to return to her home in another world."

"Is that so... Let me summon a higher level priest for you. Please wait here."

Saying that, the priest headed deeper inside the temple, clearly troubled.

"Sir Celes, will they really tell us?" I looked up to him, worried, and he gave me a strong nod back and said, "We just have to believe. We'll definitely find a way to send her back. If they know how, all we need to do is keep begging until they tell us."

Next to approach us was an elderly priest in much more extravagant robes

than the last. The stole denoting his rank was scarlet, so he must have been very high up.

“So you want to know more about the Sacred Maiden?”

“Ah, yes! We’d like to know how she returned to her own world.”

“I see... But I cannot tell you. Our temple worships the Cristallo Sacro, but also the ancient Sacred Maiden. I can tell you what She achieved, but details regarding Her summoning are top-secret. Even if you are a knight from Banfield, I cannot tell you.”

“But...!” The words slipped from my mouth unintentionally. *We need to know!* We needed to give Miss Maria a way to go home, after all she’s done for our world... *We can’t even do that!?*

“Is there really nothing you can tell us? She needs to know!”

“Miss, I cannot let the details be public. What would we do if someone tried to forcibly send Her home? It’s too dangerous.” The priest gave a tired sigh. “His Highness, the Crown Prince Edoardo came a short while ago as well... It almost seems as though your country has lost the means to send Her home.”

“Eh!?”

“His Highness was here!?”

Shocked at what the priest had said, we both raised our voices. If His Highness came here, then that the rest of the party had come as well.

“It’s outrageous that She would be summoned with no way back to Her world. How could they face Her...”

“When were they here!?” Sir Celes suddenly stepped toward the priest.

He was initially taken aback, but after clearing his throat, he told us, “I saw them yesterday afternoon. They left town early this morning.”

“May I please borrow a horse? I swear on this emblem that I will return it! We’re in a hurry. I am the Captain of the Third Regiment of the Knights of the Kingdom of Banfield, Celestino Clementi. If you suspect us, I don’t mind if we’re followed. But every second counts. Please!”

Seeing how desperate we were, the priest agreed to lend us a horse. *Thank goodness! If she had left the town this morning, we could catch up if we hurried!* I felt myself fill with determination. *Miss Maria, I'll be right there!*

# Lucia Celebrates Their Reunion

Mounting the horse that we were lent, we set off on the road towards Foristarn. If they left this morning, we would definitely be able to catch up. Believing that, I desperately clung to Sir Celes as we rode ahead.

Since we were going full speed, the ride wasn't easy. All I could do was grit my teeth so I wouldn't bite my tongue. And Sir Celes held me close, so I wouldn't fall off the horse. We were going so fast, I couldn't look up. I was amazed that Sir Celes could look forward at this speed.

I didn't know how long we'd been going, but about when I lost feeling in my hands...

"There...!" I heard a hoarse voice by my ear. I had to close my eyes as we sped up even more. "Commander...!"

Sir Celes called for Commander Agliardi. I could hear the sound of horses ahead of us. As we got closer to them, I opened my eyes, and at the same time, Sir Celes pulled hard on the reins.

Looking up, I saw the Commander's face. We hadn't been separated that long, but I'd missed it.

"You're alright!?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, neither of us are injured."

While I dimly watched them talk, I suddenly came back to my senses. If the Commander is here, then...

"LUCIA!" I heard someone scream. My head shot up, and I saw Miss Maria running towards me holding her skirt up, her hair a mess.

"Miss Maria!"

"Lucia! Luciaaa!" The moment I slipped down off the horse was the same moment she jumped towards me. "Lucia, I'm so sorry, Lucia! Thank goodness you're alive...! You're alive!"

Miss Maria sobbed like a small child, and clung to me when I touched her slim shoulders.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Miss Maria.”

“I’m sorry, I did something horrible. I’m so sorry!” she sobbed.

“It’s not your fault. I’m fine. We’re both fine. You must have been scared. It’s okay now.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“You don’t need to apologize! But have you been eating properly? You seem thinner. Have you been sleeping?”

While she cried, I noticed she wasn’t in her usual pretty dress. Instead, she was in a shorter, easier to move in dress and short boots. Her long black hair, down to her waist, was tied in a high ponytail with a red ribbon.

“Lucia!”

“Kyuwah!”

Sir Gaius came up from behind Miss Maria. On his shoulder was Shiro, flapping his wings eagerly, with a red ribbon tied around his neck. While Miss Maria still clung to me, Sir Gaius patted me on the head. Then, Eric popped his head up. “Lucia! I’m so glad you’re okay! Oh, I’m happy about the Captain, too.”

“I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m back now,” I said.

Lord Reynard came up with the carriage too, while we were celebrating. “Miss Lucia, Sir Celestino, you’re safe!”

Turning his attention to him, Sir Celes replied, “Lord Reynard, I apologize for being late.”

“There’s no problem, Sir Celestino. I’m just glad you’re both safe...!” Lord Reynard had always acted so calm normally, but his dark eyes were tearing up behind his glasses. Surprisingly, he was easily moved.

At that moment, the carriage door opened. And His Highness exited.

“Celestino, Lucia. It’s good that you’ve returned,” he said, calling out to me.

“...Your Highness.”

Sir Celes kneeled in front of the prince. I followed his example. Not knowing what we should say, a silence fell over the group. All you could hear was Miss Maria's small sobs.

"...Let's keep going to our next camping spot. There should be some open space ahead. We can talk there."

## Lucia Hears Edoardo's Confession

Once we were finished setting up the camp, we all gathered around the fire pit. Miss Maria was still clinging to me, and Shiro was on her lap. On my other side was Sir Celes. Beside Miss Maria were the Canalis brothers. Eric sat beside Sir Celes. And across from all of us, both His Highness and the Commander sat.

"Please allow me to apologize first." The first to speak was Commander Agliardi. He bowed his head low, staying like that for a moment. "Miss Lucia, I'm sorry for getting you involved. Celestino, you did a good job of protecting her. I'd also like to apologize to the Sacred Maiden once again. I'm so very sorry for hurting you."

Looking into the Commander's golden eyes, I had mixed feelings. I didn't know what I should ask.

While I was thinking, his Highness, still sitting beside the Commander, started speaking, "I'd also like to apologize. I'm sorry, Lucia. And I'm sorry for deceiving you like that all along, Maria."

I couldn't say anything to his unexpected apology. I never imagined that anyone in the royal family would ever apologize to me.

"It's okay, Ed. I'm okay with it now. Although I still wish you would have said something," Miss Maria responded. There wasn't even a hint of any grudge or sadness in her voice. Although she wasn't as soft on him anymore, she wasn't hostile, either.

"I've already explained everything to the others, but...where should I start?" Touching his lips with his hand, the prince sighed. The sound of the crackling fire echoed loudly. "At the beginning of our journey, Fernando and I were given two orders by my father. One was to purify the Cristallo Sacro — that was the public order — but beneath that, was watching and observing the Sacred Maiden, Maria."

*Watching and observing?* I tilted my head in confusion, unable to understand

what he meant.

