



A Tale
of the

Secret Saint

NOVEL

1

Written by
Touya

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SIRIUS BONUS The Serafina Quiz, Hard Mode Challenge!

Afterword



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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CHARACTER LIST

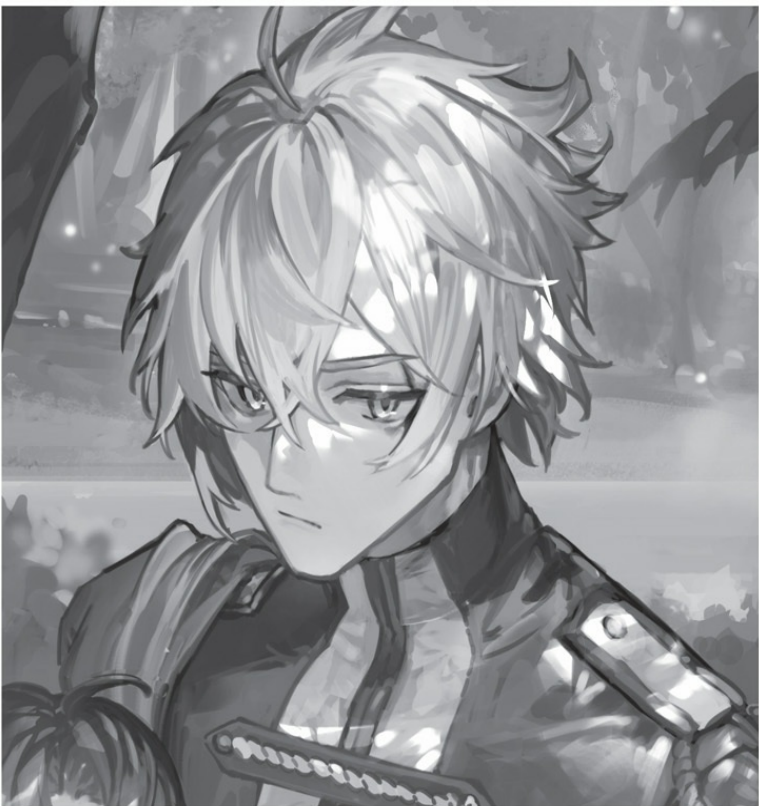
SERAFINA NÁV

The second princess of Náv. Has crimson hair and golden eyes. She lived hidden away in the Forest of Lent because of her blindness since birth, but she returned to the royal capital after regaining her sight. Despite her tender age, she already possesses exceptional ability as a saint.



SIRIUS ULYSSES

Vice-commander of the Náv Horned Beast Knights at the young age of nineteen. Current head of the Ulysses dukedom and nephew to the king. A handsome man with gray hair and silver eyes, he is the kingdom's strongest swordsman.



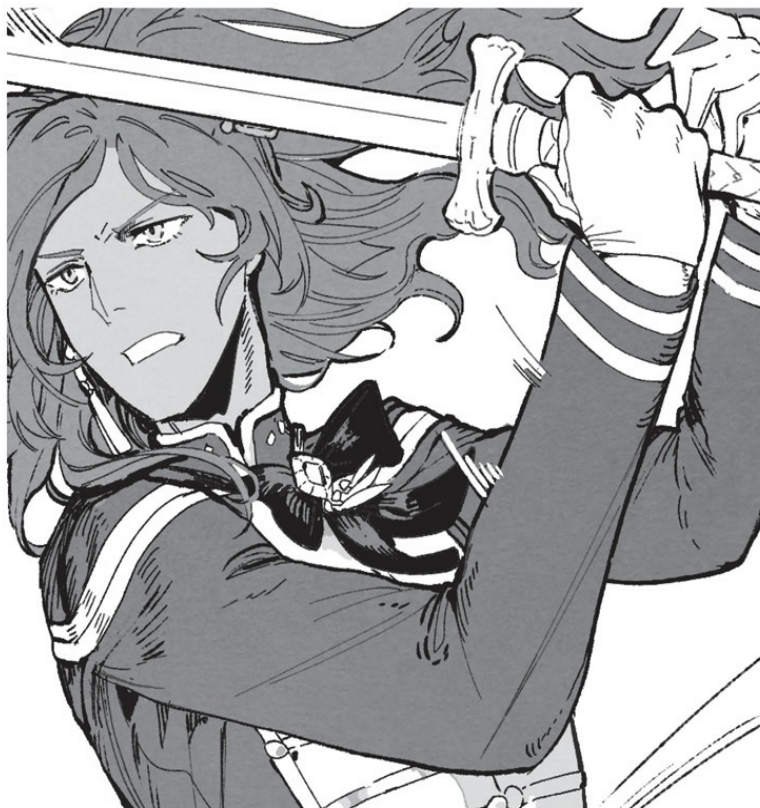
SEVEN

A young spirit boy who has a pact with Serafina. Only she was able to see him initially, though he later made himself visible to Sirius.



CANOPUS BLAZEJ

A young man from the islander minority group. After Serafina chose him as her personal knight, he swore an oath of fealty to her.



Procyon Náv

Serafina’s father. The king.

Spica Náv

Serafina’s mother. The queen.

Vega Náv

Serafina’s older brother. The first prince.

Capella Náv

Serafina’s older brother. The second prince.

Rigel Náv

Serafina’s older brother. The third prince.

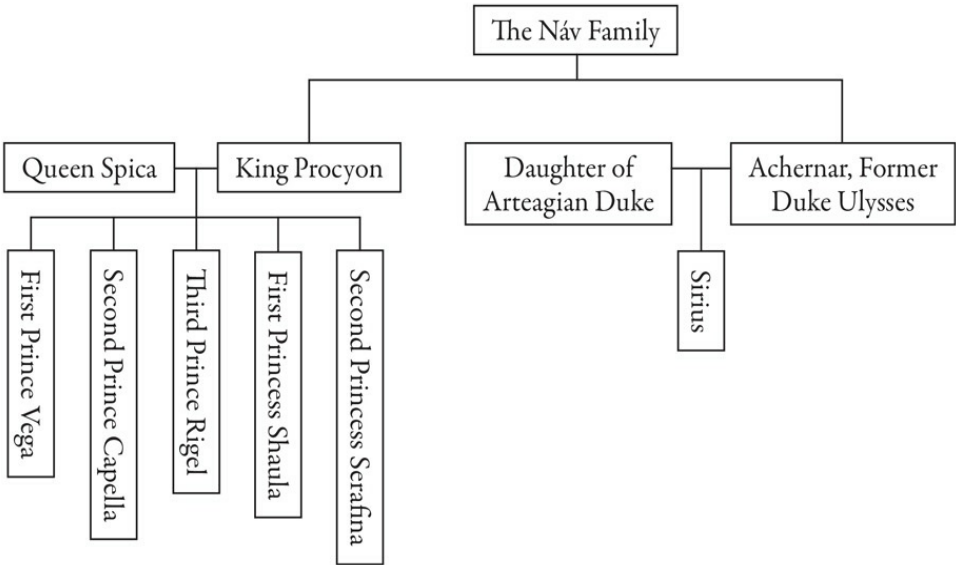
Shaula Náv

Serafina’s older sister. The first princess.

Wezen Wald

Captain of the Náv Horned Beast Knights. A gallant and highly respected man, yet terrible at paperwork.

Náv Kingdom Royal Family Tree





Point of View: Sirius

My Cousin Serafina

THEY SAY YOUR LIFE flashes before your eyes when you die. But...

“Ha ha! Seems more like a hallucination than a flash. I feel like I’ve been dreaming this whole time, watching a story play out. Serafina’s six? Yeah, this can’t be real...”

No matter how many times I blinked, the sight before me never changed.

Why? How? At that moment, I was seeing something I’d long dreamed of—no, it far surpassed my wildest imagination.

The knights were on the verge of death, their bodies riddled with wounds. Yet in an instant, they were restored to full health, and with boosted attack power and speed. Right before my eyes, Serafina created gods of battle out of ordinary men.

It was the power of a saint.

She did not cower behind the knights and hide away in the back lines. No, she stood right alongside them, holding her head high...

“I never imagined she could be such a powerhouse. Is she seriously a *saint*?”

The diminutive girl was shooting off spells I’d never seen before. I couldn’t tell if it was saint magic or not. The power she casually flaunted was unheard of. The sight was so patently absurd that, even in the thick of battle, I couldn’t help but let out a dry chuckle.

“Ha ha ha! Isn’t this crazy? Somebody sure stacked the deck in her favor!”

I couldn’t see us losing anytime soon—the tiny saint was systematically obliterating all the monsters surrounding us.

“Ha ha ha!”

With another laugh, I readied my sword and headed into battle.

It all started one fateful day. I was in King Procyon's private chamber, sitting across the table from him, when the monarch uttered an unfamiliar name.

"Serafina?" I repeated, trying to conjure up any memories of the girl. In the recesses of my mind, a vague recollection began to form.

I, Sirius Ulysses, was the only son of Achernar, younger brother of the king of Náv. I was blessed with gray hair and silver eyes—a rare sight in the kingdom—as well as a naturally tall and lean frame. Upon my father's passing, I inherited the title of duke at the tender age of nineteen and also became the vice-commander of the Náv Horned Beast Knights. Because of those respective titles (or perhaps because I was the king's nephew), I was often called to the king's private chamber, a far more exclusive setting than even the throne room.

That day, I went to the chamber thinking it would be business as usual, but the visit soon took an unexpected turn when the king ordered everyone else—including the servants—to leave the room. As I watched, perplexed, the king picked up a bottle of fine wine, poured two glasses, and handed one to me. I sank into the sofa and eyed the king as I carefully sipped from my glass. Just a quick glance at his profile told me that he was on edge.

This is no ordinary matter, I realized and steeled myself for the unknown. Meanwhile, the king gave a painfully feigned smile.

"Thank you for taking the time to come out here today. Oh, and I know it's been a while since we last saw each other, but I must say you're as good-looking as ever. I can see why you were voted 'Most Handsome Member of the Horned Beast Knights' for three years straight."

I did not humor this comment with a response. The king only praised my looks when he was trying to push a job no one else could handle onto me.

With a nervous expression, the king wiped his sweaty palms against his chest. Falteringly, he said, "Have you heard of Serafina?"

"Serafina?"

The name did not immediately bring anyone to mind.

My reaction prompted the king to hang his head in dejection. “I see,” he said quietly. “You know every key figure in the kingdom, yet hearing the name Serafina yields no immediate reaction. That is quite shocking for me, I must say. Serafina is my youngest child, the second-born princess of Náv. She will be six this year.”

The vague pull on my memories finally took on a concrete form.

Oh, yes. I did know her. Almost six years ago, there was a ceremony to celebrate the birth of a new member of the royal family. The queen had held a tiny infant in a white lace dress.

What happened to the princess after that? I spotted the three princes and the eldest princess every so often, but I couldn’t recall seeing Princess Serafina after that unveiling ceremony.

Figuring that she was probably being raised in some sequestered part of the castle, I took another sip of wine. But suddenly, the king let out a deep sigh.

“No, it makes all the sense in the world that you wouldn’t know about Serafina. She doesn’t reside in the castle, so your paths wouldn’t have crossed. She lives in the Forest of Lent.”

“The Forest of Lent?” It was a deep, dark forest at the far east edge of the kingdom. A frontier land, one could call it. “Why is Serafina living *there*?” I asked, puzzled.

The king checked if the door was shut soundly before he responded. “This matter is only privy to a select few,” he said, as if he was having difficulty forming the words. “Serafina was born blind due to an unknown eye disease. Many doctors and saints attended to her after her birth, but not a single one found a cure.”

My eyes widened; this was all news to me.

On reflection, though, there was no way I would have known. The king must have been desperate to keep this information secret, seeing as how not a word of this had spread outside his inner circle. It showed just how deeply he cared for the princess.

More often than not, a physical disability was considered a major deficiency among royalty. As her father, the king must have been trying to shield the young princess from the world's judgment.

As I chewed on that thought, King Procyon lowered his gaze to his arms that were folded in front of his chest. "I suspect that Serafina's eyesight will never improve," he continued with a strained tone. "The girl will have to live her entire life in darkness."

This would be extremely harsh on the young princess, most would agree. But if even the most privileged man in the kingdom couldn't restore her vision, then it was the reality she would have to accept. With a small, sorrowful sigh, I drained the rest of my glass.

The king continued: "As you know, the castle is a den of wolves where even a slight mistake could cost you a limb. A blind girl like Serafina would be a walking target. So I sent her away to a different environment, hoping to call her back to the castle once her eyes had healed...but despite trying everything, to this very day her vision has shown no improvement."

The king paused there, clenching his hands into fists.

"And so...since she is not getting any better, I have decided to bring her back to the castle immediately."

"I understand how you feel as a king," I replied out of lack of anything more insightful to say.

"Serafina must live as royalty," he went on with a taut expression. "I must hurry and get her accustomed to the castle so that she can establish her place here. Her road will be difficult, but she must learn to stand on her own two feet..."

At this point, the king lifted his head and sprang from his seat. He grabbed my arms and gazed at me imploringly.

"Sirius, you must help me! Listen to a father's request for his daughter! As my nephew, duke of this kingdom's highest house and vice-commander of the Horned Beast Knights, I ask you to bring Serafina to me!"

As a father worried for his daughter, his plea made sense. The question of

whom to entrust to retrieve the princess was not one to take lightly. After all, not just anyone could be trusted with a member of the royal family. The king couldn't go himself, so he would have to send someone in his place—and when one considered logically who the best *someone* would be, there was no better candidate than me.

I was one of the most important figures in the Náv Kingdom, next to the king, and because I was a shoo-in for the knight brigade's future commander, I was well-liked among the general populace as well. As a knight, I was known for ensuring their safety by slaying monsters day after day.

"I doubt that anyone will bat an eye if I were to retrieve Serafina, given that she is my cousin. Very well, I accept your request," I answered without hesitation.

The monarch's eyes lit up. "My thanks, Sirius!" he declared in a way that could only be described as a holler. "And while you're at it, be sure to sing her praises throughout the land!"

"Excuse me?"

"She has red hair, so I expect she has it in her to become a talented saint. However, she is not yet of age, so she cannot form pacts with spirits, nor can she wield much strength of her own. I would very much appreciate it if you were to put in a good word for her on the road. Just yell something like, 'Wow! Serafina is so amazing!' at the top of your lungs and make up some saintly-sounding deeds. I'm sure the ladies will be keen to listen to what a handsome young man such as yourself has to say. And since you're the strongest knight, you're quite popular with the men too. Everyone in the kingdom will believe what you say—no reason *not* to exploit it!"

Ah yes, I thought in the ensuing silence. Our monarch is the type who doesn't know when to shut his mouth.

As I felt a throbbing headache coming on, I figured that this was a good time to ask to take my leave. The king was grinning from ear to ear as he rambled off some incomprehensible nonsense about "being Serafina's cheerleader."

After I emerged into the hallway, I let out a deep sigh. I couldn't help but mull over my physically distant cousin.

The royal family owned a villa in the Forest of Lent. Serafina was supposedly living there, though I recalled that it was a very old structure. Add in the remote location on top of that, it was unlikely she received many visitors.

The princess had her whole life ahead of her. Yet from the moment she was born, she was hidden away with only a scarce few attendants and knights for company—and she was unable to see a single thing. It seemed like a terribly lonely existence to me.

In retrospect, I probably pitied her for it. I thought that perhaps her life would be full of struggle. I wanted to at least support the blind young girl and ensure that she would have a bright future. And so, even knowing that the days to come would be utterly hectic, I began to plan my visit to a land far to the capital's east.

My later interactions with the princess thoroughly dispelled all notion of pity from my mind, although there was no way I could have foreseen that at the time. To my dismay, I must confess that I held the notion of *protecting* my young charge.

Interlude:

The Náv Kingdom and the Saints

THE NÁV KINGDOM was a mid-sized country at the western reach of the continent. The Arteaga Empire, which held a lock in the northeast, was the biggest superpower. There were about ten small-or medium-sized countries (Náv included) dispersed across the rest of the land.

Oral legend had it that Náv was founded by the Spirit Lord. He fell in love with a human girl, who then bore the child that started the dynastic line. For this reason, Náv was loved by the spirits, many of whom chose to reside within the kingdom's borders.

The forests and seas, meanwhile, were home to many monsters. Battles against either those monsters or an enemy nation were often decided by whether one had access to healing magic or not.

Generally, knights had to rely on healing potions, but it took quite a while for them to mend a serious wound. The injured had no choice but to remove themselves from the battle entirely. This was all very self-obvious logic, but the saints—wielders of healing magic—made this unnecessary, for they could patch up injuries at a blisteringly fast speed compared to the potions.

The downside was that healing magic required an incredible amount of magical energy. The spells required a different form of casting than attack magic, which meant that a single use would deplete the average caster's reserves entirely. In order to make up for this, every saint formed a pact with the spirits. This would allow them to convert the mana in the air into energy, giving them roughly ten times more capacity for healing spells.

The spirits only ever responded to women, but they were guaranteed to form a pact if asked. Every saint with a pact had a sigil on the back of their hand to show for it. Because the spirits never conversed, mutual understanding was impossible on a finer level, leaving a great deal of mystique to the process.

But some things were for certain: Every spirit took on an adult human form,

and they exclusively formed pacts with grown women. The spirits themselves also varied greatly in terms of strength, with the most capable ones favoring red-haired saints.

By loving, respecting, and treasuring the spirits, the saints were allowed to call upon their power. And by doing so, they could heal wounds, cure illnesses, create healing potions for minor injuries, and even raise the dead.

Only the saints were capable of wielding this miraculous magic.

The Holy Princess in the Forest of Spirits

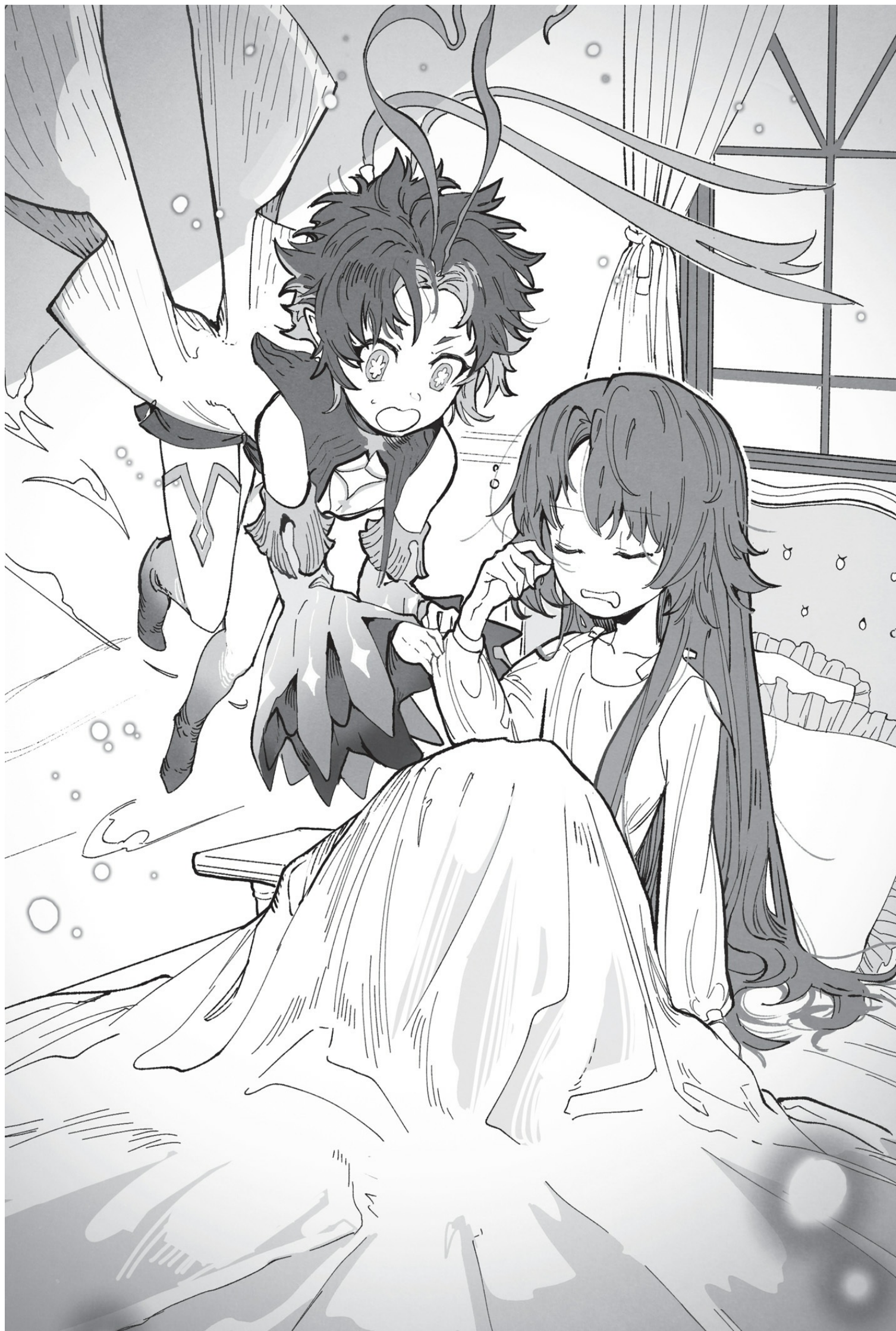
“I’M SO SLEEPY,” I mumbled. “It’s morning, but...I’m way too comfy here.”

I was in my bed all wrapped up in a blanket when my friend came to wake me. My body reacted on instinct, burrowing even further into my happy place. Seeing this, my cheeky friend reached out to peel the blanket away from me, but I was having none of it. I burrowed down and clenched the blanket tightly around myself.

Then my friend—the spirit boy—let out an exasperated cry.

“Don’t be so lazy, Fi! If you’re this sleepy in the morning, stop training your magic at night. Do it during the day instead.”

I have to admit that he had a point. I gave up struggling, poked my head out from under the blanket, and turned it in the spirit’s direction. Then, with as bright a smile as I could muster, I said the perfect morning greeting—exactly what my friend would want to hear.



“Good morning! What a beautiful start to the day! Everything is sparkling!”

“Fi, you can’t see a thing. How can you even tell if it’s sparkling?”

“Phooey. Nothing gets past you, Seven.” I clamped my mouth shut awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

Because my cute spirit friend was exactly right.

My name is Serafina Náv, and I was born as the Náv Kingdom’s second princess. I’m turning six this year.

My ladies-in-waiting tell me I have red hair, which is a good color because it means I’m loved by the spirits. My hair goes about halfway down my back—although, sadly, I have never seen for myself what I look like. This is because I was born without eyesight, and I can’t even open my eyelids.

Since my eyes can only sense a bit of light, I couldn’t even tell whether it was sunny or cloudy that morning—just like the spirit said. This was the reason why my parents sent me to their villa in the Forest of Lent right after I was born—they were worried about my well-being, and they thought a life surrounded by beautiful nature would be good for me.

I bet my parents were secretly hoping that the forest springs, which apparently improved your health, would cure my eyesight, but despite almost six years of drinking from them, nothing changed. Doctors and saints also came by from time to time to attend to my eyes, but none of them were able to help me either.

Since my eyes weren’t improving, everyone thought it was pointless for me to be at the villa and that I ought to return to the castle. But as for me, I was just really glad to live where I was—because I made a lot of friends that only I could see.

For a while after I was brought to the villa, people wouldn’t take me outside because they thought my blindness would be a hindrance. But when I turned three, they let me step into the forest as long as I had my ladies-in-waiting and

knights to escort me. There were no monsters in the Forest of Lent, and I had no trouble walking, so they figured it was fine.

The day I first went out into the forest, there was a restlessness in my chest. I just knew that something special was going to happen, and it filled me with anxiety all morning. I had this weird feeling that the forest was calling for me.

As I tried to steady my beating heart, I stepped into the woods, but my eyes only showed me the same darkness they always did. Nothing special happened at all. It made me kind of sad, because I thought it meant my intuition was off. But after a short while, these tiny, flickering white orbs appeared in my vision. It was my first time seeing anything other than darkness, and I had no idea what to make of it.

At first, I stood frozen in shock, but then I quickly became fascinated by the white light. Slowly, I walked toward it and held out my hand. I waited super, super patiently, and then the light made its way into my palm.

“Whoa.”

I sat in the shade of a big tree, and the white light sat in my palm the whole day. It felt so nice! The wind blew gently, as if it were trying to tell me something. Unfortunately, my ears couldn't figure out the meaning.

None of my ladies-in-waiting or knights were able to see the white light I was sensing. To them, it looked like I was smiling at my empty palms. But still, none of them dismissed me when I said, “There's a shiny white thing on my hand.” Instead, they treated it as a fact. “You can see what we cannot, Princess Serafina,” they said. “Perhaps something good came of us protecting you.”

It turned out that the white light belonged to young spirits. Through spending time with them every day, I gradually learned to discern their shape and understand their language. Weirdly enough, though, nobody else ever saw them or heard them speak.

I guess that's why everyone else called the spirits the “invisible blessings.”

The “invisible-blessing”-slash-adorable spirit came into my room that morning to wake me up like usual. The one who looked out for me the most was a boy

about the same age as me named Seven.

Although the spirit children couldn't be seen, I did get a sense of how they would look as I got older. I could clearly see Seven's pure-white form, right down to his facial features.

At the moment, his eyes were wide as he tugged on my sleeve. *"Fi, stop mumbling in bed and get up already,"* he said impatiently. *"You've got special visitors from the capital today. You have to get ready to see them."*

"What? From the capital?" I instantly sat up and faced Seven in shock. "But it's not my birthday yet. They wouldn't have presents from Father and the others, would they? Why else would anyone come see me?"

The knights gave me seasonal gifts, but this never involved a formal messenger. The spirit's choice of words made it sound like a birthday celebration, but I couldn't be sure. One thing I did know was that the spirits were never wrong about anything, so there definitely *were* visitors heading our way...

"Oh well, they'll tell me why they're here. I should just get changed now, yup. Hmm, since they're from the capital, I guess I should wear a super nice dress?"

As I paced around the room in my pajamas, Seven sighed in exasperation. *"Your 'super nice dress' is all covered in mud after you tripped and fell in the forest while trying to show it off to us. Your ladies-in-waiting were so mad about it. How have you already forgotten?"*

"Uh-oh, you're right. Then I guess I'll wear a normal dress without the mud."

As if on cue, a lady-in-waiting swooped into the room right then. After she helped me get dressed, she let me know my breakfast was ready.

I turned to Seven, and he muttered, *"One man...and ten others far behind."*

So I told the lady-in-waiting, "I have a feeling visitors will come today. It'll be just one at first, but after a while, there'll be ten more. He'll be here real soon, so I'll have breakfast with him."

"Oh, really?" The lady-in-waiting sounded flustered. "Your intuition *is* always right, Princess Serafina, so I'm not doubting you for a moment. But, oh, how

could there be a visitor so early in the morning?! What a peculiar individual he must be! And eleven people! I shall request extra food from the kitchen at once.”

She hurried out of the bedroom, and I headed out into the foyer after her. I was part of the family that owned the villa, after all—I felt like I ought to welcome the visitor.

After a short wait outside the foyer, I heard the sound of a galloping horse. I could tell that there was only a single rider and that the horse was going very fast. It made me think that the visitor was a knight, not a nobleman.

When the visitor reached the entrance, he stopped his horse smoothly and dismounted. He approached me next to the pillar I was standing at and stopped when he was a few paces away from me.

“You must be Serafina. It’s a pleasure. I am your cousin, Sirius Ulysses.”

“Ohhh! You’re the national hero!”

Even a sheltered girl like me had heard his name before. I covered my mouth in surprise.

I quickly remembered that I was supposed to be polite, so I lifted the sides of my dress and did a curtsy. “It is nice to meet you. I am Serafina Náv. Thank you for traveling so far to see me. Please make yourself at home.”

“Judging by your choice of words, it sounds like you know we’ve never spoken before.”

“Hm?”

“I was at your birth ceremony nearly six years ago now. You were just a baby back then and I figured you wouldn’t remember, so I didn’t put much effort into saying hello. Looks like I’m paying the price for my rudeness now, though.”

I gazed mutely up at Sirius, surprised at the sudden familiarity in his tone.

“Uh, sorry.” His awkward voice fell on me from above. “It’s my first time talking to a little kid, so I tried to lighten the mood. Did I make you uncomfortable? I’ve always talked a little roughly, so I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“N-no! Not at all! I should have said a proper hello six years ago... My ‘waaah’ meant ‘nice to meet you.’”

Sirius laughed cheerfully at my answer. “Ha ha ha! Is that right? Looks like I was the poor listener. The thing is, when I approached you six years ago, you took one look at me and started bawling your eyes out for some reason. I didn’t want to upset you any more than I already had, so I panicked and ran out. To think that that was just your way of saying hello.”

Then he crouched down and offered his large hand to me. There was an earnest air about him, different from before. I could sense that he was smiling.

“Let’s try this once more. ‘Hey, Serafina, we meet again. It’s me, your cousin Sirius.’”

“Oh? Uh...”

“Serafina, you’re supposed to say, ‘It’s been ages, Sirius.’ We’re old pals catching up again after six years. No need to act all stuffy.”

“Really? Well, um...”

As I stood there, lost for words, Sirius took my hand and led me into my house. He took short and deliberate steps, conscious of how I couldn’t see. He was a nice person, I thought.

The thing is, I could actually make out Sirius’s shape, thanks to the spirits. Lately, they’d caught on to how I could see a dim outline of the things they were close to. Whenever a new person came by, the spirits scrambled around the person’s face and body. Today, those kind spirits stuck fast to Sirius’s hands and legs. They moved when he moved, so I was able to sense his rhythm.

But for some reason...there was only a single spirit hanging around Sirius’s mouth, not the usual crowd. This was my only guide to his mouth movements, which made his expression hard to make out.

Just as I was puzzling over why this was, Seven whispered into my ear. “*The spirits were taking pity on him, you see. Sirius was suuuper clumsy when he was talking to you. This is their way of being kind.*”

He went on to say that it would be unfair to me if I couldn’t see the person’s

expression at all, hence why there was one spirit around the mouth. This was all very surprising to me. Those cheeky spirits were being very considerate in their own way, but as I walked, I couldn't help but wish I'd seen Sirius's face. If he was a nice person, I wouldn't have been bothered by any awkward faces.

From my mental map of the villa, I was pretty sure that Sirius was headed to the reception room, but then the steward guided him to the breakfast room.

"You haven't had breakfast yet, Serafina?" Sirius said. "I might've shown up too early."

"Have you already eaten, Mr. Sirius?"

"Try that again," he insisted. "Remember, we're friendly cousins meeting again after six years."

"Um...have you...eaten, Sirius?"

When I fixed my phrasing, he patted me on the head fondly. "Nah, but missing a meal isn't a big deal. I can go without food for days as long as I have water."

"Oh, wow."

Just as we were entering the breakfast room, Sirius stopped in confusion. He was probably wondering why there was breakfast for two on the table.

"I didn't know you were okay without breakfast," I said timidly, "so I asked the cooks to make something for you."

"How did you know I was coming?"

His tone was sharp, which made me feel like he was angry at me. "Oh, no, I didn't know," I answered, flustered. I only knew there would be a guest, not that it was Sirius. I hung my head down in shame, feeling like I'd screwed up.

Sirius patted my head again. "Sorry, I wasn't trying to scold you. My tone was too harsh for a child. I'll try not to do that again. What I wanted to say was... thanks, I was just getting hungry."

"Oh, yay!" I lit up.

Sirius put a hand on my back, led me to the highest chair, and sat across from

me. He signaled to a lady-in-waiting, and we began our breakfast.

I have to say, it was super fun eating a meal with Sirius. Although he wasn't the talkative type, he paid close attention to me and made his words count. Plus, he had nice things to say about all the dishes. Maybe it was because he knew I was the one who asked for his breakfast. Living in the capital, I would've bet that Sirius had been eating way better meals every day, so his kindness made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

After we were done, I was sipping on some milk when the sound of multiple clattering feet rang out from the entrance hallway.

"Sounds like they're here," Sirius muttered as ten knights cascaded into the dining hall.

"We've finally caught up to you, Vice-Commander! We're begging you, please stop going ahead by yourself! Our job is to protect you, so what are we supposed to do if you go off alone?!"

"It's fine," he said. "I'm not injured."

"Glad to hear it, but that's beside the point!"

As I sat there, overwhelmed by the sudden commotion in the hall, the ladies-in-waiting appeared out of nowhere and started setting down cutlery.

"You don't have to worry yourselves over these knights." Sirius swiftly attempted to stop the women, only for the head lady-in-waiting to take a step forward and bow her head to him.

"I am sorry to refuse your request, Your Excellency," she said, "but their meals have already been prepared. I hope they can partake while it is still fresh."

As Sirius gazed suspiciously at the head lady-in-waiting, the knights behind him cheered.

"Woo-hoo! It was worth dragging ourselves through the cold for this!"

"What an honor for Her Highness to invite us to breakfast! It would be rude to refuse!"

Then one of the knights turned to look at Sirius. “Don’t be so on edge, Vice-Commander Sirius. Anyone would have guessed that we’d be trailing you! Nobody in your position would move alone, you know? Yes, anyone could predict that the expendables would struggle to keep up... Oh man, saying it out loud is making me tear up.”

After that, the knights turned back to me and bowed politely.

“Your Highness, we thank you for your generous breakfast invitation! We truly didn’t expect such good fortune.”

“We got going as soon as the sun rose this morning, so we are positively starving! Thank you so much for your kindness and consideration, Princess Serafina.”

The knights sat where they pleased and eagerly dug in. They talked a lot and ate just as much. I’m pretty sure each one of them scarfed down about ten times more than what I could. The chefs prepared a feast, thinking that the knights wouldn’t be able to eat all of it, but by the end, they cleared their plates and then some.

Later on, I heard that the chefs moaned at the empty plates: “Ugh, we lost! But it’s nice that they ate it all up!”

After breakfast, Sirius took me to the reception room. We sat facing each other on opposite sofas, a table in the middle of us.

In the silence, I felt Sirius’s gaze on me. Just like before, the spirits never rose above his mouth, which made his expression hard to make out, but I could sense his eyes focused on me.

As I fiddled with my dress sleeve in discomfort, Sirius began to speak. “There’s no way to sugarcoat what I’m about to say, so I’ll just give it to you straight. Your father, King Procyon, asked me to come here. He is concerned for you, not as a king but as a father. He sent you to this forest hoping that your eyes would heal, but he misses your presence and cannot stand the loneliness any longer. That’s why he has asked me to bring you back to the castle.”

I rubbed my hands together in hesitation.

You see, when I first came to this villa, my entire world was in darkness. The knights and ladies-in-waiting wanted to shut me inside because they wanted to keep me safe. But when the forest beckoned for me when I was three, I witnessed something other than darkness for the first time: the white light of the spirits. To me they were a light of joy in my dark world. I lived with the spirits that day forth, grateful that they showed and taught me so much.

But they only lived in this forest.

If I went to the capital, I would have to part ways with them and be all alone. But if I rejected my father's wish to see me, I would be a terrible daughter. I stayed silent, unable to respond to Sirius.

Eventually, I sensed him standing up from the sofa. He walked around the table and sat down next to me before he lifted me lightly from my seat and placed me on his lap. My head fit snugly against his chest, and he wrapped one of his arms around my back. My jaw dropped in surprise, but he didn't stop what he was doing.

Since I'd always lived away from my family, I couldn't remember ever being held like this by a relative before. And because I was a princess, my knights and ladies-in-waiting only touched me when it was absolutely necessary, like when they were guarding me or changing my clothes.