“If the ‘Sacred Maiden’ was useful, she would be made my bride on our return. ‘Her position, light magic, and bloodline would be a great boon for our country,’ he said. He thought that once the trees were purified, the whole world would know her as the ‘Sacred Maiden of Salvation,’ and all countries would unite under us. Also, any children of hers would inherit at least half of her light magic powers. Of course, some of them could be much stronger. Strong mages have a better chance of being born from parents with strong magic. Maria’s magic has no equal. If her power could be passed down, we needed to keep it for ourselves.”

His Highness’s lips drew into a thin smile as he spoke.

“If she was useful, I would be used to keep her under control, take away her freedom, and expend her powers to their fullest for our benefit. That was his plan. So, in order to gain her trust, I spoiled her and won her over.”

Silence hung in the air for a while. Miss Maria, who was still clinging to my arm, tensed up slightly at his words. Shiro squeaked at her, almost as if to comfort her. He must have gotten very attached to her. She lightly petted him as he flapped his little wings.

“But her behavior back in the palace was unfit for a future queen. Even if she was useful as a ‘Sacred Maiden,’ if she wouldn’t work as a ‘queen,’ we were to eliminate her once our journey was over. Then, we were to tell the world that she had gone back to her own world after purifying the Cristallo Sacro.”

“That’s—”

“In order to do that, we needed as few witnesses as possible. So when Maria had a tantrum, I took advantage of it and sent the soldiers home. I knew that it would be dangerous traveling with less fighting power, but I also knew that I couldn’t have her become my queen. At that point, ‘sending her home’ was almost set in stone.”

*So that means that when I first met Miss Maria, His Highness and the Commander were already thinking about killing her? My mind went blank from the shock. These people had really been planning on doing something so awful!?*

“Father had decided that if he couldn’t use her, he couldn’t let her exist in our world, and ordered her death. But I had memories from my childhood of stories about the Sacred Maiden of Vatis. As you may know, my mother was originally from Vatis. She told me all kinds of things about the Sacred Maiden that weren’t passed down in Banfield. Their Sacred Maiden was summoned from another world, purified the trees, and went back to her own world. Yes, she was ‘sent home.’ The option of not killing her, and just sending her back to her own world was there. Though the Kingdom of Banfield knew how to summon her, the method to return her had been lost. So, unbeknownst to my father, I had decided to search for that method while in Vatis, and if it was true, I would send her home. I’d told this to Fernando, too. This is what we had planned back when we sent the soldiers and servants back.”

“Which means, Miss Maria...”

“Was never in danger, from the beginning. Maria may do what she likes, but she’s a good girl deep down. She’s also not one of our citizens. We couldn’t reward her for saving our world with death.”

I was so relieved when the prince denied it. *Thank goodness.* I didn’t know how I would have faced either His Highness or the Commander if they had planned on killing Miss Maria.

“Lucia, do you remember the letter that Gaius delivered when you joined us? There was another order from the King there. Maria’s light magic is the power of the Sacred Maiden. But no one had ever heard of a power like yours. Maria’s destroys, while yours does something akin to purifying. And neither of you use crystals. My father set his sights on you. He had already decided that Maria would be killed because of her conduct at the castle. So, his plan was to have her killed as soon as the trees were purified, and use you instead. It would be said that ‘The Sacred Maiden of Salvation’ may have returned home, but she had entrusted her powers to her servant, a ‘second Sacred Maiden,’ who would devote herself to the country. As long as my bride was a ‘Sacred Maiden,’ it didn’t matter which. That was the part that you all heard.”

Telling us all of that, the prince dropped his shoulders, as if he was exhausted.

“I didn’t want to kill Maria. But I also didn’t want to use you as a replacement.

The position of the queen would be too much for a normal citizen. I thought the same for Maria. Neither of you are nobles. You're both too pure to handle the position I'm always in. You have no freedom, and you always have to worry about how you're seen. It's just like spending your entire life in jail. Birds should fly in the blue sky, not be imprisoned in gilded cages."

As His Highness finished his explanation, all we could hear for a while was the crackling of the fire.

It was true. I wouldn't be able to handle living in the monarchy. Behavior, education, political tactics — I could never manage those kinds of things. Just the thought of being bound like that sent a cold shiver down my spine. But His Highness had always lived like that. When I thought about it, his calling it 'jail' sounded much heavier. Being born the Crown Prince, that position and power must have always weighed down on him.

"Your Highness. I'd like to ask. Did you find out how to send the Sacred Maiden home?" Sir Celes broke the silence. "When we inquired at the temple in Remora, we were told it was top secret, and nothing else."

Hearing his question, the prince looked up again. "That's right. Details on the summoning of the Sacred Maiden are secret. We couldn't let the public know how we connected our world to another."

I looked over to Miss Maria. She wasn't crying, but she wasn't cheerful either. All she did was stare silently at the prince as he spoke.

"We did learn about how to send her back. But...we don't know if we can do it. Everything depends on purifying the Cristallo Sacro."

"What do you mean?"

"Specific details weren't passed down to the temple. Just one verse of the legend was left. 'When the Drop of the Cristallo Sacro is brought together with the hidden stone in the place of beginnings, the Sacred Maiden will return to her world.'"

"The Drop...of the Cristallo Sacro?"

Unfamiliar with the term, Sir Celes and I looked at each other.

## Lucia Worries

The one who answered Sir Celes's question wasn't His Highness, but Eric, "The Cristallo Sacro aren't plants, or minerals. While they're made of crystal, it seems like they're also alive. They birth monsters as fruit, after all. So we think that by 'drop' it means a crystal, but those are pretty normal, right? If it's specifically from the Cristallo Sacro themselves, I think it might be a shard from them, but we won't know unless we collect one ourselves."

Toying with the crystal on his chest, Eric mumbled, "Doesn't it just make you want to study them? When this is all over, I'm gonna start experimenting with the Cristallo Sacro. It's never been done before, since they're the source of the monsters."

"We've gotta figure out how to send Her Sacredness home first, Sir Chief-Researcher of the Academy," Sir Gaius chuckled.

"A bear like you could never understand the depths of science!"

"Forget science, we need to do what we can right now, brat!"

Eric and Sir Gaius were bickering like they always did. And Lord Reynard was off to the side, looking slightly jealous. *He really loves his brother.*

"Anyway, we'd been planning while you two weren't here, but what we're gonna do is examine the Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn for that drop thing. We can't really do anything else right now."

"Unlike Kyriest, Foristarn and Maynard are in foreign countries. If we don't investigate them now, it will be hard to get back to do it again."

Everyone was ready to search for a way to send her home.

"Miss Maria, let's definitely find that 'Drop of the Cristallo Sacro.'" When I said that to try to cheer her up, she finally smiled. *I need to do my best so her smile doesn't disappear!* Gripping my fist, I vowed to myself.



"I'm really so sorry, Lucia. I'm glad you and Celes are okay. Are you mad at me? I don't know why I did that..."

Separating from the men, Miss Maria, Shiro, and I got into our tent, and she apologized again.

"Of course I'm not mad at you. It wasn't your fault. The ground was just soft. I'd been told that it was back in Admina, so it was partially my fault for forgetting. I'm sorry too, Miss Maria. I made you worry."

"I really, *really* worried. I was miserable," she said, teary-eyed.

"Sir Celes saved me, but we had nothing with us, so it took a while to get back to you all. We sent letters ahead, but it seems that we beat them to you."