This was the first time, for as long as I could remember, that someone had ever touched and held me outside the line of duty.

I was so shocked by the touch that my entire body stiffened, but Sirius didn't seem to notice. "The king doesn't know that you are happy here," he went on quietly. "He called you back because he imagined that you were lonely living so far away from the capital by yourself... He had your best interests in mind. If you're happy staying here, then I can tell His Majesty your wish."

"What?! R-really?" I asked, surprised.

Sirius must have noticed from my hesitation that I wanted to stay, but my father *was* the king. I didn't think that Sirius could go against his orders.

Sirius smiled reassuringly. "Of course. We've been friends for a long time. A knight must use their full authority for a friend."

“Wow!” That was a surprise.

“Sorry, I was just making a bad joke,” Sirius said apologetically. “The king wants you to be happy, so I just plan to tell him that you’re happy here. That said...we didn’t know what a fulfilling place this was for you, and you don’t know what the castle is like either.”

“Yeah.” Sirius was right; I didn’t know any different.

“So how about you visit the castle once and see for yourself what life is like there? Who knows, you might like it more. But if you do find yourself preferring life here, then I’ll deal with your father, mother, and siblings, and I’ll bring you back.”

“Whoa...”

Sirius’s proposal was brilliant. He made sense, and he was so kind and considerate too. At first, he told me that the king was lonely, but as soon as he found out that I wanted to stay here, he completely stopped talking about Father’s feelings. He didn’t want me to blame myself for wanting to stay, even if it meant not being with Father.

Sirius was such a kind person, thinking so far ahead in just a short amount of time. A warm, fuzzy feeling grew in my chest, but I still wasn’t able to give him an answer straight away. He put a hand on my head in reassurance.

“I would like to accompany you back home, but I don’t think you should rush such an important decision. I’ll stay here for a while, and you can tell me what you want to do when it’s time for me to leave.”

I didn’t fully grasp it then, but Sirius was from the kingdom’s most important noble family, and he was very busy as a knight brigade vice-commander. His time had to be extremely valuable. Even just making the trip between here and the distant capital was a big strain on him, but he decided to extend his stay because he didn’t want me to make a quick decision that I could regret later.

I didn’t know any of that, though. I was just happy to have him around for a while longer.

“Sorry, Serafina.” His lips twisted in self-deprecation. “I didn’t know you were happy here until I actually saw you. I want to see for myself how fulfilling this

place is for you and make sure the king gets an accurate picture. Even if you do decide to live in the capital, I'll tell the people there how much this place means to you."

"Really?!"

I was so shocked that I couldn't think of what else to say. He was still finding new ways to surprise me with his kindness. He was telling me that, no matter what choice I made, he would make sure the happiness I felt right now would be understood by my family.

Yeah, anyone would look up to him.

It was incredible how he was so kind to a little girl he had just met. After just a few hours with him, Sirius was already my hero.

From that day forth, Sirius and the ten knights lived at the villa. Fortunately, the rustic villa had plenty of rooms, so there was no problem finding space for everyone.

The knights insisted that they provided ingredients for their meals, so they went into the forest every day to hunt. They always came back with so much meat that the chefs had to work hard to cook it all. "You'll never be able to finish all this!" the chefs would say smugly as they put the dishes on the table, only to keel over in shock when the knights packed it all away. This was a common sight over the next few days.

Sirius never went hunting with the others, though—he spent most of his time with me. To be specific, he went into the woods and watched from afar as I played with the spirits—although like the others, he couldn't see them. I have no idea how I looked, muttering and murmuring to what must have seemed like my imaginary friends.

He also told me all kinds of stories about the capital. "I have my own room in the castle. If you come to the capital, we can still chat like we do now," he said, which gave me an image of what life was like over there. Sirius was giving me all the information I needed to make my decision, it seemed.

One bright and sunny day, I was sitting under a big tree in the forest with Sirius, enjoying the light breeze.

“Your intuition is very sharp, Serafina,” he muttered.

“Hm?”

“I heard that on the day we arrived, you told a lady-in-waiting to prepare breakfast for eleven people. That sounds like more than just a good intuition, but I have no other way to describe it. And from what I’ve seen, you haven’t taken a single tumble. It’s strange—even though you’re blind, you have no problem avoiding obstacles in your path.”

I wanted to explain that the spirits were helping me, but I hated the thought of him brushing it off as a kid’s imagination, so I kept my mouth shut.

Over the past few days, Sirius had told me a lot of things I’d never heard before. He said it was common knowledge that spirits always took on an adult form and anyone could see them. Also, it seemed no one could understand the spirit language.

When he told me that, I finally understood why my knights and ladies-in-waiting called the spirits around me “unseen blessings,” no matter how many times I explained that I was being helped by a bunch of spirit children. The beings I spoke of sounded completely different from the spirits everyone else saw and knew. They all thought that I couldn’t possibly be seeing spirits.

I told Sirius what he already knew. “I’m being helped by *unseen blessings*.”

Sirius knew that I’d been insisting that the blessings were actually spirits, but he didn’t bring that up at all. “I see. You’re loved by the land.” He smiled gently. “I’m impressed at how something in this land can know and trust you so well. I’d say it’s proof that you’re a lovable person.”

He looked around the forest. “I’ve never seen such a mysterious forest—it’s huge, yet there isn’t a single monster. I’ve been strolling around day and night trying to find a reason for this, but it looks no different from other forests.”

“I wonder if it’s because...the spirits have been protecting the forest?” I voiced my theory timidly.

According to Sirius, every spirit who had a pact with a saint had an adult form. But spirits had childhoods too, and they needed a place where they could grow. This forest was probably that place. It would explain why nobody else was able to see the spirit children—they were keeping themselves hidden so that they could survive into adulthood. Maybe I would never have been able to sense them if I had proper eyesight. And maybe the reason why there were no monsters was because the adult spirits were protecting the children from danger.

“An interesting theory. I’m sure you already know this, but they say the royal family’s great ancestor is the Spirit Lord. The villa was built all the way back in those days. The Spirit Lord chose this forest, vowing that it would never be overrun... I wouldn’t be surprised if the spirits were protecting this place.”

“Oh, wow.”

I’d never heard this story before, but it did explain why the spirit children would be here.

Sirius went on. “That might be why the forest has taken a liking to you. You may not be able to see it for yourself, but you have beautiful red hair, the likes of which is rarely seen. The spirits are fond of red hair, so I think that seeing you made them want to protect you.”

“Maybe...”

“Not every saint fights on the battlefield. There are many who heal the wounded or specialize in making healing potions. Those are some possibilities for you.”

My chest tightened in pain at Sirius’s gentle words. He was telling me that I could be a talented saint out of pure kindness and consideration. But if a saint was what they called a woman who could heal the sick and injured—or one who formed a pact with a spirit—then *I already was a saint*.

I remembered what Sirius said before, about his work as a knight. “You said that, because you’re the vice-commander, you fight for everyone. If there are saints who fight in battle, does that mean you fight with them?”

“Yeah. Usually, I escort them to the field. The basic unit has five knights and

one saint. People tell me that I'm not good at dealing with saints, though, so they don't want to team up with me."

"Oh, really?"

Sirius was so, so nice. I couldn't imagine why the saints wouldn't want to fight alongside him.

My confusion must have shown on my face, because Sirius smiled awkwardly. "I'm told I ask for the impossible," he answered. "My top priority as a knight is defeating the enemy quickly and making sure as many people survive as possible. I tend to tell the saints what they could do better, and they typically don't agree."

"They don't like your advice?" I asked, thinking that his priorities were pretty reasonable.

Sirius shook his head. "No, we're all on the same page. It's just that my expectations are unrealistic, they say. I'm a knight, not a saint. I don't understand what they have to go through, but here I am telling them how to do their job. That's why they're mad, they tell me."

I cocked my head, not really understanding what Sirius was getting at.

"For example," he explained, "I'd say something like, 'Why don't you take two more steps forward so you can use your magic on all the knights?' and they'd reply, 'We don't need to cast magic on all the knights.' They have their own way of doing things that's tried and true. They learn all the tricks of their trade in a unit called the Fourth Saint Knight Brigade... My suggestions would go against what they learned there, apparently."

"Oh, I see."

Judging by what Sirius said, I still thought he was right, but I guess the saints had their own way of going about things too.

When I fell quiet, Sirius took my hand. Maybe he thought my silence meant I was feeling down. "Serafina, I'm sure you'll find a role that suits you perfectly," he insisted. "Your blindness might limit your options, but there are still many things you can do."

When I realized that he was comforting me, I turned my head in his direction. “Sirius,” I said, my voice firm and clear. “I’m not upset about not being able to see.”

“Oh?”

“I think my blindness is a blessing. Blocking my eyes is what makes me able to see the important things.”

I was certain that I was able to sense the young spirits *because* of my blindness.

“Huh. You’re a wise one.”

That was all Sirius said as he stroked my head with his large hand. It felt nice, so I stayed quiet and let him keep doing it to me. Sirius stopped speaking too, and for a while we listened to the sounds of the gentle breeze. It reminded me of how we were silent like this on the day we met as well. Back then, I thought the silence was uncomfortable, but it felt completely different now. Now I knew that doing anything with Sirius was fun.

We enjoyed the comfortable silence for a while after that, taking in the sounds of the wind...

“Princess Serafina, we found some rare fruit in the forest! This is called the ‘Sweet Red Fruit.’ Usually it’s bitter, but sometimes it can be unbelievably sweet,” said a knight as he placed five pieces of fruit into my palm.

“Hey, quit it! You’ll traumatize Princess Serafina if you give her a bad one.” Another knight snatched away all the fruit I’d been given.

“Okay, then how about this scone? They’re going to be today’s snacks, but I was able to pinch one from the food tasters.”

“Hold up! That was meant to be tested for *poison*! Why are you serving it to the princess?!”

“Ack! You’re right!”

The knights kept handing me food and taking it away, squabbling all the while. I could feel my cheeks about to burst from grinning. The knights were always

cheerful and trying to make things fun for me—it made me really happy. Some of the ladies-in-waiting disapproved and thought they were being too casual with me, but I was just a kid, so of course people wouldn't be overly formal.

After chatting happily for a while about food, the knights started talking about Sirius.

“Vice-Commander Sirius is vital to the knight brigade. Without him, the knights would just be a disorderly rabble since we're all prone to doing our own thing. We need a person with a strong presence to keep us in line and tell us what to do.”

“But his standards are way too high for the rest of us. He makes the right calls, but nobody can live up to his demands.”

“If nobody can meet his standards then his idealism is merely wishful thinking. Oh, I'm just talking about the knights and the saints here. Although it might also apply to his love life, given his looks.”

This reminded me of how the spirits only lit up Sirius' mouth. But his looks didn't matter to me at all because he was so kind and well respected by the other knights.

“I think Sirius is wonderful. I'd love to be able to fight with him,” I muttered.

The other day, when Sirius encouraged me to become a saint, he mentioned that saints and knights fought together on the battlefield. If I ever became able to see and trained to become a good saint, then I might be able to fight alongside him one day.

Maybe I was attached to that possibility because I was looking for ways to keep Sirius in my life in the future since he was going back to the capital soon. He never directly mentioned it, but I sensed that we would soon be saying goodbye. He was an important person who juggled so many different jobs, but he'd been staying with me for nearly ten days now. Any longer and he would be letting down all the people who relied on him.

Ah, I really am blessed to have met Sirius, I thought as I walked through the forest.

Seven and a bunch of other spirits joined me, and I chatted with them as we

took a nice walk to the lake. Whenever I spoke with them, the others thought that the “blessings” were communicating with me, so they gave me some space.

My guards for today were a couple of knights who came with Sirius from the capital. They made sure to keep their distance as they watched over me.

I sat by the edge of the lake in the Forest of Lent and scooped the water into my hands. The water here was said to improve your health, and even though it never had any effect on my eyes, I still drank it out of habit.

Later, I was sitting in the shade under a tree, thinking that today was awfully hot, when a cold chill suddenly ran up my spine.

“Huh? Wh-what is this feeling?!” I let out a frightened yelp. I’d never experienced anything like this before, so I had no idea what was happening.

Seven instantly jumped out in front of me. *“Fi! Are you okay?!”* He looked around to see if everyone around me was fine and then said frantically, *“You have to hurry back to the villa! Monsters have gotten into the forest!”*

“Whaaat?!” I cried in shock.

I’d never seen a single monster in all my years of being here. In fact, I’d never seen a monster in my entire life. I knew that something major had happened, and my heart began to race.

I began pacing around in a panic, which caused my guards to sharply question me. “Princess Serafina, is something the matter?”

“Monsters! They might be in the forest!”

When I let them know what Seven told me, the knights gasped in surprise. One of them crouched in front of me and spoke. “Princess Serafina, this is an emergency. May I have your permission to carry you?”

“S-sure.”

From his voice, I knew that it was Xeno, one of the knights who came with Sirius.

As Xeno lifted me up, one of the other knights blew a horn to signal an emergency. The shrill noise rang out while Xeno clutched me and began running for the villa.

“The monsters are plant-types,” a floating Seven explained to me as he kept pace with Xeno. *“I’m guessing that birds dropped a bunch of monster seeds in here. They’re not considered threats when they’re just seeds, so that’s what got them through the spirits’ barrier and into the forest. And thanks to the heat today, they all sprouted at once.”*

“Oh, no!”

“You sense it too, right? The monsters are getting stronger. They’re the type to grow superfast.”

I blinked, startled. It was just as Seven said—the bad energy in the forest was growing stronger. A wave of sickness unlike anything I had ever felt before washed over me.

Just then, Xeno came to a halt. I heard the other knights’ footsteps stop as well. I looked up warily and could sense some kind of *creature* was moving in front of us.

This was bad, no doubt about it.

“Seven?” I called out hesitantly.

“Yup,” he said tersely before launching into an explanation on what I couldn’t see. *“There are monsters in front of us. They look like carnivorous plants with long vines, and they’re twice as big as the knights. There are five, six, seven of them—and five more behind us. We’re surrounded.”*

“But they’re plants...”

“That’s just their type. They’re monsters, so they can move around. Worse, this species is really fast.”

While Seven was explaining this to me, I heard the sound of swords being drawn from their sheaths at multiple points around me. There was a loud *crrrrk*, as if the swords were striking the plants, followed by a harsh metallic noise.

I held my breath at the sudden start of battle. I heard a whoosh, as if

something had just gotten slashed.

Soon after, the knights started crying out in pain.

“S-Seven?” I asked, my voice trembling.

After a short silence, Seven responded in a strained tone. *“The knights are in a bad position. The monsters are strong, and there are a lot of them. They’re steadily closing in on us too. I dunno how we can get out of this.”*

At that moment, I felt a rush of wind near my face, accompanied by a sharp whipping noise.

Some kind of liquid splattered on my face, and the knight carrying me groaned in pain.

“Xe...Xeno?” I shakily called out the knight’s name.

Xeno replied with ragged breath. “My shoulder took a wee bit of damage. We’re in a bit of a pickle—I can’t find an escape route.” He paused. “You’ll have to wait until help arrives from the villa.”

“That won’t be easy,” was my immediate thought. The lake was located deep in the forest, much too far from the villa for anyone to come help us right away.

What was I to do? I was sure that pretty much every knight here was injured, and none of them could use healing magic—only me.

“Let me down, Xeno.”

Knowing this, I *had* to help the knights. It was a saint’s role to save people.

“Xeno, please! You can’t dodge the monsters while you’re carrying me. You have to hold your sword to protect me.” When I changed my wording to sound more reasonable, Xeno finally lowered me to the ground.

But...I couldn’t see. When I decided to help the knights, I didn’t know where they were, or where the enemy was. I strained my ears, trying to work out where everyone was standing, but all I could hear was a stream of painful cries. My stomach twisted in panic and confusion.

“Oh, Sirius!” I muttered the name pleadingly, without even thinking.

And then...

“Serafina! Are you okay?!”

Unbelievably, Sirius’s voice came ringing back.

“What? S-Sirius?!”

My voice came out sounding hoarse, but luckily Sirius seemed to notice me. “Serafina, it’s going to be okay!” he said reassuringly. “Leave it to me. I’ll be there with you in a bit!”

Oddly enough, just hearing that put me at ease.

Even though the villa was so far away, Sirius realized the danger and arrived faster than anyone could have imagined. He did the impossible, and now that he was here, I knew I would be just fine.

But of course, things weren’t so simple. At some point, more monsters had joined the first twelve. As if to affirm my fears, I heard the sounds of bodies being pierced from all directions, plus the knights crying out in pain. This was followed by Sirius’s unending assurances of “You’ll be okay” and “This will be over soon.”

I clenched my hands together, breathing in and out slowly, and went back to focusing on my surroundings. Although Sirius’s appearance had changed the situation for the better, I could sense that the knights were still getting hurt.

I wanted to help them, even if it was only a tiny bit. I was a saint, after all.

As soon as that thought ran through my head, everything around me fell into a hush. I tried to figure out what was going on, but since there was no sound, I couldn’t tell what had happened.

Later on, I heard that the monsters surrounding the knights stopped in unison at that moment. The knights had readied themselves in preparation for some kind of attack—and that was when the monsters all began spewing pollen at the same time.

“Ahh?!”

Even without my eyes, I could tell that a strong magic spell had just activated—a status affliction.

Every knight in the area got paralyzed. The tiny pollen-like magic invaded their

bodies and froze them in place instantly. The seriousness of the affliction depended on how tough the person was and how much pollen fell on them, but over half the knights were unable to move at all.

“Urk...!” “Argh!” They groaned.

“Hold your breath!” Sirius’s voice rang out. “Don’t inhale the pollen!”

“*Oh, good,*” I thought. The sound of his strong voice relieved me. It meant that he hadn’t taken too much damage.

But the situation was definitely getting worse by the second.

“Serafina, hold your breath as much as you can!” Sirius called out to me as he struck a monster.

I was worried that I might take a lot of damage because I was so tiny...but since I was a saint, my body automatically cured any paralysis I received. I could defend myself against the affliction before it even affected me. This meant that I was as healthy as ever. I concentrated hard on my surroundings—my head was shouting that I had to do *something* for the knights who were protecting me.

But there was a part of me that wanted to start crying.

Because, just like before, I couldn’t tell who was injured, who was in danger, or even where the knights and enemies were. A blind girl like me couldn’t save her knights.

For the very first time, I cursed my inability to see.

Since I’d been blind from birth, I’d always thought of it as normal. My condition made it possible for me to sense the spirits, which made it easier to accept. Only now did it occur to me that my abilities weren’t enough. It wouldn’t have mattered if all I wanted to do was just survive, but I wanted to be a saint. I needed my eyes to see the battlefield if I was going to save those knights.

There was no wavering in my mind at that moment. The answer came to me right away...

I’ll be a saint and save those knights.

That feeling was stronger than anything in the world.

I reached my hands out to the sky and spoke in the spirit language.

“O Spirit Lord, I thank you for all the blessings you have given me. You have been so gracious with me.”

As the sky swallowed my voice, multiple peals of light began glimmering around me. They belonged to Seven and all the other spirits.

“Serafina understands us, Your Majesty.”

“Serafina can speak with us, Your Majesty. That voice you hear is hers.”

“Please show Serafina this beautiful world, Your Majesty.”

Somewhere far, far above me, all the way beyond the sky, I felt someone break out into a smile. And then something bright and glittering came falling from the heavens. The moment the light touched my eyelids, the weight over my eyes disappeared, and the block in my vision vanished in an instant.

For the first time in my life, I opened my eyes.

Although I didn’t mention it when I was talking with Sirius, I vaguely suspected that the root cause of my blindness was a “blessing”—specifically, a blessing from the Spirit Lord. I thought this because the spirits had been teaching me how to control and use my power, and I was secretly casting heals on my knights and ladies-in-waiting. I knew exactly how to cure my eyes, but the spell never worked on them.

In other words, a force way stronger than my magic was sealing my eyes shut. Since I was a member of the Náv royal family, I had the Spirit Lord’s blood in me. There was no way he would curse his own descendants, which meant that my blindness only *seemed* unfortunate at first glance. It was actually a blessing from the Spirit Lord himself in disguise. I learned to sense the young spirits because of my blindness, and thanks to that, I also learned to speak their language.

Once, when I told a physician about my “unseen blessings,” he said, “Any part

of you will wither if you have no use for it. Your ears are the same. For example, the Arteagian language has many sounds that don't exist in our language, so an adult who hears their language for the first time won't be able to pick up on those unique sounds very well. That is because our language has no need for them, and so over a long period of time, they become impossible to hear. I suspect that you are able to hear these 'unseen blessings' because you are young, Princess Serafina."

The Spirit Lord had connected my world to that of the spirits. As the warmth of gratitude gushed through my heart, I opened my eyes for the first time and took in the world...

"Serafina?!" Sirius cried out in surprise when he saw me.

His reaction made sense since large tears from my newly opened eyes were streaming down my face...

"Sirius, the world is so pretty..." After everything that had happened, that was all I could say.

The only world I had known was one of darkness and occasional spots of white light. But the world was actually *full* of light, with blue skies and lush green trees. And the people were all unique, from their body types to their sparkling different hair colors. I'd never known that the world could be so beautiful, so diverse.

"I... I want to protect this beautiful world. Oh, now that I know how beautiful it is, I..."

I snapped my eyes wide open so that they could take in all the sights around me. I stood here as a saint, sworn to protect this beautiful world.

I gazed at Sirius with sorrow. My vision showed me all the knights who were injured because I acted too late.

"Sirius, I am a saint."

"Yes, you are." Sirius agreed without hesitation. He couldn't understand me when I spoke in the spirit language, so he must have thought that I cured my

eyes by myself.

“Please let me help, Sirius,” I begged him. “I know I’m in the way because I’ve never fought before, but I want to protect the knights.”

Sirius’s eyes widened at my dead serious expression before nodding firmly.

“Okay. Thank you, Serafina.”

He was probably able to say this because of his great strength. He could defeat every monster here by himself—just at the cost of many injured allies.

Wanting to repay his kindness, I opened my eyes even further and carefully looked around the scene. It felt strange taking in a bunch of information just by opening my eyes—like how many opponents were present, how many people were on my side, and how strong they all were. I understood it all instinctively.

As I scrambled to sort all of this information in my mind, I looked at Sirius. Even suffering with a paralysis affliction, the brave knight was incredibly strong. He could cut down every foe who came his way. Because he was strong enough to protect me—all of us, rather—he took on more of the burden, more of the wounds. In his kindness, he even prioritized my wish.

Sirius knew the battlefield far, far better than I did. A saint at her first battle was practically a useless baby. And yet he let me do as I wanted without even a frown—because he respected my desire to move forward.

Oh, my knight. My kind and thoughtful knight.

I so desperately wanted to protect him.

I stood behind all the knights so that I wouldn’t drag them down. Since I’d never fought with them before, I didn’t know how they did things. I wouldn’t want to get in their way, but I didn’t want to get separated from them either, so I made sure not to stand too far back.

Sirius sighed in relief when he saw where I had positioned myself. He wanted a first-timer like me to be in a secure place where he could protect me. That only made sense, of course. He didn’t know that I had a pact with a spirit, so he had no way of figuring out how strong I was as a saint. He was treating me the

same way he would any saint on her first mission.

“I’ll help you out, Fi.”

Seven’s voice rang out as he appeared in front of me.

“Oh, Seven.”

It was my first time actually seeing my contracted spirit. He was a boy with mottled green hair who looked about the same age as me. He gave me a cute smile and waved both his hands casually, likely knowing that this was the first time I had laid eyes on him.

Looking at him took me back to the days we spent together in training. Day after day he was at my side, teaching me what it meant to be a saint. Healing the wounded. Reviving the fallen. Curing the sick. Making potions for light injuries. I thought that this was everything a saint did, but Seven and the other spirits taught me otherwise.

A saint...

Could remove status ailments like paralysis and charm. Cast buffs to increase speed and attack power. Wield defensive spells to ward against physical or magical attacks.

That was the true might of a saint.

I could use those spells because the spirits had taught them to me over the years. By drawing upon Seven’s strength for them, my powers could reach every corner of the battlefield.

“Hi there, Seven!” I called out to him in the spirit language.

This made Seven grin in delight. As he twirled high in the sky, I channeled his power into my spell. As if in response, the pact sigil on the back of my hands lit up—it was bright red, the same color as my hair.

When I was sure that the spirit’s power had been completely absorbed into my spell, I pointed a hand straight up at the air and unleashed the magic at every knight I could see.

“Heal!”

I uttered a single word—but it said everything.

As my voice cried out, a sparkling red light burst out from my hand and fell over the knights. Every wound closed up and completely disappeared before they could even blink.

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

The knights’ eyes widened in shock, which was a natural reaction to what just happened. Their wounds had been no laughing matter; some had broken arms or legs, while others lost chunks of their bodies or had holes in their stomachs. Each and every one of them was well past the point where a simple healing spell would work. At least, it was way beyond what they thought I could achieve without a spirit pact.

I turned to the dumbfounded knights and chanted another spell.

“Shatter the chains that bind and ensnare the knights’ bodies—Paralysis Cure!”

At my words, an explosion of sound rang out across the scene, and the chains around the knights’ bodies fell away. With that, it dawned on the knights that their status affliction was cured, and they blinked in confusion.

“Wha... Whaaaat?!”

The knights looked like they didn’t have the foggiest idea what had just happened. They patted themselves all over, swung their arms around, and stared in puzzlement at their healed bodies. Slowly but surely, they turned to me with questioning eyes.

But I didn’t have the time to answer them—I still hadn’t finished casting all the spells they needed. I held my hands over the knights to give them protection.

“Bequeath impenetrable armor upon these knights’ bodies—Paralysis Defense: +30%!”

The knights gazed at their bodies in shocked silence.

And finally, just to top things off, I chanted one more spell.

“Invigorate! Attack ×2; Speed ×2!”

Every knight’s jaw dropped, including Sirius’s, and they stared at me in utter confusion. Since they were all reacting in the same way, I was worried that I might have done something wrong. I had no experience fighting as a saint, so I must have made a rookie mistake if I was surprising all those veteran knights. Clenching my dress, I furrowed my brow and gloomily gazed back at them.

Sirius was the first to return to his senses. “Serafina, what did you do?!” he demanded sharply.

“Er, um, I used a saint’s supporting magic!” I insisted. I wanted them to know that, even if the outcome wasn’t what they expected, I had tried to do what I could in my role.

For some reason, everyone frowned very deeply. A profound silence filled the battlefield.

Then the knights around Sirius started scratching their heads in disbelief. “No, Serafina, you’re mistaken!” they roared. “This isn’t saint magic!”

“Paralysis Cure?! Paralysis Defense?! Invigorate?! None of those are saint spells! Those spells have never existed before! Nobody’s ever heard of them!”

“Princess Serafina, have you gotten saints mixed up with almighty goddesses?!”

At that last knight’s words, the commotion ground to a halt. “Oh, right! This is all a misunderstanding!” they agreed.

Then one of the knights bowed his head very low and shouted, “Princess Serafina, we are ever so grateful for your miraculous defense! I still don’t understand what’s happening, but I do know that I’m a new man! My body is patched up, and I feel so strong I can hardly recognize myself! We are definitely going to win now! O Mighty Saint of Crimson Hair, I vow to bring you victory!”

The other knights spoke similarly. “We shall bring victory to the Crimson Saint!”

With a bold declaration so loud the leaves trembled, the knights threw themselves onto the monsters with surprising vigor. Yes, I knew I had cast a buff

on them, but the difference was so big it was like they were a completely new team. After a series of slashes and stabs, the monsters fell one after another. It was all so one-sided—not a single one of the knights even suffered a scratch.

“W-wow! You’re so strong! No wonder you’re knights of the kingdom!”

The knights cleaned up all the enemies as I watched on in wide-eyed wonder. Within practically seconds, the knights and I were the only ones left standing.

Thanks to the efforts of our kingdom’s brave knights, the monsters were gone in a flash. I gazed at the knights in wonderment as they approached me wordlessly.

“Everyone was super strong!” I said excitedly to Sirius, who was closest to me. “And they’re so nice for looking out for me since I don’t know much about being a saint! I can’t imagine how hard everyone must have worked to make sure I didn’t have to do too much. I mean, nobody got hurt at all after I joined in!”

But Sirius frowned. “What are you saying, Serafina?!” he shouted incredulously. “The reason everyone fought like demons is because of your spells! I’ve never heard of them before—what in blazes were they? Who in blazes are *you*?!”

Sirius spoke much more roughly to me than he did before. I’d noticed he’d been blunt throughout the battle, but I thought that he would go back to his usual fatherly tone once things were over. The fact that he was still talking roughly made me feel like he’d accepted me as one of his team. What a nice thought!

“Heh heh.”

I couldn’t help but smile and giggle, which only made Sirius’s frown deepen.

Behind him, the knights pressed their hands to their mouths. “Oh my goodness! Is that the fabled smile of a goddess?!” they exclaimed hoarsely.

“P-Princess Serafina, are you more than you appear? You look like an adorable little princess, but maybe you’re actually a goddess? Who else could turn us into super soldiers?!”

“You have my worship and adoration! I’m certain I’ll never see magic as mighty as yours again!”

As the knights clapped their hands together and bowed their heads before me, I looked at them and thought, *Oh, I suppose this is what they do after they win a battle.* I glanced around hesitantly, not sure if I was supposed to copy them.

My eyes met with Sirius’s, and I grinned at him instinctively. He bit his lip and knelt in front of me.

“Oh, um...?” I squeaked.

When Sirius came down to my eye level, he spoke in a lower voice than usual. “Serafina, your magic is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It’s truly amazing.”

“Really?!” I jumped, startled. I really didn’t expect Sirius to praise me out of the blue.

Being a gentleman, Sirius did not draw any attention to my awkward jump. He smoothly took my hand and said, “It must have taken an indescribable amount of effort for you to master such powerful magic while blind, and I was ignorant to all of it. Anything I say would only sound frivolous, but I want you to hear me out anyway.”

“Er, um, okay?”

Sirius used a lot of big words that I didn’t fully understand, but I nodded anyway. If he wanted something from me, I would do it.

Then Sirius said something I never expected. “I want you to lend me your strength. Serafina, come with me to the Royal Capital.”

“Whaaaa—?!”

Sirius said he respected my wishes when it came to where I wanted to live, so his forceful request took me by surprise. But as his words sunk in, I could feel my cheeks flush with happiness. This was Sirius’s desire. He knew fighting better than anyone, and he chose to invite *me*—I guess this meant that he valued my ability as a saint. That made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Being blind, everyone had always looked after me, but for the first time ever, I was

being seen as a comrade.

My hand squirmed in his as I tried to figure out how to respond. I had a lot of fun spending time with Sirius and the knights, but they lived in the capital, and I always knew that they would all have to leave one day. I'd been thinking of taking a visit to the castle, like Sirius suggested, but I figured that I would eventually return to the forest.

I'd already accepted that we would part ways, and yet... All of a sudden, it felt so hard to bear. Knowing that now was the time for me to make a decision, my breath was unsteady.

*Ah...*this was going to be the most important choice in my whole life. But I had to pick: Leave the spirits or say goodbye to Sirius and his knights. Which one?

The spirits had been by my side for as long as I could remember, and they taught me so many things. The thought of leaving this place had never once crossed my mind. The land had been so good to me; it had everything I wanted. If I chose to stay and live with the spirits, I'm sure I would be as happy as I'd always been.

But on the other hand...Sirius was so brave and righteous that I was sure he would find himself suffering in more battles, and would come to face greater danger than what he dealt with today. I wanted nothing more than to be at his side and heal him when the time came. We'd only been together for ten days, but I already felt so strongly about him.

Caught in indecision, I gazed up at Sirius. His eyes peered straight back at me, not wavering for even a second. Then, as he clenched my hand, he slowly and deliberately spoke.

"Serafina, let's go back to the capital together. I know that you're happy here. I swear that I'll make you just as happy as this place makes you. So...come with me." He'd said the same thing on that first day of his visit. Oh, he was always as straight and true as an arrow. And his kindness toward me never changed.

As my heart welled with emotion, he continued, "Your eyes have been healed, and you demonstrated a rare power when they did. No matter where you choose to live, people will come for you because they're interested in that power. You used your magic to heal us today, but I'm sure some would try to

take advantage of your compassion. I can't bear the thought of you being in danger somewhere I can't reach you, so let me protect you." He paused and then added, "I'll take you to the capital even if it means kidnapping you."

"Huh?" My eyes widened in surprise at that last bit. *K-kidnapping is a crime, Sirius!*

But he went on speaking without a hint of shame. "Please, Serafina. Whether you make the decision yourself or I make it for you, you're going to end up in the same place... If you can't choose, then give up and let me abduct you."

Um, hmm... "Let me abduct you?" I understood what he was getting at, but...

As I blinked in confusion, the knights behind me started cheering in excitement. "Oh gosh, is this what I think it is?! My eyes are not deceiving me?! Proposing to royalty in public... Ooh la la, I had no idea our vice-commander was so bold!"

"I'm just blown away! I always thought the vice-commander was scary, but he can be suave when he wants to! I mean, he was always good-looking, but who knew he was such a sweet talker? Gee, I can't imagine how Her Highness can resist his swagger when he gets up close and personal!"

"I've never seen the vice-commander ask for *anything* with such intensity! Princess Serafina might be tiny, but is she a secret seductress?!"

Then every one of them lowered their heads at the same time. "Your Highness, we make the same request! Please come to the capital with us! We'll do anything for you!"

I didn't understand half of what they were saying because there was some slang (I think?) from the capital mixed in, but the knights looked so cheerful and enthusiastic that I couldn't help but giggle.

Sirius looked at my face and immediately scooped me off my feet for some reason. "Ohhh?" I squealed as he stood up.

Since he was so tall, my feet were completely swept off the ground when he carried me. I loved it so much that I let out another giggle.

Sirius gazed back at me with a bright smile. "Then it's settled, Serafina! Your

place is with me. I'll be sure to make you happy."

"Oh my!"

I blinked, completely stunned—who knew the vice-commander of the knight brigade could be so forceful!

"Your eyes are finally open," he went on, unbothered by my surprise. "I'm sure you'll be taking in a lot of new sights. Serafina, I vow to show you what's beautiful about the world. It's what your eyes deserve to see, nothing less."

Wow, Sirius was more overprotective than I thought. Glancing at the knights behind us, they all looked astonished. I guess this meant that the serious Sirius usually didn't show this side of himself.

I faced the doting vice-commander...and gave him a firm no. "Sirius, I don't want to just look at pretty things. I want to see the same things you do."

Sirius's eyes widened in surprise. "You saw that battle. I'm sure you're well aware what kind of life I lead. You say that's what you want?"

"Yes!" I answered emphatically.

Sirius pressed his head against my shoulder as he carried me. "You're full of surprises. Something tells me you'll come to my aid one day...or maybe you already did that when we met. Serafina, are you fine with me taking you to the capital? And never coming back to the forest?" Even though he made a big show of abducting me, Sirius still asked for my opinion in the end.

I nodded firmly. "Yes, Sirius. Let's go to the capital!"

And so I chose Sirius, even if it meant leaving the spirits behind.

As I muttered a farewell in my heart, I felt something like a gentle breeze rustling inside me. How soothing—I knew I'd made the right choice. Something told me that the time had come to "graduate" from this forest. This place was for children; the reason only young spirits lived here was because they all left when they grew up. In the three years I'd gotten to know them, many had already left the forest behind.

And now, it was my turn...

Tears pricked my eyes—it hit me that I was going to have to say goodbye to Seven.