"Letters? Nope, we didn't get any. Did you write one?"

"No, Sir Celes wrote them to the Commander," I said, tilting my head.

We'd worked so hard to send them, but it turned out they weren't needed after all. I was slightly disappointed, but it was more important that I was back with her now.

"I'm really so glad we can talk like this again. I have so many things I wanted to talk to you about. So many that I can't even think of one."

Giving me an embarrassed smile, she pressed her face against Shiro in her arms.

"Kyuu?"

"Did His Highness explain everything right after it happened?"

"Ed? Yeah, after we searched for you, he got us all together to talk about it. I panicked. Up until then, Eri-*kun* and Gaius and Reynard had all been working hard to protect me from him. It was amazing when Gaius yelled at Fer and Ed. He might be old, and a bear, but he was kind of cool. Eri-*kun* got mad too. It was like they'd always fussed over me, just like guys did at home, but it was all just to get in my good books. I'm the 'Sacred Maiden,' after all. So... So it was the first time they'd all been worried for *me*."

Oh, Sir Gaius protected Miss Maria! *He really is someone you can rely on!*

Clapping my hands together, I said, “He’s really dependable, isn’t he!”

“Yeah. He’s kinda like a dad. Kinda.”

“I know exactly what you mean!”

“Since we’re on the subject of reliable guys, how was Celes? He jumped in right after you when you fell. He was so frantic... Lucia?”

*Sir Celes... When she said his name, I got a bit embarrassed. I mean, we’re...um... We’re lovers now, huh?*

Seeing my reaction, Miss Maria exclaimed, “Wait, why did you go red? Ah, Celes did something, didn’t he!”

“No, um...”

“Something had to have happened! He didn’t do anything you didn’t want to do, did he!?”

“Not really... I mean, wait, um...”

“Lucia!?”

“Kyuu! Kyuwa-kyuu!”

After that, Miss Maria made me tell her everything about what happened.

# Lucia and Maria Talk About Love

“Oh, so *that’s* what he did. That son of a— Getting ahead while I wasn’t around... What’s he letting loose for?” she murmured.

When I told her that he had confessed to me, Miss Maria was very clearly upset. Did that mean...Miss Maria really did love Sir Celes?

“Miss Maria...”

Realizing what I was thinking, she crossed both her hands in front of her. “Okay, wait, stop. I don’t like Celes like that! His face might be my type, but I’m not so desperate that I’d go for someone my friend liked! It was obvious he loved you, so there’s not gonna be any illicit feelings here!”

“Really!?”

“Kyuuu!” Shiro frantically flapped his way over to me, having fallen off Miss Maria when she folded her arms.

Shiro squeaked a protest, “Kyuwa! Kyukyu-kyuu!”



“Wah, I’m sorry, Shiro! Don’t get mad.” Miss Maria laughed, hugging him again. “I didn’t mean to toss you.”

“Kyuuuu...”

They’d gotten really close while I was gone.

“Has Shiro been okay, even without my *Soap*?” I asked.

“Hm? Ah, that’s right. He’s a monster, huh. I keep forgetting. We got told off in Vatis about him, but it all worked out. He’s been absolutely fine without it.”

“Kuwah~”

*Thank goodness they didn’t have any real problems.* That meant that he didn’t need my *Soap* at all.

As I thought that, Miss Maria spoke up again, “So...what’d you guys do?”

“Do?”

“Do — like actions! You love each other, right? Did you at least kiss or something?”

“K-Kiss...!?” I could feel my face turn bright red.

“Oho, you’re blushing! So something *did* happen!”

*I’m not telling! I’m not telling her anything about that!* I shook my head hard. Embarrassing memories were popping back up. So embarrassing that I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide! While I was sitting there suffering, Miss Maria was just smiling away, staring at me. Her obsidian eyes were sparkling.

“It... It’s a secret,” I stammered.

“Ah, really? Oh no, it’s always been a dream of mine to talk with a friend about romance like this. Come on, please, can you just tell me a bit? It won’t hurt!”

“It will hurt! Mentally!”

She thrust her hand out towards me saying, “Shiro will make it better. Here, hold him!”

“The only thing he’ll make better is my mana!”

“Kyu!”

She clung to my arm, getting her face close to mine. It was hard to say no when she was giving me the puppy dog look!

“Please? Pleeeeease, Lucia? Pleeeeeeeeeeeeease?”

Unable to resist her cute begging pose, I had to give up.

“Huh, so he was surprisingly forceful! I kinda called it. I mean, any straightlaced guy’d end up bursting like that after it being one-sided for so long. Plus, I wasn’t there to get in the way.”

After I told her everything that had happened since we’d gotten together and met back up with the rest, Miss Maria nodded happily as she sipped her tea.

“Um...”

“Tch, it was so irritating. It would look like he was going for it, but then he’d wimp out at the end. And then when I’d try to goad him into doing something, he’d end up missing it completely.”

She started yelling about him getting physical too quickly, swinging her fists around.

“It’d been a year between first meeting you and then finding you again, plus spending a few months at the castle trying to get chummy — and you’re just now getting together? Too long! It took way too long! It would’ve taken even longer without that accident! I swear, you would’ve never taken the first step, so it had to be him!”

*Um...I think everyone else can hear you, so please... Please be quiet...* I was at my limit, so I tried asking about her love life instead, “Miss Maria, do you have any love stories?”

“Changing the subject, huh? Whatever. I was super popular. I never hit it off with girls because of my looks and personality, but I always had lots of guys around me. I would always choose one as a boyfriend.”

“Did you love them?”

“Hmm, I don’t know. I’d start dating them when they told me they liked me. I always was the one to make them say it, of course... It was fun. Kind of like a

game." Pursing her lips, she tilted her head to the side. Shiny black hair, a small, delicate body that made you want to protect her, and big obsidian eyes, framed by long eyelashes. She was beautiful. Of course any guy would end up liking her. "So I'm a bit jealous of romances like the one you have. I wanna have one like that someday."

"Miss Maria, what about the prince?"

"Forget about me!"

She suddenly cut the conversation once I mentioned the prince. So there *was* a gap between them now. On our way to our campsite, Miss Maria hadn't sat in the carriage with His Highness, but instead sat on the coachman's stand with Lord Reynard, who had taken over for Commander Agliardi. The prince looked as if he'd been watching her from afar, too.

"So anyway, you need to end up happy!"

"You need to end up happy too, Miss Maria!"

"Of course I will. There's no way someone as good as me would get stuck in an unhappy marriage!"

The two of us looked at each other, laughing.

# Lucia Gets Researched

It took us three days to reach Foristarn from where we were. The group stopped at the nearby fort to pick up the letter we sent. The first letter I'd ever touched ended up being one that we sent ourselves. I almost wanted to cry, even if it wasn't technically addressed to me.

Saying goodbye to the Vatis knights who asked to come with us, we stepped into the forest surrounding the Cristallo Sacro. *We'd been attacked by monsters as soon as we got to the forest in Kyriest, hadn't we?* Remembering the severed head of the Each-uisge from the last time, I shook my head to keep myself from feeling sick.

"Are you okay?" Sir Celes, back in his normal uniform and sword, whispered in my ear. We were still on his horse, but he'd had his hand on the hilt of his sword since we got to the forest.

"I'm alright. I'll be fine. I'm not afraid of anything when I'm with you."

"Gnh!" He tensed up.

Sir Gaius called out to me, "Lucia, you know we're here too, right?"

"I know. It's reassuring that you're all here, too!"

"Whoo, your reaction is too pure for this old man! Cap'n, I know you might be overjoyed, finally getting a girlfriend, but keep your eyes on the road. Now's not the time to be thinkin' of romance. We don't know when the monsters'll come at us. You're the one who'll cry if she gets knocked off the horse."

The rest of the party had learned about our relationship over the last few days. I mean, we never actually intended to hide it, but Sir Gaius and Eric found out after Miss Maria started teasing Sir Celes the morning after our girl's talk. After that, it got spread to the rest.

"It's bugging me how happy the captain is! We're working right now. Can I burn him, just a bit?"

“No friendly fire, kid.”

“What’s wrong with wanting him to keep his mind on work? What do you think, Commander?”

His Highness was alone in the carriage, while Lord Reynard and Miss Maria (and Shiro) were sitting on the coachman’s stand. Sir Agliardi, Sir Gaius, Eric, and Sir Celes had their horses surrounding the carriage. I couldn’t ride by myself, so I was on Sir Celes’s horse, but...it was getting hard to say anything.

“...Leave them be, Eric. It’s not affecting his work. I’ll get on him myself if it gets too bad.”

Sir Celes replied, “I’m sorry, Commander. I’ll try to hold back.”

“You’re too nice, Commander! Be serious!” Eric exclaimed.

“You’re in a bad mood today, huh, brat?”

“We’d been so worried about them, and now they’re flirting like that. Can you blame me for being mad!?”

It seemed like the reason for Eric’s attitude was because he’d been worried. Feeling bad, I turned to him and said, “I’m sorry, Eric, everyone. Um...”

“Ah, no. You don’t need to apologize. It’s just kinda disappointing that the captain is being so annoying about it when we worried so much.”

Sir Celes seemed surprised that Eric singled him out. “Am I really being that annoying?”

“What’s with that ‘oh, I never noticed’ look. Okay, Captain, I’m just gonna say it. You’re looking at her and smiling too much. It might seem like you’re trying to hide it, but you keep smirking, and it doesn’t even seem like you care that we see. You used to only do it once or twice every half hour, but now I don’t even want to count. And Lucia used to ride with the bear, but she’s been with you ever since you got back.”

Eric pouted, glaring at Sir Celes.

“I’d wanted to watch you guys more, but you got together when we were apart. What’s with that? Skipping the investigation process and just showing the results? That’s so unfair. Watching and seeing how you react is the funniest

part, and you took it away from me! Of course I'm mad!"

"Oh, so it seems our researcher's just mad that everything got settled without him."

"I worried about them! I really did! It's not all about the observation stuff, but I still wanted to do it! And you've been looking at them and smirking too, you bear! You traitor!"

"Don't tell them that!"

*Oh no...were they really all watching us that much!? I looked down, incredibly embarrassed. It felt like my face was on fire. Eric, please keep the research to the Cristallo Sacro!*

## Lucia Reaches the Second Cristallo Sacro

Though we'd been ready to fight the entire way through the forest, we didn't encounter a single monster on our way. *Why? There were so many in Kyriest.* When we reached the Cristallo Sacro, it was the same as the tree in Kyriest — a clear, twisted trunk, with crystal branches reaching the sky; spattered spots of black egg-like fruits; even the black miasma around it was the same.

We all dismounted at the base of the tree.

"Okay, I'll get the pre-purification samples first." Eric pulled a small knife and bottle from his gear, eyes sparkling. You could tell he was excited to get to his research.

"Don't we need the stuff from *after* it's purified?" Sir Gaius griped.

"We'd have nothing to compare it to if we don't grab some samples before purifying, too. We wanna see how it changes. The mana content, the composition... Whether it's a plant or mineral, or some form of matter we've never seen. Ahh! I want to go straight back to my lab!"

"Research dummy."

"Thanks for the compliment!" Eric beamed.

"It wasn't a compliment."

Following their exchange, Eric started trying to take off a leaf — but suddenly stopped. "I can't get it off! Bear, help me out here!"

No matter how he pulled, the leaf didn't even budge. It looked like it really was one solid piece of crystal.

Sir Gaius approached the tree and started trying to pull one off, too, but no luck. "I can't get it off either."

"What, even you can't get it off? Hey, Captain! Come slice this off!"

*He didn't ask Sir Gaius to cut it off, huh.* Sir Celes came closer and silently touched the crystal at the hilt of his sword before aiming a slash at the tree.

But, aside from a loud clink that echoed around, the leaves remained unmoved.

Both Eric and Sir Celes's eyes widened. They clearly had both thought it would work.

"The Captain's wind magic enchanted slash didn't work either? How hard is this thing! Geez, guess it's time to get serious. *Rafaga!*" Losing his temper, Eric grabbed the crystal on his chest and used his magic. A sharp blade of wind shot towards the branch, but it...didn't move an inch, much less drop any leaves.

"What!? Are you serious!?"

"It looks as if we're going to have trouble getting a 'drop' from the tree... Could there be any other methods we could try?" While Eric's shoulders sagged in disappointment, Lord Reynard furrowed his brow, deep in thought.

'The Drop of the Cristallo Sacro'... What was it, and how would we get it?

"Okay then, let's try purifying it first. We might be able to get it then, since we're obviously not gonna get anything right now. ...I hate to say it, but I'll have to give up on a pre-purified sample."

"...Okay." Hearing Eric's idea, Miss Maria nodded from her spot beside Lord Reynard. There was no fear in her obsidian eyes this time, only a strong will.

"I'm gonna do it, so everyone should step back!"

"Maria..." His Highness stepped toward her.

Miss Maria just smiled at him. "I told you I was gonna try on my own, Ed. I'm not gonna just rely on others anymore. I've stopped running away! It wasn't like me, anyway."

Holding Shiro, she stood in front of the Cristallo Sacro, still surrounded by black mist.

"Okay, time for my light magic. Watch this, everyone! *Cristallo Sacro — cornerstone of this world — be bathed in light!*"

The incantation that she used wasn't like any I'd ever heard. I might not have known much about magic, but it seemed like it was a different system than Eric's incantations.

"Ah!"

As soon as she finished the ancient-sounding incantation, the tree lit up. It was different from when I'd done it. It felt...divine. Surrounded by painfully bright light, we all shut our eyes. It was that strong.

"It's done!"

Opening our eyes at her prompt, we saw the Cristallo Sacro sparkling, clear of miasma.

"Eri-kun, d'you think you can get a leaf off now?"

"Ah... I'll try!" Eric, who had been captivated by the tree, came back to his senses when Miss Maria spoke to him, nodding quickly. "This is amazing... The eggs are gone. Does that mean they're made of the same stuff as the mist? Do they not grow off of the purified Cristallo Sacro?"

Now that he mentioned it, there weren't any on the ground, so they must have really disappeared. But they said that the egg with Shiro hadn't disappeared back in Kyriest, so...how did it work?