But at that exact moment, Seven appeared out of nowhere in front of me. He floated up to my eye level and grinned when he saw how high I was above the ground. *“Congrats again, Fi! I’m glad your vision was restored! Oh, and if you’re going to the capital, then you can bet on me coming with you.”*

“Oh, wow! R-really?!” I shouted in surprise.

Seven nodded as if it was totally obvious. *“I’m your contracted spirit, Fi. Of course I’m going with you. Besides, if I let you go off by yourself, everyone in the forest would worry themselves sick over you. I’m doing this so our friends can sleep easy too.”*

My face broke out into a smile. Although I was still sad, some of these new tears came out of joy. “Yay! Thank you, Seven!”

“You’re welcome!”

As Seven and I grinned at each other, Sirius spoke up. “Serafina, is that child your spirit?”

“Oh, you can see Seven?” I asked back, startled.

He nodded firmly. “I can. I’ve never seen a spirit child before, but... I see... So he must be an ‘unseen blessing.’ They were spirits all this time, weren’t they?”

“Um...”

“I’m guessing that your spirit used a strong force to conceal himself. He must have purposefully lifted the veil, which is why I’m able to see him now too.”

“Is that what you did, Seven?” I asked, wondering if he was capable of something so fancy.

My spirit shrugged. The fact that he didn’t deny it meant that Sirius was probably right.

“It’s generally accepted that spirits don’t speak... Serafina, can you hear your spirit’s voice?”

“Hm? Um, yes.”

“I see,” Sirius said thoughtfully. “You’re an odd case in more ways than one. I wonder if I’ll be able to protect someone as out of the ordinary as you.”

Anyone could tell from Sirius’s tone that he was joking, but Seven didn’t seem to like the punch line. He let Sirius know his feelings by giving him a big kick to the shoulder.

“S-Seven!” I chided him, shocked. But Seven merely turned away, not looking the least bit sorry.

Sirius tried to smooth things over. “Serafina, don’t be too harsh on your spirit. I’m in the wrong for making a joke in bad taste. He was willing to leave his birthplace to be with you, so of course he would be mad at me for making light of your safety.”

As I eyed Sirius, I got to thinking... I still didn’t know him very well, but I wondered if he was testing Seven in some way. Maybe he said something to make him mad on purpose so that he could see just how much my friend cared about me.

I squinted at Sirius, trying to work out what he was really thinking, but he just smiled cheerfully, pretending not to notice. “All right, let’s all get ready for the return trip! I suppose everyone, including the knights, ladies-in-waiting, chefs, stable hands, and tutors in the villa will come along. There’s no use in them being here without the princess around, after all. Oh, and we’ll take anything they want to bring along. Doesn’t matter if it’s furniture or trees from the garden, it’s in for the ride!”

“By ‘furniture,’ you’re not talking about beds, are you?!” one knight cried in dismay.

“Trees?! Please say you’re joking!” moaned another.

They knew they would get stuck with carrying everything anyone requested.

It truly was an eventful day. When we made it back to the villa, everyone cried tears of joy at how my eyes could now see. And at the end of it all, we started packing our bags for the capital.

Family Introductions

“DON’T BE NERVOUS, Serafina. You’re meeting up with your parents, it’s just been a while since they last saw you. Besides, I’ll be with you.”

“Mhmm...”

I gave a timid little nod and gripped Sirius’s hand tightly as we walked along. The hallway to my royal bedroom stretched on forever, and the walls were lined with knights who towered over me. Sparkly, oddly shaped stones lined my path; my shoes made a loud thumping sound against them.

I squeezed Sirius’s hand harder. This place was completely different from the villa. Only now did I start to regret coming here. Jeez, what was I getting into?

Right up until I went into the castle, I had enjoyed taking in all the new sights without a care in the world.

“Oh, wow! Is that the castle?!” I squealed as I gazed up in wonderment.

“Right you are, Serafina.” Sirius smiled at me.

Everything looked so unusual to my country bumpkin eyes, but Sirius never got annoyed with me. He explained everything, like how the stalls sold everyday necessities, or how the guard tower in the castle was the tallest building in the capital.

“Would you like to go there together sometime?” he would say at the end of each explanation, giving me something to look forward to in the future. The unfamiliar didn’t seem scary at all when I knew he would be there with me.

I was all smiles as I gawked at my surroundings—until I went inside the castle, where everything was completely different.

It was such a grand and splendid place, filled with nobles in equally splendid outfits. I don’t know whether there was some kind of unspoken rule inside of the castle, but everyone had blank expressions, and nobody said a word when

they walked past each other. People glanced at me out of curiosity, but they always looked away without a single word.

Just the tall ceilings and endless space would have been enough to intimidate me, but all of the gorgeous sights made me feel incredibly out of place. As I shuffled along nervously, my feet got caught on something and I tripped.

“Ah!”

Thank goodness Sirius was holding my hand. He kept me steady, so I didn’t end up falling over and making a huge scene. But before I could completely regain my balance, Sirius’s other hand went around my waist. In the blink of an eye, he was practically hugging me.

“Huh?” As I squeaked in surprise, he lifted me up and carried me down the hallway. “S-Sirius!”

The blank-faced knights standing in the hallway widened their eyes in surprise when Sirius picked me up.

“L-let me down, you hear!” I pleaded with him, not wanting to cause a fuss. “A fine knight like you isn’t meant to carry a little kid like me!”

He responded by bringing his mouth to my ear. “Serafina, this is just between us, but I like carrying small children,” he whispered, as if he was sharing a big secret. “But I can’t exactly say that without risking my position, so I’ve never once picked up a child. Let me have this, just for today.”

When he put it like that, I couldn’t turn him down. I ended up being carried most of the way down the hallway like a little doll. It was such a strange experience that my fear of the castle disappeared.

“Tee hee, you’re such a great bodyguard, Sirius!” I giggled, clinging to his neck. Maybe the nervousness was making me act all funny.

Sirius smiled. “I appreciate the compliment, Princess.”

He took me to my royal bedroom, where the king and queen were waiting. When Sirius walked in with me in his arms, the two of them stood up, blinking in surprise.

I didn’t know my parents because I’d been separated from them since birth,

but they clearly knew me. They ran up to me, their faces pale.

“S-Serafina! Are you hurt?!” said King Procyon, a kind-looking man with blond hair and blue eyes who looked about forty years old.

“My goodness, do you need Sir Sirius to carry you?! I hope you are not terribly unwell!” Queen Spica seemed tense. She had auburn hair, green eyes, and also looked around forty.

My parents stopped in front of Sirius and peered at my face. Their eyes widened in amazement.

“S-Serafina, your eyes...”

“My word, they’re wide open! Are you perhaps...able to...?”

The royal couple trailed off into silence, apparently lost for words.

Sirius spoke up. “Serafina is as healthy as can be and not injured in the slightest. And yes, she can see.”

“Serafina!” The king and queen shouted my name, overcome with emotion.

When they plucked me from Sirius’s arms, I felt wet tears plop on my face. I didn’t know who they belonged to.

“Father...? Mother...?”

When I called out to my parents, they lifted their tear-stricken faces.

“Yes, Serafina! I’m your father! I’m amazed you know who I am when we haven’t met since you were born. You must be a genius!”

“Oh, my dear, adorable Serafina. You’ve gotten so big in just six years.”

My heart gushed with warmth at their abundant love. It made me so happy to know that Mother and Father really cared about me. I smiled at them, and they sat me down on the sofa. Well, I was on their laps, not the sofa; they each used one knee to prop me up.



When I was in my new, comfy seat, Mother and Father smiled and stroked my head.

“Jeez, if you were *this* sweet on her, you should have called her back to the castle sooner,” Sirius muttered exasperatedly.

The king looked up. “Yes, yes, but Serafina was blind this whole time!” he retorted. “I never thought a blind girl would be able to put up with life in the castle—you know what it’s like! Anyway, when did she learn how to see?! I never heard a word about this.”

The king stared at Sirius.

“Ah, but of course! Only a prince’s kiss could lift the curse on a fair and beautiful princess! S-S-Sirius! I know that Serafina is simply adorable, but how could you make a move on such a young girl?!”

Whatever the king was imagining, it was making his face turn bright red. Sirius threw him a look of deep annoyance and then said something that only added fuel to the fire.

“You know me better than anyone, Your Majesty. If you say I have a fondness for little girls like Serafina, even if I never knew it till now, then it must be true. I’ll take responsibility, so please give her to me.”

“A-absolutely not...”

As the king shook his head frantically, the queen pulled on his sleeve. “Darling, Serafina’s eyes are golden.”

“That’s beside the point, dea...wait, really?!”

The two of them then squinted at my eyes.

“They *are* golden... ’Tis the Spirit Lord’s blessing!”

I cocked my head, not really getting why the king and queen were so amazed.

“Serafina, the Spirit Lord is the royal family’s ancestor, and he had golden eyes,” Sirius explained. “Though every single descendant receives the special divine protection thanks to the Spirit Lord’s blessing, very few of them have the same eyes as him.”

“Um, Sirius,” the king said timidly, his face apologetic. Though he was still hugging me, his attitude had completely shifted.

Sirius cast him a sharp glance. “What is it? I thought you had no business with a man of my proclivities.”

“Er, um, sorry about that. I completely forgot that you dislike all women, which includes little girls.” The king probably meant that as an apology, though it was probably not a smart thing to say, seeing how Sirius silently glared at him. The king didn’t seem to notice the hostility.

“The truth is there in Serafina’s golden eyes,” he said sheepishly. “No wonder she didn’t open her eyes before. The Spirit Lord must have sealed them while she was young so that she would not see too much.”

He was basically saying, “Sorry for jumping to conclusions.” Instead of answering, however, Sirius picked me up from my parents’ knees and put me on his own.

“Wha—?” I gasped.

“Sirius?!” the king exclaimed at the same time.

Sirius wrapped his arm around my stomach, ignoring us both. “So apparently, despite never knowing it myself, I dislike young girls and grown women. Oh, but for some reason, Serafina’s the sole exception.”

Only when Sirius said this did the king seem to notice that he was mad. “Oh, Sirius, I was just talking hypothetically! Not being a womanizer is a good thing—means you’re a man’s man. Why, if I had your face, I’d be playing around with the ladies every day, but *you’re* married to your sword. Now that’s what I call impressive, even if it does mean your life is a sausage fest. Ha ha ha!”

This was the point where I realized something: *Oh, my father is the type who puts his foot in his mouth whenever he talks.*

Who knew that just talking would stir up so much trouble? As soon as Father mentioned “playing around with the ladies,” Mother’s face turned scary—and Father didn’t seem to notice a thing.

P-please don’t die, I mentally prayed for Father.

Sirius sighed, "You can stop there. I understand what you mean." After many years of knowing him, he seemed to have resigned himself to the king's personality. "Anyway, I agree with you that the Spirit Lord's blessing was likely responsible for keeping Serafina's eyes shut. She opened her eyes to save me when I was in danger."

"*She saved you?*" The king cocked his head in sheer bafflement.

Sirius nodded. "When we encountered monsters in the Forest of Lent, Serafina saved me and the other knights. She is a fine saint."

"Say what?!" The royal couple gaped at the young princess on Sirius's lap.

"I thought there weren't any monsters because of the forest's protection!" the king shouted.

"You're telling me our little Serafina got mixed up in a battle?!" The queen paled.

Sirius explained what he saw at the villa to the panicking couple. It was nice how he made it sound like I did a better job than I actually did, but...his voice was like a lullaby to me. Before long, I was fast asleep.

That night, I ate with my entire family, including Sirius. He stayed with me the whole time I slept and woke me up when it was time for dinner. He took one look at me and said, "You're good to go," before taking me to the dining hall... but I was gobsmacked when I saw myself in the mirror there.

My dress was all wrinkly and my hair was a total mess.

"Noooo!" I shouted in dismay.

Three boys who looked like they could be my brothers were already seated at the table. "Ha ha, you look like a wreck!" one of them called out to me.

"Yeah, I haven't seen such a bad case of bedhead in ages!" said another.

"I'm guessing this is what's hip and happening out in the countryside. You're bound to be behind the times when you live outside the capital for so long."

Sirius must have noticed how the teasing was making me glum because he

shot a glare at the owners of the voices. “You seem to have more than enough energy if you’re running your mouths so much. Care to work it off? I expect the three of you at the training grounds tomorrow at 5 a.m. sharp!”

“What?”

“No!”

“Yikes!”

As my brothers groaned, Mother and Father walked into the dining hall. Now that everyone was here, I stopped messing with my hair and stood in the middle of the room. Then I lifted the sides of my skirt and bowed at the gathering.

“Pleased to meet you all. I’m Serafina, and I’m six years old.”

After a brief moment of silence, Father applauded. “Serafina is such an incredible girl!” he shouted excitedly, a big smile on his face. “Only six, and she can already do a proper curtsy! And her hair is so curly now—she looks like an angel! It was worth having five kids!”

“You’re right, Serafina is already quite the lady,” said Mother.

My parents were soft on my manners because they knew I was blind until very recently, but it still made me happy to hear them praise me. “Tee hee hee.”

When I sat down in my seat, my brothers introduced themselves.

“I’m Vega. First prince. Nineteen years old.”

“Capella. Second prince. Seventeen.”

“Rigel. Third prince. Sixteen.”

Their introductions were very simple, which made me breathe a sigh of relief. Thank goodness it wasn’t too much to remember. Vega was blond, Capella had brown hair, and Rigel was a redhead—got it.

My big sister spoke up next. “I’m Shaula, the first princess, and I’m twelve years old. Your face is ever so adorable, Serafina.”

“Really?!” I gasped, not expecting to hear that at all.

Shaula tilted her head slightly in confusion. “Oh, was that so surprising?”

“I-I mean...I’m not very cute.”

“No way!” Shaula exclaimed. As I lifted the corners of my eyes, she spoke in a scary voice, “Serafina, what makes you think that?”

“Er, um, well...” I glanced up at Sirius.

Then Father spoke in an even scarier voice. “Did you say something, Sirius?”

Realizing that Father thought that Sirius had been mean to me, I waved my hands frantically. “N-no, he didn’t do anything wrong!” But I soon realized I couldn’t say more, because if I said what I really thought it would sound like I was insulting Sirius.

As I sat there listlessly, Sirius peered at my face from where he was sitting next to me. “Serafina, you should speak honestly.”

“But if I do...it’ll make you sad, Sirius.”

“Then just say something nice afterward to make up for it. I’m sadder that you’re keeping secrets,” he declared.

So I steeled myself and said, “I-I mean...you’re ugly, Sirius! And if I compare myself to you, then I’m super ugly!”

For a moment, nobody even reacted to what I said. Then...

“What?”

Everyone’s jaws fell to the floor.

“You’re saying...I’m ugly.” Sirius covered half his face with a hand.

Seeing him look so shaken, I felt really bad. I should have kept my mouth shut.

But before I could take back what I said, Father came to his wits first and burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! So you’re *ugly*, Sirius! Oh, my sides! I have to say, I’ve always been jealous of how good you have it! I told myself it was petty to feel that way about my own nephew, but now look! Ha ha ha, glad to get that out of my system!”

Mother whipped her head up and glared at Father. “You’re past forty, and you’re acting like this? If Sirius is ugly, what does that make *you*, darling?”

Everyone was reacting as if they didn't agree with what I said at all, which really confused me. When I glanced timidly at Sirius, he looked back at me with a straight face.

"Serafina, be honest," he said. "Do you dislike my face?"

"What? No, I love it!"

Even if his features weren't the best from what I'd heard, he was still the coolest to me. He had beautiful gray hair and silver eyes—what wasn't there to love?

"And yet you think I am ugly?" Sirius pressed me, his expression dead serious.

I shook my head quickly. "Oh, no...I've got different standards from other people, so I think you look cool. But Seven said..."

Seven had said that Sirius was "suuuuuper ugly."

I was about to say as much aloud, but then I realized I would be tattling on my friend, so I quickly shut my mouth.

As I gazed up at Sirius, biting my lip in worry, he nodded in understanding. "Oh...now I get it. Your little punk spi—"

But before Sirius could finish, Father's voice boomed: "Serafina, I can't judge a fellow man's attractiveness, but there's no doubt in my mind that you're the cutest in the world!"

"Really?!" I exclaimed in surprise.

Mother concurred. "Your father is right. Serafina, my dear, you *are* the cutest."

"Really? Really? *Really?!!*"

Um, were they saying that just to be nice? That would make sense, right?

As my eyes were glazing over, Mother went on to share something even more shocking. "Besides, you should know that half the women in this country think that Sirius's looks are second to none. He didn't get voted 'Most Handsome Member of the Horned Beast Knights' for three years straight for nothing."

"Oh gosh!"

Wait, really? But didn't Seven say...? *Ah!*

Now it all made sense. That cheeky little—! I should have known he'd tell me the exact opposite of the truth!

"So, um, Sirius is good-looking?"

As I blinked up a storm in confusion, Father reacted with a lightning-fast objection. "Serafina, your mother is exaggerating. Only around two percent of ladies think Sirius is handsome. The knights aren't known for their good looks, you know. The bards are bound to inflate the reputation of anyone who happens to be the best of a bad crop."

"What a petty man you can be!" Mother fumed. "Our girl has only recently been able to see. Don't you dare feed misinformation to a child who's still learning about what's considered good-looking."

Father looked bummed out at what Mother said. He sat in thought for a short while, before finally he reluctantly spoke up, "Okay, Serafina, I'll tell you the truth. The handsomest man in the kingdom is your Father, and Sirius is second. And since you're the spitting image of your good-looking papa, you're the cutest in the world."

I couldn't tell what was true anymore. "Is he right, Sirius?" I asked, looking up at him uncertainly.

Sirius patted my head with his big hand. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so I can't say for certain. But based on my personal standards, you're the cutest person I've ever met."

"Wha—? Whaaaa—?!"

I didn't know how to react to being told straight to my face that I was the cutest. I looked away because my face felt hot.