Approaching the shining tree, Eric tried pulling off one of its beautiful leaves. First he did it gently, but he gradually pulled harder. You could tell he was using all of his strength, but the leaf didn't even budge. "Hmm, it looks like we can't get anything off of it, even after it's been purified. What could the 'drop' be, then?"

Our happiness at purifying the tree didn't last long. We all went silent at Eric's words. How were we supposed to get this 'drop'!?

# Lucia Worries About the Trees

After that, we spent a few days at the Cristallo Sacro, trying to see if we could get a drop, or even a fragment, of the tree. We were attacked by monsters multiple times while we were there. Though purifying the tree had gotten rid of the black mist, the monsters that had been born before hadn't disappeared. It must have just been a coincidence that we weren't attacked on the way there.

"Why are monsters born, anyway?" Eric mumbled, clearly exhausted. After many attempts, we had decided to stop our investigation of the Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn. "Why do the Cristallo Sacro make monsters? I mean, they're supposed to be sacred trees, supporting our world. Why would they mass-produce things that hurt humans?"

No one could answer him. *Why the trees...birth monsters.*

The Cristallo Sacro were necessary for humans to use magic. But, over the course of our journey, we'd realized that they were also terrifying trees that birthed the monsters that threatened humanity. When they were pure, they gave us our mana, but as soon as they were infected, they hurt us.

"Should we just cull the sprouting monsters before they're born? Or maybe burn all the fruit up?" Eric mumbled with his cheek on the tree.

Miss Maria spoke up from behind, "Why do you guys need these trees anyway? If we figure out how to cut them, why not just cut them all down? They're nothing but a pain, anyway."

"Wha— No! They're the pillars of this world! Without them, we'd have no magic—"

"You can live without magic, Eri-kun. My world didn't have any. The only reason you need the Cristallo Sacro is because you rely so much on magic, so if you got rid of it, you wouldn't need the trees."

"That's just..."

"I mean, it's their fault that the world's like this, right? I wouldn't have been

summoned if not for the trees. They're everything that's wrong, here."

Miss Maria kicked the Cristallo Sacro with the toe of her boot, while Eric rushed to stop her. "Don't kick it! The trees are incredibly important pillars made by the gods of creation to support our world!"

"Are they really supporting anything, though, when they're only causing problems?" Miss Maria looked up at the Cristallo Sacro with a grimace, and the rest of us followed her gaze.

The tree shone in the setting sun, neither deep blue nor orange. The sinister, gloomy miasma was gone, replaced with clear air. There was no magic in Miss Maria's world, and no Cristallo Sacro. We couldn't imagine a world without these sacred trees. We didn't know if our world would even still exist if we lost them.

"It might be time for us to think about the Cristallo Sacro." Commander Agliardi murmured as his green eyes looked above the treetop. "If we're going to keep living with the trees, we'll need to find a way to stop the monsters — and if we want to free ourselves from the Cristallo Sacro, we'll need to find a way to do that, too. Purifying them isn't going to solve all of our problems."

Lord Reynard followed up his thought with, "But if the creation myths are true, the Cristallo Sacro exist to hold the heavens up to protect our world. I think that instead of doing something we could never take back, like getting rid of them, it would be better to find a way to live with them."

The Commander and Lord Reynard looked at each other before once again focusing on the tree.

What would be best? I had never even imagined a world without the Cristallo Sacro. But if we kept on living like this, there was a chance that they'd once again become surrounded in miasma and birth monsters. *Just like they did after the last Sacred Maiden purified them 1600 years ago...*

"Whatever the case, let's get going to the final tree." His Highness was the one to clear the air. Touching the trunk of the Cristallo Sacro, he looked at all of us. "Right now, we can't even damage the trees. But maybe things will change once they've all been purified. We still need to find the 'Drop of the Cristallo Sacro,' as well. We've investigated this tree, but there's nothing else we can do

to it right now.”

“Ed...”

“Let’s head to Dal Canto, where the next Cristallo Sacro is. We can discuss what we want to do on the way.”

# Lucia Gets Into a Fight

“Let’s do an experiment.”

On our way to Dal Canto, Eric popped up with an idea. We all looked up at him from our spots around the campfire.

“An experiment?”

“Yep, with Lucia.”

“Me?” For some reason, I was the subject.

While I was surprised at being singled out, Eric excitedly continued with his idea, “So *Soap* makes monsters calm down, right? We’ve always killed them anyway, though, since we didn’t know how long it lasted. But Shiro was completely fine while Lucia wasn’t here. So the effect must last a pretty long time.”

“That’s right! I’ve always thought it was horrible how we’ve been slaughtering them! Shiro’s this cute, so maybe other monsters could turn out like him too.” Miss Maria was the one to latch on to Eric’s idea.

“Kyawa!” Shiro, still sitting on her shoulder, flapped his wings and squeaked happily, wagging his tail.

The Canalis brothers spoke up against it, “But we don’t know if the effect would last forever. So we can’t leave them...”

“Are you saying that while knowing how many people have been killed by monsters in the last few years, kid?”

As knights who had experience in slaying monsters, they didn’t want to leave the monsters alone. Glancing towards Sir Celes, I saw that he was looking at Eric with an expression I couldn’t quite place.

“But we’ve cleansed two of the Cristallo Sacro so far. The reason monsters had been so active in the first place was because the trees were afflicted with miasma, right? That’s the whole reason we were sent to purify them. With two

cleansed, the monsters have to be calming down. We've been encountering less of them, too."

Now that he mentioned it, we had barely seen any monsters since leaving Foristarn. Even the ones we did see didn't attack us. They didn't seem interested. Just like normal animals.

"On the way from Arldat to Kyriest, we fought monsters 51 times. From Kyriest to Foristarn, 27 times. And from Foristarn to here, we've only fought 13 times. They're clearly dropping. And that's not all. The groups have been smaller, too. It might be the distance, too, but don't you think that it's thanks to us purifying the trees?" Eric puffed his chest out proudly.

*Amazing... Did he really count them all? I'm surprised.* I wasn't the only one who was surprised, because Miss Maria leaned slightly away from Eric, giving him a look.

"What, you counted them? Really!?" she exclaimed.

"Of course I did. Also, just so you know, this is the fifth time you've been grossed out by my research."

After giving Miss Maria a look back, he glared at the Commander and His Highness.

"So? Can we? I know we can't prove if it'll last forever, but we know that they won't go back to normal any time soon. If we can purify the last tree before then, we can stop the useless slaughter. We won't have to feel bad about fighting them anymore! They're just like weird-looking animals when they're not fighting. I know it's safer to kill them, but killing something that doesn't fight back... It's just a massacre!" Eric shouted, his fiery red hair swaying.

It was true that slaughtering calm monsters left a bad taste in your mouth. I agreed with Miss Maria as well, that we should leave them alone. If they wouldn't attack humans, they wouldn't do much damage.

The prince listened to Eric's plea and turned to ask the Commander, who had also been silent, "It's true that Shiro seems to be different from other monsters now. What do you think, Fernando?"

"Your Highness, thinking of the damage they've done so far, I cannot permit

it. But, I also understand what Eric is saying.”

“Then...!”