Meanwhile, everyone else looked stunned. "Did Sir Sirius just tell someone they're cute?" Mother's eyes were wide as dinner plates.

As a matter of fact, so were my big sister's. "Holy cow, Serafina! I can't believe you managed to win over the impregnable Master Sirius in just a matter of days."

Father hurriedly changed the subject. "Okay, let's not wait for the food to get cold!"

And so, the dinner finally started.

Sort of.

When I looked at the cutlery on the table, tears welled in my eyes. There were so many knives, forks, and spoons placed to the left, right, and on top of the plates. What was I meant to do about all of this? Was I supposed to hold two pieces of cutlery in my right hand and three in my left?

Because of my former blindness, I was used to having all my food prepared in bite-sized chunks, and so I only ever needed to use one fork or spoon. And the meals I ate on the journey to the castle were also simple, so I'd never seen so much cutlery before. I had no clue about the correct table manners here.

I racked my brains as hard as I could but only drew a complete blank. As I sat there, defeated, with my hands on my knees, my neighbor reached an arm out to me.

And then, before I could even blink, I was sitting on Sirius's lap.

"Sirius, what are you doing?!"

Father instantly shouted in protest, but when Sirius gave him some kind of signal, his expression softened. "Oh! I-I see," he frowned sheepishly. "Um, Serafina, since you're still so little and all, could you let Sirius help you eat?" Father had probably realized that I didn't know my table manners, so he wanted Sirius to help me out.

Sirius promptly picked out a single knife and fork from the pile of cutlery. He cut the appetizer up into bite-sized pieces and then tried to put one in my mouth... Unfortunately, he didn't take the fact that I was a small girl into account, so I was only able to chomp on half of it even when I opened my mouth wide. Still, I did my best to manage. I closed my mouth and started chewing as best I could.

"Sorry, Serafina." An apologetic voice fell on my ears. "I didn't think you'd

have such a tiny mouth.” Then Sirius glared sharply at all my family members, who were gazing at us in fascination. “Hey, this isn’t a show! Focus on your own food.”

My family hurriedly looked away, only for them to resume glancing at Sirius soon after. I’m guessing this was what they called “morbid curiosity.”

I found myself wondering if I’d failed at the dinner party by not being able to eat by myself. It was a depressing thought, but I still tried to shove down all the food slipping out of my mouth, even if it meant using my hands. I chewed through it as quickly as I could, but just when I thought I’d cleared my mouth, Sirius brought another mouthful to me.

I finished swallowing and then glared huffily up at Sirius.

“What’s the matter, Serafina?” he asked.

“My jaw’s gonna hurt if you make me rush. And you haven’t had anything yet. Feed yourself something, okay, Sirius?”

“Uh, right...” he responded, sounding confused. The next time he put a fork to my mouth, the portion was just the right size for me. After just a few mouthfuls of this, he tilted his head as if he was completely mystified. “These tiny portions hurt your jaw? You’re as dainty as a spirit.”

“No, Sirius, it’s because Serafina is a child,” Father argued immediately. “And besides, even if she weren’t a child, you shouldn’t compare others to yourself. Everyone looks dainty as a spirit next to you!”

After the awkward start, the family dinner got more relaxed as time went on. My family went from observing me and Sirius silently to peppering the dinner with some talk.

From what people were saying, I worked out that, as my three brothers were considered full-grown adults, they belonged to the knight brigades, and they all helped out with government stuff. This was what members of the royal family were expected to do, apparently.

Meanwhile, Shaula had a beautiful mane of crimson hair, which made her a good fit as a saint. She was training hard for that.

“I wanna be a strong saint just like you, Shaula!” I mustered my courage to say.

Sirius wrapped his hand around my tummy. “Serafina, you don’t need to ask your sister’s permission. If you want to be a saint, I can arrange for you to undergo training.”

Shaula’s eyes widened in total shock. “Who are you and what have you done with Master Sirius? You’ve never shown interest in anyone outside the knights. Why are you so devoted to Serafina?”

“I can be nice to kids too,” Sirius mumbled in reply, only for my entire family to shake their heads wordlessly at him.

“Remember when I was born?” Shaula said exasperatedly. “You barely noticed me as a kid.”

“She’s right,” Father agreed. “You’ve only ever paid attention to the knights. What happened to you, Sirius? Did all that overtime mess up your ability to tell knights apart from other people?”

Sirius raised an eyebrow as if to say that comment was uncalled for. “I’m always in my right mind. And anyway, weren’t *you* the one who said I should go around singing Serafina’s praises?”

“Excuse me?! That was supposed to be until you *got* to the castle. And I’ve given you many, many requests before, and you’ve never taken any of them so seriously. What gives?!”

“I’ve always taken things seriously. You know I would never abandon any of my duties.”

As Sirius stubbornly insisted that he was merely carrying out the king’s orders, Father turned to Mother, looking very disgruntled. “Would you look at this? He’s twisting my words so that he has an excuse to look after Serafina! What a sly man.”

But Mother just beamed at him. “Isn’t this a good thing? I don’t know anyone more upright than Sirius. I expect that Serafina will grow up into a proper lady under his care.”

“No, my queen! You’re not seeing the issue! If Serafina spends all her time with Sirius, she’ll have unrealistic standards for men! Why, I suppose she’ll even snub her nose at *me* one of these days!”

Mother said nothing.

“Oof! Don’t give me the silent treatment! Tell me it won’t happen, even if it’s a lie!”

I giggled at the lively dinner table conversation. Who knew that eating with your family could be so fun? I never had a clue about any of this when I was living at the villa.

At the sound of my laughter, Mother and Father stopped their arguing. “Are you having fun, Serafina?” they asked me expectantly.

I looked up at my parents with a smile. “Yup! I’m so happy I got to eat a meal with my family!”

For a moment, my parents looked as if they couldn’t muster any words. Then their faces erupted in smiles.

“We’re so happy too!”

“Yes, let’s make family dinners a priority from now on!”

As my parents nodded smilingly, Sirius’s voice rang out above my head. “Good. You’re finally back in the right place. Welcome home, Serafina.”

I looked directly upward and was greeted with the sight of Sirius’s smiling face. It blew away any worries I might have had about not being able to live in the castle.

“Yes, Sirius!” My heart bubbled with nothing but excitement. “Let’s be together forever!”

I said that without thinking too deeply about it, but it made Sirius’s eyes widen for a moment. And then...

“Yeah. Together forever,” he replied in a deep voice that tickled my chest.

Mother, Father, and Shaula started yelling about something after that.

The “Ugly” Discussion Between Serafina (the Airhead) and Seven (the Schemer)

THE FOLLOWING INCIDENT took place before Serafina became aware that Sirius was not, in fact, ugly.

That day, Seven and I were taking a break on the road to the capital. We passed the time sitting on a large tree branch chatting away, taking turns swinging our legs while the knights rested their horses nearby.

It actually took us days to get to the capital because it was so far from the villa, but we didn’t have any trouble finding places to stay overnight. This was because there were a whole bunch of nobles along the way who were happy to let us sleep in their mansions. Sirius normally used local inns or camped in the wild like he did on his way to the villa. He only took up the offers to stay with the nobles on the return trip so that I could be comfy. Wasn’t Sirius so incredibly thoughtful?

But Seven was just as good to me as Sirius was, so I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“Hey, Seven,” I said casually, as we were sitting on the big tree branch. “You know, I don’t care about people’s looks.”

I mentioned this as an aside in the middle of other topics, but Seven didn’t read between the lines. *“Uh, what are you trying to say?”* he asked bluntly. *“It’s so rare for you to be indirect. Can you just spell it out for me, please?”*

Darn it, and I spent so long thinking about a good way to put it...

“Um, I know you’re not...good-looking...by people’s standards. But I—”

“Uh, hold on a sec!” Seven interrupted me, blinking in surprise. *“Why do you say that?”*

“You know, um, well...” I stammered. “Didn’t you say that Sirius was super

ugly?”

Seven paused. *“Oh, yeah.”* It sounded like he was talking to himself. *“I did say that.”*

“You and Sirius have kinda similar faces in my opinion. If Sirius is ugly, then I guess you would be too?” I said nervously, not wanting to hurt Seven’s feelings.

He seemed to understand what I was getting at, because he said, *“Ah, okay.”* Then he muttered something else that I couldn’t quite hear. Something about “that backfired” and “digging myself into a hole.” He seemed oddly restless, which made me feel guilty.

“Don’t worry, Seven!” I shouted hurriedly. “Looks don’t matter for spirits!”

“Yes, they do!” he retorted instantly. *“We’re the same as demons! Our faces are as perfect and symmetrical as the top rung of humans. You can tell how strong we are from our beauty.”*

“Oh my...”

I had no idea. How was I supposed to cheer up Seven now? What a depressing thought.

As I was racking my brains, Seven muttered something else under his breath. *“Crud! She thinks I’m ugly and weak!”* He spoke so fast that I didn’t quite catch it.

When I looked up, he was smiling in a way that was very obviously forced. *“Of course, the general idea is that an adult spirit is stronger than a child one. But I’ve got enough talent to stand toe to toe with the adults. You can count on my strength for sure, yup!”*

Anyone could see that Seven was powerful. “It’s okay, Seven,” I said soothingly. “I’m a kid too. We’ve both got a lot of growing to do.”

Seven stood up on the branch, looking awfully flustered. *“That’s not what I’m talking about! You’re just feeling sorry for me.”*

“No, no, don’t worry about it, Seven. You can vent your heart out. I’m all ears,” I said, trying to show I cared, but this only made Seven ruffle his hair wildly.

“Okay, fine! I’ll tell you the truth! Sirius isn’t ugly, he’s actually a handsome stud!”

“Oh, Seven, you’re so kind and considerate!”

When Seven first met Sirius, he glossed over the fact that the man had a hideous face because that was “what spirits did to be nice.” And now he was covering for Sirius by claiming that he was a “handsome stud.” A spirit’s kindness knew no bounds!

“I’m so proud to have a pact with such a compassionate spirit.” I was so happy, a smile broke out.

Seven did a nimble somersault on the branch. *“Argh, it’s hard to get you on the right track once you’ve gotten the wrong idea in your head! Now you think I’m praising Sirius just to be nice... All right, fine! Have it your way! Sirius and I are just as ugly as each other!”*

He spoke with a sort of wild desperation.

“You sure are. But I don’t mind one bit, nuh-uh,” I answered gently.

Indeed. After Seven validated Serafina’s assumption, they were back at square one. Serafina came to the logical conclusion that Seven was both ugly and weak. When Seven realized that, he frantically tried to correct her...

“Fi, I take back what I said! I’m really strong and cute, I swear!”

“Of course you are, Seven. I accept everything about you.”

But Serafina’s response made it all too clear that she didn’t believe a word out of Seven’s mouth...

The rest, as they say, is history.

In a showdown between an airhead (Serafina) and a schemer (Seven), the airhead emerged the victor.

Developing the Garden

I WOKE UP ONE DAY bubbling with excitement. From my bed, I could see the beautiful morning rays peeking in through the window. I just knew that today was going to be a great day.

“Hee hee, a perfect day for gardening!” I said to myself as I sprang out of bed.

My personal chambers in the Royal Castle took up three rooms. One of the rooms even had a garden attached—what a lucky girl I was!

I decided to arrange the garden to make it a comfy place for Seven. The flowerbed already had some pretty seasonal flowers, but they weren’t quite his style, so I moved all the flowers to a different garden and started planting a bunch of trees instead. Seven had abandoned the forest he’d always known just to stick with me, so I was determined to give him a garden that reminded him of home.

Today was the day to put my plan into action. I eagerly put on some outdoorsy clothes and boots before heading to my personal garden.

The gardeners were already there, starting their work, even though it was so early in the morning. I hurried over to them and apologized for my lateness. Their job was to help fix up the garden, but they looked confused at how I’d pulled up all the cute flowers a little girl would like in favor of average-looking three-meter-tall trees, all neatly packaged and arranged. When they found out that the trees were taken from the Forest of Lent, though, they helped with the planting, even if they did look uncertain about the whole thing.

When I tried planting some smaller saplings, the gardeners stopped me. “Your Highness, do you really want to have more trees?” they asked worriedly.

“The trees you’ve already planted block most of the sunlight from getting into your room. If you plant saplings here, they will spring up very quickly and make your room dark even in the daytime.”

“We’re no expert in these things, but with the trees covering so much of the princess’s room, it’s hard to see it from the outside. Wouldn’t there be the risk of a thief sneaking in? They could hide out pretty easily.”

“Hmm, maybe.” The amount of sunlight in my room only affected me, so that wasn’t a big concern. As for the security problems... Well, better to ask for forgiveness than permission! “I’ve got it! I’ll plant them before anyone can stop me.”

“What? But that’s...that’s just asking for trouble, isn’t it?!” the gardeners wailed.

After I got them to calm down, we planted as many saplings as we could. I patted the dirt around them, praying they would grow up nice and strong.

When I was done, I stood up, looked around at my surroundings, and scraped the dirt off my hands, satisfied with my handiwork. My face, hands, feet, and clothes were all dirty, but it felt really nice knowing that I’d done a good day’s work.

“Hee hee hee,” a giggle slipped out of me.

A moment later, Seven’s annoyed voice fell on my ears. *“Fi, care to explain what happened to your garden? I take my eyes off of you for just a few hours, and now all the flowers are gone! Why? They were in bloom, weren’t they? This place is practically a gloomy forest now!”*

My cheeky spirit friend was finally back after spending the morning goofing around somewhere.

“Heh heh heh, you’ve got a good eye! Yup, it’s a gloomy forest—a perfect double of the Forest of Lent!” I answered proudly.

Seven’s eyes widened. *“What? You were trying to make the Forest of Lent?! Er, uh, yeah, I kinda see it now that you mention it. The trees are the same ones from the forest.”*

I also heard Seven mutter something about how *“I can’t blame Fi for this when she was blind this whole time,”* but I didn’t pay too much attention to that. I spread my arms and peered at him expectantly. “Yes they are! Aaaall the trees are from the forest—from the ones even bigger than Sirius to the saplings

that are tinier than me. See the biggest tree over there? You were always napping under that one.”

Seven gazed around the garden in wonderment, but when he turned to me, he looked confused. *“Fi, you had such a pretty garden. Why’d you turn it into the Forest of Lent?”* he asked.

I grinned back at him. “So that you could settle in easier, of course! You left the forest for my sake, so I wanted to give it back to you in some way.”

“Fi...”

Seven looked like he was about to cry, which was rare for him, so I gave him a big hug. “I loooove you, Seven! I was super happy when you came with me. So I wanted to make *you* happy too.”

Seven sniffled and wiped his eyes. When he spoke, his voice sounded more cheerful than normal. *“If you want to make me happy, you gotta spoil me eeeeven more! It’s nice knowing that you care.”*

“So what you’re saying is that you love me, huh?”

“So what? You love me too, Fi,” Seven half mumbled.

“You bet I do! You’re my bestest friend,” I said, letting go of Seven’s body so that I could peer at his face.

His eyes and nose were red. *“I got something in my eyes and rubbed my nose too much, that’s all,”* he muttered.

I pretended not to notice, as a proper lady should, and smiled at him. “The other spirits brought a bunch of your favorite trees. Let’s take a look around to see how they’re growing.”

I took Seven’s hand and turned my eyes to the garden.

It was only then that I noticed that the gardeners were staring at me. “What’s the matter?” I asked, tilting my head slightly.

“Who were you, um, speaking to just now, Your Highness?” they asked back, looking awfully nervous. “We didn’t see anyone with you.”

Surprised at the gardeners’ words, I turned to Seven. He was back to sporting

his usual cheeky grin. *"You know how no saint ever has formed a pact with a spirit child? And how saints only meet their spirits for the first time after they summon them? I'm basically the only spirit child with a pact, not to mention that we've been together since forever."*

"Uh-huh?"

"You might draw the wrong kind of attention if people knew about me, which is why I cast a veil so that only you can see me."

"What? You can do that?!"

"Course I can. Remember how the adult spirits can put a veil over everyone in the entire forest? But yeah, it's a tricky spell to pull off by yourself, and it eats up a lot of magic. I reckon I'm the only spirit outside the forest who can do it. Besides, spirits aren't usually joined at their pact owner's hip, so they don't really need a veil to begin with."

Seven went on to explain that most spirits found it boring to stick with humans since none of them other than me could understand the spirit language.

"Oh, so that's the reason why the spirits only appear when the saints call for them?" My eyes widened in surprise.

Seven twirled in the sky. *"That's reason enough, wouldn't you say? Spirits can't stand boredom."*

Speak for yourself, I thought. But anyway...

I turned back to the confused-looking gardeners and pasted a smile on my face. Apparently, it was a bad thing for people to know about Seven, so I had to think of a way to talk myself out of this.

"Er, um...sorry for startling you. You see, uh...I'm always talking to the, um, toys in my room. I have this habit of talking to them even when they're not around."

A look of understanding came over the gardeners' faces.

"Oh, right. Your Highness is only six."

"Ha ha, that's so adorable!"

Oh, phew. They swallowed that one.

As the tension drained out of me, I looked at Seven. He seemed satisfied, like a cat who had just gotten his fill of milk. *“Fi, are you trying to say I’m as adorable as a soft plushie? You bet I am! I’m cute and strong enough to veil myself.”*

My spirit was a bit full of himself...but that was what I liked about him. “Yup! You’re the cutest and strongest spirit in the world!” Giggling, I hugged him again.

Later, after the gardeners left, Seven and I took a slow stroll around the garden. He seemed to like it, saying it was “fun-looking.”

Feeling satisfied, I sat under a tree and began to nod off...only for someone who looked like the head gardener to come by and start yelling something. “I-I-I can’t believe it! How could this venerable castle garden have such plain, ordinary trees?!”

No, he was wrong. Sure, this species of tree was very common, but these were special. They were grown in the Forest of Lent, where they were protected by the spirits.

I knew I had to explain this, but the drowsiness put a clamp on my mouth. Without understanding my feelings, the head gardener, pattered away into the distance in a panic.

Before long he was back, this time with Sirius in tow. My ears picked up the sound of Sirius’s amused voice. “Oh, I get what she did with that tree. Ha ha ha! And she even planted saplings. So she’s planning to turn this entire strip into a replica forest?”

“S-Sir Sirius! This is no time for merriment. How can you stand by and let her turn this elegant garden into a forest?”

“This garden is Serafina’s,” Sirius said crisply. “It’s for her to live comfortably, not for demonstrating elegance. But the poor visibility does create a security threat. I’ll reassign the knights’ positions and take care of it.”

The head gardener seemed to have nothing to say to that. “Very well, Sir Sirius,” he said as his footsteps faded off into the background.

Sirius didn’t seem to notice me dozing under the tree, so he was surprised when he found me as he was surveying my forest. “Serafina, why are you sleeping here all covered in dirt?!”

His tense voice snapped me awake briefly, but my drowsiness soon took hold again. “Well, you know...I get sleepy around trees.”

Sirius couldn’t possibly have understood my half-asleep mumbling...which was why he interpreted my words literally.

That night, a meter-tall potted plant was delivered to my bedroom along with a card that said: “Hope this helps you sleep.”

The sender was Sirius...of course.

As I stared at the gift, dazed and lost for words, Seven hopped around me. I guess it doesn’t need to be said that he was clutching his sides in laughter.

My Personal Knight

AFTER A MONTH of living in the royal castle, I settled into a daily routine: Wake up early—technically, Seven would wake me up to practice healing magic with him—followed by breakfast and lessons with my tutors; a nap after lunch, followed by more healing practice with Seven; then dinner, where I would chat with Sirius; and finally going to sleep while reading a book about magic. That was basically how my days went.

The big changes in my life after coming to the castle were my tutors, being able to talk with Sirius, and the fact that I could read books now. Sometimes, Mother, Father, Shaula, and Sirius took me outside of the castle, but I felt overwhelmed by the complicated things they would explain to me, so we never did anything big.

One day, while we were at breakfast, Father called out my name excitedly. “Serafina, today’s the day you pick your personal knight! Look forward to it—Father’s prepared a special list of candidates just for you.”

Mother and Shaula immediately shot him a glare. “Master Sirius was the one who picked out the elites,” said Shaula.

“It’s pathetic of you to take credit for what your nephew did,” said Mother.

But Father stood his ground. “What are you talking about? I gave the final approval on Sirius’s list, which makes it *my* decision, doesn’t it? And besides, by sheer, pure coincidence, his top one hundred picks were exactly the same as mine.”

“Oh, really now?” The other two didn’t look convinced in the slightest.

Father pouted at their reaction, but he soon turned his attention back to me. “Serafina, you’re free to pick whichever one’s your favorite.”

“Okay,” I chirped happily.

Mother and Shaula looked like they had a bone to pick with Father, but they quietened down after my response. “Well, I’m sure if Sirius vouched for all of

them, then she's fine to have her pick," they muttered under their breaths. "I suppose any one of them is capable."

Members of the royalty had their own personal knight protector, and I was no exception. I would be picking my bodyguard off of a short list of one hundred candidates.

When Sirius took my hand and led me to my personal chambers, I looked up at him excitedly. "I'm getting a personal knight, Sirius!"

"That you are. They'll be there to serve you for life. You should make your choice carefully and pick the best person for you. No matter who you decide on, I'll make sure to assemble the finest royal guard."

"What's a royal guard?"

"It's a group of knights specifically sworn to protect you. Most of the members have been chosen already, but I'll make the final call after I've seen your personal knight. I might have to adjust the team depending on who you choose, since they all need to work well together."

Sirius's explanation was too complicated for me to understand, so I just giggled. Next thing I knew, he reached out to me and lifted me up. Surprised at how I was suddenly off the ground, I looked at him blankly. "Sirius?"

"Didn't the king and queen tell you to watch out for kidnappers because you're too cute?" He grinned mischievously.

Now *that* was funny. "Tee hee. I'll be fine with you around, Sirius," I said, clinging to his neck.

"Oh, I see." He sighed deeply. "You want me to take on some of your personal knight's work. Kidnappers would surely be no threat to you then."

He chuckled as he walked down the corridor, which earned him some bewildered stares from the knights standing on guard duty. Their reaction worried me. *"That's not the first time people have stared like that. Maybe a fine knight like Sirius isn't supposed to spend time with a little kid like me."*

I bit my lip, which prompted Sirius to say, "Are you nervous? Don't worry. I'm

right here.” That made me feel better, at least.

When I entered the hall where I would be making my selection, there was an impressive crowd of knights standing up straight and tall, each body spaced the same distance apart.

Whoa, they’re so cool, was my first thought. Meanwhile, Sirius brought me to a platform, where I could stand and look over the room as a whole. A few high officials were waiting for me there. “Princess Serafina, please state the name of your personal knight,” they told me.

This was easier said than done. Since I wasn’t able to see the knights up close, it was hard to tell who fit best. So I hopped off the pedestal and made my way over to them. The officials let out a cry of surprise behind me, and I could also hear Sirius chuckling. But the main thought in my mind was that I simply *had* to say a proper hello to the knights. I grabbed the sides of my dress and did a curtsy.

“It is nice to meet you all. I am Serafina, the second princess. Today, I shall choose one of you to be my personal knight.” I was just so happy that a giggle naturally came flowing out of me.

My plan was to take my time walking around and looking at all the knights, but my feet came to a sudden halt before I was even halfway done.

I was shocked, you see, because of this one tall and very brawny man with dark-brown skin and navy-blue hair.

“You’re strong... What’s your name?”

“Canopus Blazej, Your Highness,” he replied, sounding very stoic and serious.

I grinned, pleased with his answer. “Canopus, will you be my personal knight?”

Everyone else in the room stiffened in shock, and then the high-ranking officials came hurrying over. “Y-Your Highness, please—this isn’t your personal knight. You have a name already, remember? Go on! Say it, won’t you?”

Oh right, the officials did give me a sheet with a name on it. But...

“Father said I can choose who I want.”

“P-p-perhaps, yes. The name we’ve given you is of course a mere suggestion,” said one official, “but every member of royalty before you has heeded our wisdom in this matter. I implore you to do so as well.”

“Y-yes! And behold the hair, the skin—this man is one of those islanders, is he not?” appealed another. “He lacks the appropriate background to be your knight, Your Highness.”

The officials were very eager to dissuade me, but their words only brought a grin to my face. By “islander,” they were talking about a minority group from the south who had webbed hands that I bet made them really good at swimming. Canopus was sounding more wonderful by the second.

“Thank you for the advice, but I choose Canopus. What say you, Canopus? Will you be my personal knight?”

Canopus glanced at the officials, but he quickly lowered his eyes and got on one knee in front of me—a knight’s salute.

“I, Canopus Blazej, pledge to serve Your Highness Second Princess Serafina Náv with all my being. Glory and blessings be to Your Highness,” he said, his gaze never leaving the floor.

Then he pressed his lips against the sleeve of my dress.

I looked back over my shoulder at Sirius, filled with glee. He took that as his cue to unsheathe his sword with an elegant sweep.

“To guard the royal family, you must be willing to give up your life at any moment,” he intoned as he drew near. “I do hope you won’t place your life before that of Her Highness.”

Then he handed his sword to Canopus.

“Receive this blade and be officially dubbed the personal knight of Her Highness, the Second Princess Serafina.”

And that was how I chose a super awesome person as my personal knight.

Canopus started guarding me the very next day. I already knew he was a great knight from how he swore to be by my side forever, but I was still amazed at how seriously he took his job.

He was so knightly, in fact, that when I tripped in the hallway, he looked so apologetic about it, as if he personally stuck his leg out in front of me. All that had happened though was that I had tripped over my own two feet since I was just sleepy and focused on getting my breakfast. He didn't listen to me when I told him that it wasn't his fault that I stayed up too late and couldn't walk straight—to him, anything bad that happened to me was his responsibility.

This all came to a head one day when three other knights ganged up on Canopus. He was a tall man, but the other knights were just as big. They were in the rear of the castle, in a spot where people rarely ever went.

My first thought was that they were about to have a private chat about something, so I tried to get out of the way quickly. It was no good sticking your nose into other people's business, after all. But when the voices got louder as if they were having an argument, my feet stopped.

"Damn islander! Who do you think you are?"

"Why don't you hurry up and quit already? You know that's what's best for Her Highness!"

The knights were speaking aggressively, yet Canopus wasn't saying a word in response. I didn't think twice about stepping in. "Um...did Canopus do something wrong?" I asked, worried.

The three scowling knights swung around, but they hurriedly dropped to their knees when they saw me.

"Your Highness!"

"Apologies for the unseemly sight!"

The three men shuffled away from Canopus, who'd been pinned against the wall. Canopus straightened himself up and adjusted his disheveled uniform.

I was curious to know what they were fighting about, but nobody said

anything—not Canopus, the three kneeling knights, nor the two guards at my side. A part of me wondered if I had better not say anything either, but I pushed through anyway.

“Did Canopus do something?” I asked hesitantly. “He’s a fine knight, so...I bet it’s my fault if there’s some kind of problem.”

I said that based on past experience, but the three knights wouldn’t stand for it.

“What a ridiculous notion, Your Highness!” they insisted. “The fault surely lies with Canopus! He is an islander, after all.”

“Your personal knight was supposed to be Sargas of the Aldridge marquise! And yet this *commoner* swooped in uninvited!”

I was surprised at how seething they were. “But Canopus has webbed hands. Isn’t that amazing?”

The three knights only scowled at my compliment. “Canopus might have sworn his fealty to you, but a personal knight is not a mere bodyguard, Your Highness!” they retorted.

“He lacks the qualifications to be a personal knight!”

“I am sure he disappoints you in matters beyond security!”

“Huh? Really?” I asked in return, because I was so taken aback at how sure of themselves they sounded.

I was always the one causing a fuss, so the idea that Canopus was the disappointment was completely new to me. I examined Canopus from head to foot, wondering what on earth he was doing that was so bad. Maybe he was actually a total pig who emptied out the castle larders? Or maybe he could only sleep in some special way?

“Oh!” I gasped, figuring out what the three men were getting at.

Canopus bit his lip and looked at me expectantly.

“Canopus, don’t tell me,” I said nervously, “can you not sleep unless you’re in water? Oh no, that puts us in a pinch! Umm, I could lend you my bathtub, but I bet it’s too small for you. I *think* you’ll manage if you use the knight brigade’s

big bathhouse.”

Canopus frowned down at me. “Apologies, but may I interject? I can sleep anywhere, indoors or outdoors. Although I believe I could sleep *on* water, doing it while submerged would prove rather difficult.”

“Oh. Then have you, um, been eating everything in the castle larders?”

“No, I eat average portions. I am incapable of eating so much as to cause stock issues, and I can rein in my hunger if need be.”

“Then how are you a disappointment?” I gazed up at him in confusion, unable to think of anything else.

Canopus grimaced. “The personal knights of the princes and the first princess are individuals of high noble standing. I, however, am an islander. My ancestry could very well besmirch your honor, Your Highness.”

I turned back to the three knights, who were all nodding fervently.

“We mainlanders are a different sort from the islanders!”

“Their race has dark skin and webbed hands. Disgusting is what it is!”

“One of those people serving as your personal knight would affect your good name, Your Highness!”

I gazed at Canopus and the three knights in turn. “Don’t tell anyone about this, but,” I said, putting my pointer finger to my lips, “I was born blind and lived in a separate house.”

Everyone’s eyes widened in surprise, Canopus included.

“A lot of people said they felt sorry for me, but it never bothered me one bit. You see, I have a pact with a spirit child. And I was only able to do that because I was blind. So what everyone else called a misfortune was, to me, actually pretty lucky.”

Everyone listened to me in stunned silence, as if I’d hit them with a bolt from the blue.

“So who’s to say what’s ‘good’ and what’s ‘bad’?” I asked, looking at them all.

No response.

I turned to Canopus next. "Canopus, you seem proud of being an islander."

"The issue lies in how others see me, not in how I see myself," he mustered.

I started walking toward him, causing the three knights kneeling in front of me to hurriedly clear the way. I thanked them quietly, then took Canopus's hand.

He blinked back at me in shock.

"I think your webbed hands are wonderful. Is that wrong of me?" Looking at his hand, I giggled in wonderment. I had to marvel at their shape.

This caused Canopus to frown as if he was very troubled. He got on one knee and peered straight into my eyes.

"Princess Serafina, you are my liege," he said after a pause. "I value your words above anyone else's. They speak to my heart..."

He trailed off into silence, as if he was carefully choosing his next words.

"I am truly sorry," he said finally. "Even though I believe that the discrimination against islanders is baseless and I should be proud of my background, I have experienced so much bigotry that it became my habit to hang my head in silence. I apologize that you had to reveal such a thing for my sake..."

Canopus's face twisted in anguish. "I am a fool. I only wish I could rend myself asunder...but I know that would make you unhappy. My foolishness is not so grave that I would disregard your feelings after you confided a national secret to me."

Canopus's words were too big for me to understand, so I put on a thoughtful frown so that I would at least look like I was following along.

Meanwhile, he bowed his head to me deeply. "Thank you so very much. Because of your kind and considerate words, I am sure that I can carry myself with pride, no matter what anyone says about my homeland."

Canopus lifted his head once more, but now his expression was totally different. He looked so at ease with himself, as if all his previous worries had been blown away.

I couldn't help but giggle at the sight. "That's good to hear! Don't you quit on me, Canopus."

"I certainly won't. I pledge my eternal service to you."

Now wasn't *that* a nice thing to hear?

Next, Canopus stood up and faced the three knights, who were still kneeling. "You heard her, yes?" he said. "You're the ones who made it necessary for Princess Serafina to bare her secret—you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. I, for one, will bear my shame for the rest of my life."

The three men nodded wordlessly.

"I have resolved to feel no abashment over my background," Canopus continued. "I owe at least that much to our revered princess. Should you speak to me again the way you did earlier, I will not hesitate to voice my disagreement."

The three knights stood up and each offered a hand to Canopus.

"We won't pick a fight with you again. Her Highness made me see the light. I respect that *you* are the one she chose. Sorry for projecting my jealousy onto you."

"To my utmost regret, my immature conduct caused our liege to share what should have been a closely kept secret. I vow not to repeat the same mistake again."

"Canopus, I know it may be difficult, but could you let this matter go? From now on, we'll help you out in whatever way we can."

Tee hee hee, aren't knights so grand? I thought as I watched the three knights exchange handshakes with Canopus. The three of them turned back to me and bowed their heads deeply.

"Your Highness, we apologize profusely for our undignified conduct!" they shouted in unison. "We will inform the vice-commander of our actions and await his punishment."

"What, you're telling Sirius?!"

I didn't know it at the time, but it seemed everyone thought that Sirius was

my guardian. Who knew when that happened? That's why the knights were trying to get Sirius involved, but...

"Um, Sirius is very busy. I don't think he'd want some problem involving me taking up his time. So please don't tell him, okay? For my sake. In return...let's see...I'd prefer you not tell anyone the secret I just told you. Only Father, Mother, and Sirius know about it," I said, trying to smooth things over.

I got the feeling that Sirius was a little overprotective; something told me that he would probably show no mercy to the three men if they admitted that I told them my secret. I felt sorry for them, you know?

That was really all I was thinking, but for some reason the three knights all looked deeply moved.

"T-to think you shared such a deep secret *and* that you would shield us from the vice-commander's wrath! I cannot thank you enough."

"I vow not to breathe a word of your secret to others!"

"I swear it upon my life!"

Meanwhile, Canopus grimaced in apparent regret. "Princess Serafina...as much as I appreciate the extent to which you will go to aid your personal knight, this was a most terribly unfortunate situation. I swear, I will put my very life on the line to serve you."

The four of them were too much, but hey, whatever worked. I would do what I could to stop people from fighting with Canopus for becoming my personal knight.

Well, that's what I told myself, but...

For some reason, Canopus crossed swords with Knight Commander Wezen the very next day.

"How...could this be?"

As I watched the two of them gravely square off against each other, I had to remind myself why this had even begun in the first place.

Yes, I was pretty sure that it all started when I bumped into Sirius in the hallway...

“Sirius!”

Just a few minutes ago, I was walking down the hallway when I saw Sirius coming from the opposite direction. Naturally, I said a cheerful hello to him.

Sirius came over and gently picked me up. “Whoa?!” I squeaked, eyes widening in surprise.

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” was all he said before turning on his heels and walking straight back down the hallway in massive, confident strides.

All I could do was blink repeatedly in confusion as he carried me along in his arms. I mean, all I did was call out to him, right? I was pretty sure that was it. Sirius was always busy, so he didn’t have time to look out for me constantly. And it’s not like my schedule was empty either.

“Um, where are we going, Sirius?”

“You were off to the library to borrow a book, weren’t you? I’ll let the librarian know you’ll be visiting later,” Sirius said crisply.

He cast a single glance at one of the knights at his flank, which was all it took to get a “Yes, understood!”

Wow, that took care of that, I thought as I watched the knight trot off to the library. “Hey, Sirius, how did you know I was going to the library? Oh, wait, do you know my whole schedule? Wow, you’re a genius!” I gasped in wonderment.

Sirius’s lip curled up in amusement. “No one’s called me a genius since I came of age. Nice to have some reassurance.”

This was only because everyone was too intimidated to say so to his face, but I didn’t really get that at the time. “Tee hee hee!” I laughed, feeling amused. “Look at me, I figured out something you didn’t! Yup, you’re a genius, Sirius.”

“I’m honored by your praise, Princess.”

We had a nice little laugh together, which did not prepare me for where we ended up: a serious-looking place crammed with armor and swords. It was probably the knights’ training grounds.

Sirius lowered me to the floor, and I held his hand as I gazed around the scene nervously. My eyes met with a beefy guy standing with his arms folded in the middle of the area. As soon as he saw me, a fearless grin appeared on his face.