“Eric, Shiro is different from other monsters, because he was purified before he was born. Don’t you think that he’s fundamentally different from other monsters? How many days has it been since the last time *Soap* was used on him? We aren’t headed straight for the last Cristallo Sacro in Maynard. We’re headed towards the capital of Dal Canto, Fatna. We’ll be headed towards the tree after we have an audience with their King. At the very least, we have to make sure that the lengths of time that Shiro was without *Soap* and how long it will take to purify the last tree match up, or I cannot give you permission.”

“So you mean we’ll have to keep slaughtering them until we get to Fatna!?”

“Celestino and Lucia were separated from us for about half of a month. And going at the speed we’re at now, it won’t take that long to get from Fatna to Maynard.”

In contrast to Eric’s rage, the Commander was very calm. The only reason he couldn’t agree was because the chance wasn’t zero.

“We can’t be sure that they won’t attack humans. Since we can’t be sure, we can’t let them live, even if they don’t fight back. You should understand that best as a researcher, shouldn’t you?”

Hearing Commander Agliardi’s cruel decision, Eric spun around to point at Shiro, who was happily holding his tail on Miss Maria’s lap. “But it’s so hard... Shiro’s so cute. Monsters might be cute too, once they get used to you. They won’t fight. They might even be helpful. Why can’t we think like that?”

“Kyawa! Kyuu!”

Shiro must have thought he was being praised, because he let go of his tail and flapped his wings happily. But Miss Maria held his wings still with a grimace. She must have accidentally been hit by them.

“Shiro, that hurts. Don’t hit me like that! Fer, I agree with Eri-kun. If you’re worried about them going wild, all you need to do is train them. Death is the end. You might learn some new things if you don’t kill them. Please?”

After watching both of them argue vehemently for it, I spoke up, “I... I’m against it, too! I don’t want us to have to kill them anymore. Isn’t it alright if we just calm them down? If we need my *Soap*, I’ll use it as much as you want! So please, stop the senseless killing...!”

I’d stayed quiet before because I wasn’t sure if I should say anything, but I was against slaughtering the monsters, too! I thought back to our journey so far. The feeling of watching monsters be cut down, without them fighting back... Even though I tried to tell myself it had to be done, it still hurt.

*If all I need to do to stop it is use my powers, then I’ll do it. So...I want to let them live.* I shook off the memories of sprays of blue blood, and the moment that the light left their eyes. I’d never felt as bad as I did then. Monsters were our enemies. If not for them, my father wouldn’t have died. But, even so, I didn’t want to see them slaughtered anymore!

“Commander, Your Highness.” Sir Celes, who had also stayed silent, finally spoke up. “I’d like to ask, too. Please, let us leave them alone.”

He bowed his head and stood still. Seeing that, the rest of us followed his example.

“You all really... Ah, Fernando. We’ve lost. Let’s leave the monsters be.”

“Your Highness!”

“I said before, didn’t I? Shiro is our companion. If we can make other monsters as docile as Shiro, there’s no need for us to go out of our way to kill them. But Maria, in return, I’d like you to purify the last Cristallo Sacro as soon as possible. And Lucia, you need to keep praying that your magic’s effect lasts.”

# Lucia Reaches Dal Canto

After that, we continued on our way to the Kingdom of Dal Canto. Even though we'd decided not to kill any more monsters on our way, and just use *Soap* on them, we didn't see a single one before we got to Fatna, Dal Canto's capital. Honestly, it was so easy, it was a letdown. It looked as if Eric's hypothesis that monsters were decreasing was true.

"Whew, it's been a long journey." Sir Gaius smirked as we reached the castle gates with their royal flags flying.

*We're so close to the next Cristallo Sacro!*

Or so I thought...



"What? We're staying here for a while?"

"Yep!" Miss Maria nodded to me, up to her neck in the bath.

Once we arrived at the royal castle, we were led to the baths to clean off before we saw the King. The unbelievably luxurious bath we were in now was apparently for guests. Since we were the only women, I was brought to the same bath as Miss Maria, the Sacred Maiden. As per her request, we were the only ones in the room.

"Haaaah, it's been so long since I've had a bath! This is great."

"Kyuah!"

"Wait— Wait just a second! Don't we need to hurry!?"

Though I felt bad for saying it to Miss Maria now that she was relaxing, I was shocked. *Don't we need to purify the Cristallo Sacro to stop the monsters...?*

"Well, apparently we need to get dressed up, see the King, go to a welcoming party, and finally get an official send-off for some stupid political reasons. Why do we need to do all that? I was summoned here for a reason."

“What!?”

“Lucia, you didn’t know?”

“You did tell me that you had to stop in Hirsch for His Highness to greet the Grand Duke...”

“Yeah, that! We stopped like this in Hirsch, too. The Grand Duke is Ed’s uncle, so we got a super warm welcome. We would’ve been there even longer if Ed hadn’t gotten him to stop.”

Miss Maria looked up at the ceiling, stretching herself out. I followed her gaze to see elaborate ceiling reliefs. They were made to show the legends of the Cristallo Sacro, with the image of the tree in the center. It was a beautiful inlay, but after seeing the real ones, they were much more beautiful.

“I wish it’d all end quick. It’s such a pain to have to greet the nobles all dressed up,” Miss Maria sighed unhappily. “They all act nice, but they’re really just checking the others out. It sucks.”

*I would hate that too... I’ve never had anything to do with that kind of world, so I’m going to stick out like a sore thumb.*

“Not being able to bathe when you want is torture, not a welcome. Right, Shiro?”

She tilted her head at Shiro, and he mimicked her back.

“Kyuuwah!”

Unlike us in the tub, Shiro was sitting on top of a decoration, just watching us. I thought he might be bored, but whenever he was included in the conversation, he wagged his tail, so he must have been having fun in his own way. While I watched them, I thought back to the dispute that had happened before we got into the bath. People of high status never bathed alone, so being state guests, we had been accompanied by servants.

They didn’t take kindly to Shiro. Though still just a baby, he was a dragon. Even if we called him our companion, other people still saw him as a threat. They hadn’t noticed him when we entered the country since he was in the carriage, but people had screamed when they saw him in the castle.

Apparently, the same thing had happened in Hirsch. Both times, Miss Maria's stubbornness and the prince's golden tongue won out. That was why we were all here together now, but...it seemed like it would be difficult for people to live alongside monsters.

"After this, we're probably gonna get massaged, then thrown into the dresses they prepare, then slathered in makeup, before we finally meet with the King. It's such a pain!"

"It's difficult being a Sacred Maiden, huh..." I said, trying to show my sympathy.

She shot me a glare and yelled in frustration, "Why are you acting like it's all for me? You're gonna get it all, too!"

"Me!?"

*Weren't we making me her servant?* I was surprised, but Miss Maria just started toying with her hair, smiling.

"Of course. You're not my servant, you're my friend — my companion! You even purified one of the Cristallo Sacro! I'd *never* let them treat you like a servant!"

"I'm absolutely fine with being treated like a servant..." I mumbled.

"Hm? What? Did you say something!?" She taunted me with a wonderful smile. *Please, stop!* Laughing as I shook my head at her, Miss Maria stretched herself out again, relaxing. "Well, you're gonna get *something* massaged, soon. My back and legs hurt, so I'm looking forward to it."

"I-It's full-body!?"

"Of course it is! It feels good, so I wish it just stopped at that. We don't need the rest."

It would be my first time ever getting a massage... *Is it really okay for me to get something so impressive?* Though I felt a little guilty, I followed Miss Maria's example and stretched myself out.

# Lucia Wears a Foreign Dress

After we got out of the bath, we were surrounded by servants, just like Miss Maria said we would be. We got full-body massages, and were painted with so much make-up that we couldn't breathe. Then, we were put into dresses that were stylish in Dal Canto.

“Ooh, that looks great! How do I look?”

In Banfield, dresses with large skirts were the standard, but in Dal Canto, they preferred skirts that dropped straight from the chest to the floor. The lengths were different too — with Banfield dresses barely skimming the floor, while Dal Canto dresses were so long they dragged on the floor. The sleeves were also lengthy, covering to the tips of your fingers.

Another difference was that unlike in Banfield, where they liked corset dresses, women in Dal Canto didn't like having their waists squeezed. Though there were thick sashes tied under the breasts, the rest of the dress was loose.

“Oh, I always make everything look so good!” Miss Maria twirled her skirt in front of the mirror before posing with a hand on her hip. “But I’m so happy we didn’t get squeezed into corsets! Aren’t you glad, too?”

“You’re right. It squeezes a bit around the chest, but it’s not painful.”

Banfield-style dresses looked good on her, but so did Dal Canto-style ones!

With her shiny pure white dress and willowy frame, Miss Maria looked like a fairy from a fairytale. Her long black hair was done up with pearl ornaments, and both the jewels sewn into her dress and the necklace-like sash ornament sparkled as she moved. She was beautiful.

“But really...” She glanced over at me, before snorting unhappily. “It bugs me how much they’re emphasizing some things!”

I looked much better than usual next to the fairy-like Miss Maria. It was the first time I’d ever worn such a gorgeous dress, so I was really nervous!

I was in a light purple silken dress. Even though there was a lot of fabric used, the style made it look slimmer. It was accented with a violet sash embroidered with silver thread. It was beautiful. But it was embarrassing how open the chest was... I wished I had a shawl.

While I tried to pull the fabric up around my shoulders to hide them, the door opened, and in walked some servants different from the ones who had helped us prepare. "Sacred Maiden, if you are ready, please come to the audience room. His Majesty awaits you."

"Okaaaay. This is such a pain." Miss Maria responded with such an obviously unhappy voice, causing the servant to scowl. Since they usually only took care of nobles, they must have been bothered by her freewheeling nature.

"Let's get this over with. Right, Lucia?"

"Yes, His Highness and the others must be waiting."

"Please hurry up," one of the servants gave us a curt order.

Miss Maria loudly whispered a complaint into my ear as we walked. *The servant definitely heard that. Watch out, Miss Maria!*



"You've done well to make it here. I am the King of Dal Canto, Herbert Gualtiero Dal Canto. These are my daughters Bernardina and Cecilia, and my queen Elana. In her arms is our Crown Prince, Ildebrando."

The King of Dal Canto was younger than the King of Banfield. While His Majesty didn't even bother to hide his fatigue, the King of Dal Canto greeted Miss Maria and His Highness with a lively smile.

"It's been a while, Prince Edoardo. I'm glad to see you in good health. How was your journey?"

"Thank you for your concern," His Highness replied. "The Knights of Banfield are excellent, so I haven't been fed to the monsters yet."

"Hahahaha! That's great. I see that Commander Agliardi is with you. That's a relief!"

As the two began chatting, I remembered that there had been rumors of His

Highness being betrothed to the first princess of Dal Canto, before Miss Maria was summoned. They had faded away after that, but I wondered what really happened. If Miss Maria was going to be wed to the prince after our journey, how had things with Dal Canto ended up?

I glanced towards the princesses standing by the King and Queen's side. One wore a light mint green dress, while the other wore a lovely pink dress.

"Prince Edoardo..." The princess in mint green who stood beside the Queen called out His Highness's name.

"Princess Bernardino. I'm glad to see you're well."

She had been looking at Prince Edoardo, but when he responded, she suddenly faced downwards. She must be the first princess. She looked to be the same age as Miss Maria and I. Her dark skin, a characteristic of the people of Dal Canto, blushed red as she played with her golden sash.

"Um... I'm glad to see you once again," she mumbled.

"I apologize for coming so suddenly. Please allow us to stay for a spell."

"Um, er... Yes, of course. Please make yourself at home."

While Princess Bernardino answered him quietly, Princess Cecilia, who had been watching us quietly, opened her mouth.

"Father, I've decided." Her azure eyes sparkled as she excitedly continued, "I've found my soulmate! I'm going to marry into Banfield, too!"

Her dreamy eyes were focused on... Sir Celes!

*What!?*

## Side Story: The Red Ribbon and a Gold Crest

While Lucia wasn't there, Shiro was my only comfort. His detailed scales, big round eyes, lovely little voice. Everything about him was cute. He was always with me, as if he was protecting me in place of Lucia. But he was a monster... Though I had forgotten, the nobles of Vatis made sure to remind me.

"A dragon!?"

"Uwaaaaah!"

The moment we entered the castle, we were met not by welcoming voices, but screams of terror.

"What? What's wrong?"

"E-Excuse me! But, Sacred Maiden... Isn't that...isn't that a dragon?" One of the people who had screamed timidly pointed towards Shiro, who was in my arms.

I think he said he was a minister. He'd looked so high-and-mighty when he introduced himself, but now he was nearly soiling his pants. I was just about ready to explode at their rudeness. *How could they look at my adorable little Shiro like he was a danger! It pissed me off!* He was different from other monsters. He might be a dragon, but he'd never hurt anyone!

"Wh—"

He must have noticed that I was about to go off, because Ed quickly moved in front of me. "I understand that you're nervous, but please, calm down. This dragon won't hurt anyone."

"But Prince Edoardo, a dragon is a dragon!"

"That's true. But this dragon hasn't hurt anyone at all over our journey. He, Shiro, is the Sacred Maiden's companion." Saying that, Ed reached out and touched one of the ribbons holding my hair up. "I'm sorry, Maria. Can I borrow one of your ribbons?"

“Eh? Ah... Okay? Why?”

As soon as I answered, he pulled the ribbon out. “Just stay still, Shiro.”

Tying the long ribbon around Shiro’s neck, he took a brooch showing the crest of the Banfield royal family off of his own clothes and pinned it to the ribbon.

“The dragon must stay with the Sacred Maiden. He is her beloved follower.”

“Kyuwah!”

With the red ribbon around his neck, Shiro chirped what sounded like an agreement to Ed’s words.



After Ed's announcement, the people of Vatis reluctantly allowed Shiro to stay with us. Though they said that I always had to be with him, that was the plan from the beginning, so I didn't have any problems. After that, we went to greet Ed's Uncle, the Grand Duke, but no one said anything about Shiro. They must have already heard about what Ed said. They did give him some meaningful glances, but that was it.

Once our annoying meet-and-greet was over, and we finally had some free time, I went to talk to Ed for the first time in a while. He had told us all about his mission from the King, and I *did* understand it, but the fact that he had hidden it in the first place still bothered me.

"Ed."

"Hm?"

While I hesitated, Ed gave me his usual smile. It pissed me off a bit, so I was deliberately a bit curt.

"Um, about Shiro... Uh..."

"Ah, sorry for worrying you. It probably would have been better to have a plan before we came, but honestly, I'd forgotten that Shiro was a monster. But it should be alright now. Just make sure that he's always with you. We don't know what people might try."

"Ah... Okay."

I'd had meant to thank him, but all that came out of my mouth was a dull acknowledgment.

"Is there something else?"

"N... No, nothing."

I automatically shook my head as he asked me with a gentle smile. *Come on, Maria! We need to thank him!* If he hadn't done what he did, they wouldn't have let Shiro into the castle. They might have even killed him! But for some reason, my mouth wouldn't move right.

"The people of Vatis won't treat you badly. They're believers in the Sacred Maiden faith, after all. It should be better for you here than it was back in

Arldat. But if anything happens, tell me as soon as possible. Or...you could tell Reynard instead."

*Why did you have to look so lonely at the last part? That's no fair!*

"If I have something to say, I'll say it straight to you! I'm already doing that, aren't I!?"

"Ahaha, that's true. Thank you, Maria."

After another few words, I left.

"Kyuwah?" Shiro gave me an innocent look from his spot in my arms. Around his neck was a red ribbon with a gold crest hanging from it. Something that Ed gave to Shiro to protect him.

*"He, Shiro, is the Sacred Maiden's companion."* I remembered what Ed said when we first got here. *"The dragon must stay with the Sacred Maiden. He is her beloved follower."*

"I think I should be congratulating myself for not saying that he was kinda cool, right, Shiro?"

"Kyuu?"

I would never admit that what he said then made me a lot happier than any of his sweet words up to now!

## Side Story: Eric and His Notebooks

When I heard that I was going to be sent along on the Sacred Maiden's journey to purify the Cristallo Sacro, I prepared a few notebooks. Honestly, they were a bit heavy, but I needed some paper and pens to write down my research findings along the way, so I didn't care.

I'd packed as few changes of clothes as possible, a spare crystal, a crystal lamp, a few monster repellent crystals; medical salves and cold medicine; and of course, a mana measurement device and lots of mana restoratives.

"This should do it..."

Once I got all my stuff together, I put the dark red Academy robe I'd taken off back on. *I'm ready!* I had decided that I was going to research the Sacred Maiden's powers while on our journey, and hopefully, the Cristallo Sacro too. Both were rare and wonderful research subjects, so naturally I was interested. Even if I couldn't do any experiments, I'd be able to observe and think up some hypotheses — that was what the notebooks were for.

While the idea of bringing them was good, unfortunately, I didn't have any reason to use them once we finally got out there. We were still far from the trees, and the Sacred Maiden wouldn't show me any light magic. Seriously! The center of our purification journey, the Sacred Maiden, wouldn't use her magic. No matter how strong the monsters we encountered, she wouldn't even leave the carriage — she just left all the fighting to us. She'd only come out once the corpses were all burnt up, then she'd act all important and flirt with the men. Honestly, it pissed me off.

It only got worse once the servants and soldiers had been sent back to the capital. I hated selfish people. I hated people who expected to be waited on. I hated people who got in the way of my research. And justly so, I hated the Sacred Maiden.

She was lauded by others as the Sacred Maiden who would save our world, but the reality was different. I couldn't stand to look at her while she flirted

with the prince, the captain, and any other high-ranked, attractive men. But then, something happened to show me that I had also been acting just the way I hated.

Of course the Sacred Maiden is gonna save our world. Of course she's going to go on a journey. Of course she's going to use her light magic to fight. That's what I'd always thought.

Of course I'd get into the Academy, since I'm the youngest and strongest mage. And of course I'd get sent on the journey of purification and have to pause my research. There weren't many people who could become mages, and there were even fewer who could become researchers at the Academy. It was a given that I'd be fighting and sent off to help save the Cristallo Sacro.

But my "of course" and the Sacred Maiden's "of course" couldn't be any more different.

I was embarrassed when that was pointed out. I'd thought she'd been acting that way because she was selfish, that she'd been hiding away to make us worry. I regretted it. Unfortunately, that's where my memories stopped. There was actually a lot more stuff that happened after that, and I even did some stuff, but because I drank some spiked water once we got back to the inn, I forgot it all.

Thank goodness I still remembered how selfish and immature I'd been. I should never forget that.

As soon as I woke up again, I went to apologize to the Sacred Maiden. While I was bowing, she just accepted my apology with a laugh, saying how serious I was. I didn't see any of the harshness or pride that I had at the beginning of our journey. I saw a normal girl, fragile, full of smiles. This is the person that I — that we'd — all forced to save our world. It wasn't her world, but because she was the Sacred Maiden, "of course" she'd save it.

I wondered why I had thought that way. I realized how shortsighted I had been, and how much my emotions had swung me around. *Observing things with prejudice, what am I, a novice?*

Once I got back to my room, I pulled out an unused notebook. I'd thought I would use them for researching light magic, or the trees, but I decided that I

could spare one to start writing a travel observation diary. That way, even if I didn't remember something, I'd have a record. Instead of judging things, I'd just calmly write exactly what happened. If I had anything to consider, I'd just write it at the end.

And that was how I got absorbed in writing in my notebooks.

Observation was so fun! Since I was just calmly observing, I didn't get cranky, and I started looking forward to our journey. Usually, I didn't leave Arldat, so it was interesting seeing new things, and I could see how magic really worked on things. Since it was so dangerous around the Cristallo Sacro, no one could get close, so I'd never have another chance to go!

The Sacred Maiden really *was* just a normal girl. She laughed, played, got scared, but she never stopped. Once I looked at it another way, her determined spirit was a positive thing. She was doing her best.

The prince was always smiling. But since he was *always* smiling, I wondered if that was just his "Crown Prince" face.

The Commander was always with the prince. He must be worried, since he's the only prince we have.

The Commander's aide quietly did his work. And he talked to his brother, the bear, a lot. They looked like they were close. I was an only child, though, so I wasn't exactly sure.

The bear was loud and annoying. But even though he looked rough, he was surprisingly attentive, so I'd been hanging around him a lot lately. It was fun. Everyone always had their nose stuck in their research at the Academy, so I never had anyone I could just play around with like I did with him.

The thing that I was most interested in was the relationship between the Captain and Lucia, who joined us later. They were obviously in love with each other, but neither of them seemed to notice. And because the Sacred Maiden kept getting in the way, it was starting to get irritating that they weren't together yet.

When were they gonna notice? I couldn't even tell if there was any progress being made. I'd never been around anyone who'd been public with their

romances before. The world was huge, and there were so many people. Their natures and relationships were all different.

Once this journey was over, I wanted to leave the Academy and investigate lots of different places. Maybe I'd start studying the Cristallo Sacro, since we didn't even know if they were alive or not.

Dreaming of the future, I kept observing. Everything started with observations. I'd observe, make up a hypothesis, and test it. The end result was important, but so was how you got to it.

There was nothing bad about broadening your horizons!



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The Extraordinary, the Ordinary, and SOAP! Volume 2

by Nao Wakasa

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