“I don’t believe we’ve met. I am Wezen Wald, commander of the Náv Horned Beast Knights.”

Commander Wezen was smiling, but his ferocious energy stood out like a sore thumb in this calm and quiet space. My hand instinctively squeezed Sirius’s.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Serafina Náv,” I introduced myself timidly.

Commander Wezen watched me tremble with a single eyebrow raised. I would guess he looked a bit puzzled? Then he looked at Sirius, who had picked me up again out of worry. His eyebrows creased into a frown, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Sirius, are you seeing yourself right now?! I thought you only had *knight vision*. Turns out you can see Princess Serafina just fine. I heard that you’re always carrying her too! I thought you’d finally put her down when you came in, but all I do is say hello and she’s back in your arms. Wait, don’t tell me she has trouble walking?”

“Serafina is perfectly healthy,” said Sirius. “But she does have a young girl’s physique, so I thought it would be quicker to carry her. Besides, she is a princess, and her needs come above all else.”

Commander Wezen smirked wryly. “Ha, quit the jokes! You’d make anyone walk if you needed them to—doesn’t matter if they’re a prince or a princess. How many times have I seen you run those princes ragged? And you treat Princess Shaula the exact same way.”

Sirius gazed back, silent and expressionless. There was enough pressure in his stare to make anyone shiver, but the commander looked completely unbothered.

“And look at yourselves!” he went on. “You’re not going anywhere! Why does she need to be held if you’re not even moving? Care to explain why you won’t let the princess down?”

“These are the training grounds. You never know what danger could come

Princess Serafina's way. I've taken the appropriate measures to protect her."

"Are you being serious right now? What happened to you? You've never had the personality or time to play nanny!" Commander Wezen blanched. "Hey, stop glaring at me! You made your point. I get it, the training grounds are full of danger. Enough that the brigade's strongest swordsman has to carry the princess at all times!"

The commander's tone was dripping with sarcasm in that second part. He swung his head toward Canopus, who was standing behind us.

"Hey, aren't you meant to be Princess Serafina's personal knight? Draw your sword. Let's have a go at it."

Then, without even waiting for Canopus's reply, the commander pulled out the sword at his hip. Canopus drew his sword too, while Sirius carried me off to a safe distance away.

"What? Are they about to have a serious fight? Isn't that dangerous?" I asked.

"It is, but you'll never be able to gauge someone's true strength otherwise," Sirius declared flatly.

It finally hit me. *Oh, so this is what it means to be a knight.*

But still, they could get injured if they were having a full-on battle. The thought made me sick with worry.

"It could be tough on you to watch the knights fight each other," Sirius said as he noticed my clenched fists. "You can bury your head in my shoulder if you don't want to see it. I should add that Commander Wezen is a first-rate swordsman. He knows how to pull his punches, so I doubt that your personal knight will come to harm."

Although I was grateful to Sirius for his concern, Canopus *was* my personal knight. I felt like I shouldn't look away from his fight. I steadied my gaze on the two knights, and then Sirius gave the signal for the fight to begin.

Canopus instantly thrust his sword directly at Commander Wezen. A harsh clang rang out as their swords clashed.

As their swords met—twice, thrice—the commander's expression turned

serious. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Sirius giving an impressed nod.

“I didn’t expect this,” he muttered.

Commander Wezen’s voice rang out at the same time. “Ha ha! Nice swordplay!” He sounded like he was having a blast.

Canopus was the only one attacking. Commander Wezen was just blocking, but their swords screeched against each other so many times that I found myself clinging to Sirius’s neck. Silently, I prayed that neither of them would get hurt.

After blocking about ten more times, Commander Wezen finally swung his sword down for the first time. A high-pitched noise rang out as Canopus’s sword flew from his hands.

Canopus gazed at the commander’s sword, which was pressed against his throat. “You win,” he said calmly.

The commander sheathed his sword in a flash and then bumped his massive fist against Canopus’s shoulder. “Canopus is your name, right? You’ve got some skills! I reckon they’ll come in handy for protecting the princess,” he said as he stepped back and studied Canopus’s body. “Who knew there was a knight of your caliber in the brigade? Ha ha, you oughta drop by the training grounds every once in a while instead of just showing up for meetings.”



The commander turned his back to Canopus and strode toward me next.

“I’m very sorry about beating up your knight, Princess Serafina,” he said without a hint of remorse on his face. If anything, he looked proud of himself.

“Oh wow, Commander Wezen. You’re twice as old as Sirius, but you’re just as much of a child as he is,” I blurted out, wide-eyed.

Sirius frowned, not appreciating my comment. “I’ve been an adult for a long time, Serafina! Nobody has ever called me a child.”

Commander Wezen cracked up at Sirius’s sour face. “Ha ha ha! Never thought I’d see someone treat Sirius like a youngster! And from such a tiny little princess, no less! Sirius, looks like you’ve finally met your match!”

Commander Wezen was grinning broadly as if to say “Congratulations,” but Sirius did not look happy. “Serafina is a gifted individual, yes, but it’s not like I’m a total brute to everyone else.”

“Oh, really?” Commander Wezen smiled in amusement. “When putting you on a monster-culling mission means we have to deploy less than half the regular squad numbers, I’d say that’s proof of your *brute* strength right there. And I, for one, definitely welcome it with open arms.”

He then turned to look straight at me, snuggled in Sirius’s arms.

As soon as he noticed the color of my eyes, he was shocked. “Would you look at that? Golden eyes! Now, I’m something of a good-natured old man, if I do say so myself. Kids tend to like me, but you...you’re afraid of me. You see past the surface, and it frightens you. Those are some good eyes.”

I sighed in relief at the commander’s good-natured words. Thank goodness. He didn’t seem to mind that I was intimidated by him earlier.

“Thank you! I’ve been told that golden eyes are blessings from the Spirit Lord,” I answered.

But the commander shook his head in disagreement. “I reckon that any asset goes to waste if you don’t use it well. You might have been blessed with golden eyes, but it’s your strength that makes you capable of using them, Princess.”

“I have to hand it to you, Commander Wezen,” Sirius said. “Not everything

that comes out of your mouth is rubbish.”

His enthusiasm sounded forced, which made the commander grin. “Whaddaya mean? I’m always right on the money! And hey, you’ve got some good eyes yourself. You noticed Canopus’s talent way before I did. I showed off my whole rear end by overlooking him.” His smile widened. “So, Princess, I owe you an apology! I made some shallow assumptions about Canopus because of his pretty face. I worried you might’ve picked him based on looks, like he’d be an ornament instead of a knight. That’s why I got it into my head to train him up—but what do you know? He was way more skilled than I imagined.”

“Oh my.” I giggled, pleased to hear such nice things about Canopus.

When I smiled, Commander Wezen blinked frantically and turned to Sirius. “Hey, Sirius! What kind of bullcrap is this? She’s got blessed golden eyes *and* the smile of an angel! She’s way out of your league.”

Sirius nodded and added, “I should also mention that Serafina is the most talented saint I’ve ever seen.”

“You’re kidding me! The best you’ve seen? As far as saints go, only the cream of the crop can team up with *you*. No one else could hack it against high-ranking monsters. And you’re saying the princess is better than all of them, without a shadow of doubt?”

“I am.”

Commander Wezen gulped at Sirius’s words. “Come to think of it, she does have shockingly red hair... If she’s this young and already the best of the kingdom, wouldn’t that make her even more brutal than you?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying. From her perspective, I’m just a regular old knight, not a brute monster.”

“I’ve always thought the day you call yourself a regular knight is the day hell freezes over,” the commander said gravely as he put a hand to his forehead. “You’ve never exaggerated about anything ever. And if that’s the case here, then you’re the only match for the princess. I see why you’ve changed.”

The commander then staggered to the doorway.

“Oh my. Looks like I got the chills, Sirius. Definitely the sign of a bad illness, so I’ll be off to my home to rest for the day. You take the reins!”

For all his tottering, Commander Wezen suddenly switched into an energetic sprint before he was even finished talking. When I blinked, he was gone, leaving only me, Sirius, and Canopus in the massive training grounds.

“Wha—?” My eyelids fluttered in surprise. “Um, Sirius?”

“Commander Wezen is a capable knight...but he has the occasional habit of running off, sad as it is to say. He usually doesn’t lift a finger to do the paperwork and pushes it all on me instead. When I was off at the villa, I’m told he finally sucked it up and did the work himself. Maybe the stress of it got to him.”

“Oh...okay.” I stared at the door, unable to think of anything else to say. I was indirectly the reason why Commander Wezen had to do paperwork. I hoped he got a nice good rest, at least for today.

As I was praying, Sirius approached Canopus and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. “You’re a fine swordsman, Canopus. Be a good shield for Serafina.”

Clear, unmistakable words of praise—Canopus’s eyes lit up with delight.

Every knight looked up to Sirius. It was easy to imagine how proud they would feel after hearing positive feedback from him of all people.

Seeing Canopus beaming made me happy too. “Wow! Sirius respects you!” I squealed. “But I’m not surprised, tee hee. Of *course* my knight is the best! Canopus, you’ve got to guard me forever and ever.”

Canopus nodded fervently at my smiling face. “I will put my very life on the line to serve you.”

It was the exact same thing he swore to me yesterday. Wow, I didn’t expect to hear such a heavy vow twice. It made me realize what a wonderful, devoted knight I had. Who wouldn’t be thrilled about that?

Point of View: Sirius

The Tragic Tale of the Nutshells

WHEN YOU'RE THE VICE-COMMANDER of the knight brigade, you get your share of paperwork duties. And since Commander Wezen *never* did his part, it resulted in twice the workload on an already stacked plate.

To make matters worse, my daytimes were hectic, leaving me no time for sifting through documents. This meant that it was now my habit to take the paperwork home with me in the evenings.

Oh, and speaking of habits, I munched on nuts from a crystal container on my table during those nightly workouts. They were covered in stiff, hard shells, but they were easy enough to split open when they ripened—you just had to dig into the little slits. So I developed a routine: read a document, crack open a nut, and put it in my mouth as I signed off on it.

That night, I was going through the motions when a visitor came knocking on my door. Given the late hour, there was only one person who would casually show up to my room. As soon as I heard the knock, I stood up and opened the door myself.

There stood Serafina, dragging Canopus behind her, just as I expected. "Listen to this, Sirius!" She gazed up at me with sparkling eyes. "I might be a genius!"

Serafina genuinely was a genius, but she only called herself one in situations where she was anything but. Just the other day, she put the finishing touches on a magic formula that no one else could conceive, and it never even crossed her mind that this was an incredible feat. Meanwhile, the word "genius" flew off her tongue whenever she did something pretty much anyone could do, like telling the difference between an embroidered rose and a real one, or skipping on her tiptoes. I put this down to her long years of living in a forest.

Okay, what's she calling herself a "genius" over this time? I wondered as I gave her a curious expression.

Serafina thrust a plate at me, a proud grin on her face. “I wrote with sauce, Sirius! See?!”

Wordlessly, I looked down at her hands. The plate was stacked with vegetables with melted cheese and sauce on top—a simple but readily digestible meal. Upon further examination, there was indeed something resembling writing on the plate. The words were almost impossible to decipher, but if you squinted and relied heavily on guesswork, then it came out looking something like... *“You do great work.”*

Warmth pricked my chest. “You came all this way at night just to show me this?”

Although we both lived in the castle, our rooms were on different floors. The distance to my room would have felt like a marathon to her little legs. And besides, I never had any problems doing paperwork at night—I had the ability and stamina to do the job well. Nobody would have thought to fuss over me like this...

But I don’t think Serafina quite understood what I was asking. “Yup!” she responded with a sunny smile. “You stay up every night working, so I got you a snack.”

“So this is for me to eat?” I appreciated the thought. With a smile, I took the plate from her.

Being a duke, the king’s nephew, and the vice-commander of the knight brigade, I received my fair share of gifts. But Serafina’s presents made me feel the happiest.

Although it was late, I felt bad about sending her straight back to her room after all that, so I invited her inside. She plopped down on the sofa and peered at the nut container with great curiosity.

“Those are my late-night snacks,” I explained. “They’re good to chew on while I’m working.”

Serafina turned her sparkling eyes my way. “Can I have one, Sirius?”

“Okay, but *only* one because it’s late. There’s a shell on the outside, so you split it open with your hands and just eat what’s inside.”

Serafina did not need telling twice. She grabbed a nut and eagerly tried to split open the shell—but unfortunately, she couldn't quite manage it. Maybe she wasn't strong enough for the task.

As I watched her wobbling hands and frowning face, I decided: *Yeah, this isn't going to work.*

"Give it to me, Serafina. I'll do it for y—"

But I never finished that sentence.

Because Serafina put the nut—shell and all—into her mouth and bit down on it forcefully. The crunching noise that rang out was *deeply* unnatural.

I thrust a flustered hand in front of Serafina. "Serafina, spit out everything in your mouth!"

I was worried that there might have been a rock inside the nut. This had never happened before, but that noise didn't sound like anything that would come from a nutshell, hence my fears.

One thing led to another, and I looked down at what she spat into my palm... only to gape in abject horror.

For the first time in my adult life, my hand trembled.

Oh, hell! Did I accidentally hurt Serafina? I shouldn't have let her eat that nut!

Because, you see, Serafina's tiny teeth—two of them, in fact—adorned my hand. I suspect that her delicate teeth were unable to withstand the slightest bit of stiffness.

"Call a saint! And a doctor! Shake them out of bed if need be!" I yelled at Canopus as I flew off the sofa.

Canopus's eyes boggled at this impossible order. But I meant everything I said; I felt ill enough to hurl.

"Sirius?" Serafina smiled in an attempt to reassure me, revealing a wide-open gap in the place of her missing front teeth.

My eyes were drawn to the blood oozing out from where her teeth should have been.

How could this be? What travesty was this? Could a saint even restore missing teeth?

I picked up Serafina and patted her on the back to reassure her, causing her usual energetic giggle to spill out of her tiny body. Oh, what a wretch I was for harming such an adorable being! I vowed to restore Serafina's teeth, even if it meant squandering my entire fortune.

Just as I was set in my resolve, I realized that Canopus was standing by the doorway, even after I'd told him to fetch a saint and doctor. "Canopus, why are you standing there?! We're in a race against time!"

Undaunted by my shouting, Canopus approached me with a very measured expression. "Vice-Commander Sirius, may I ask Princess Serafina a question first?"

Before I could tell him *"No, just get on with it,"* Serafina spoke up. "What is it, Canopus?"

"Were those two missing teeth feeling wobbly before?"

"Yup!" Serafina said promptly. "They've been like that for days. It hurt to eat."

Canopus seemed to take this as some kind of confirmation. "Makes sense," was all he said, before looking at me as if he expected me to have some kind of epiphany—but nothing came to mind.

"Get to the point, Canopus!" I told him irritably.

Canopus was quiet for a moment before responding. "I believe Princess Serafina is growing a new set of teeth. At her age, baby teeth start to get replaced by adult teeth. If you look closely at where her teeth fell out, you can see her adult teeth are sprouting."

When I turned to Serafina in surprise, the clever little princess opened her mouth wide.

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "You're right! I can see some tiny teeth growing there."

In the space left behind by her missing teeth, the tiny tips of new teeth were peeking through.

"We all look after the children together in Sutherland," Canopus continued.

“There was always some child kicking up a fuss about losing teeth. That was how I realized that Princess Serafina was also going through that phase.”

Having never cared for children before, it failed to cross my mind that they grew new teeth. Canopus, it seemed, was trying to make me feel better about my ignorance. As far as I was concerned, however, the key takeaway was that Serafina’s teeth weren’t broken. I couldn’t care less about the details.

“That’s good news, Serafina!” I said to her.

She smiled. “Yup! Now I can eat more solid stuff.”

This gave me a mental image of her crushing her teeth against other hard foods. Needless to say, I wasn’t smiling back.

From then on, it became a habit of mine to step in whenever Serafina was about to put something hard into her mouth. Nutshells were a given, of course, but I broke up every portion of solid food for her.

Whenever I did this, everyone looked at me as if I’d grown another head. “Aren’t you being a little overprotective?” they would say, but I ignored them all. I told myself bitterly that they were only able to say that so easily because they’d never witnessed the terror of Serafina’s teeth loss for themselves.

And so I resigned myself to the snide comments, for there was no greater fear in my mind than that which I had seen.

The Saint Knight Brigade

I FELT KIND OF RESTLESS—two months after coming to the royal castle, I still hadn't met a fellow saint.

I'd always dreamed of becoming a saint since I was little. At first, I thought of it as a way to help people while being blind, but even after I became able to see, I still really wanted to be a saint. Sirius acknowledged me as one, and I came straight to the capital when he said he wanted my strength. I thought I would be working with the other healers over here...but the chance never arose.

My tutor had told me about the standard training course for saints. Much like how knight brigade candidates went to “knight school,” a bunch of different places had a “saint school” for aspiring saints.

Half the women in this country had a spirit pact and could use healing magic, which qualified them as saints. But Seven told me: *“It's only because of their pacts. Most of them are weak and can only use a bit of healing magic.”* Basically, they stuck to minor spells that helped around the house. But there were more powerful saints too, like the ones who tried to cure my eyes. They could heal serious illnesses and make really effective potions. Almost everyone who worked for the good of the people studied at a saint school.

And then there was me. I was a saint, but I had no idea how good I was at it. I had no one to compare myself to since I learned everything I knew about healing magic from the spirits and trained by myself. What if I picked up bad habits or learned things the wrong way? I wanted to do it the proper way, but I gave up on that after I found out that saint school would take three years.

Why? Because Sirius was already fighting monsters as a knight. While I was taking my sweet time at school, Sirius could wind up badly hurt. So although I was still worried about my abilities, I got the idea of tagging along with the Fourth Saint Knight Brigade, which was where most of the saint school graduates went.

No harm giving it a try, right? I could always go to school if it turned out I really needed to. And if I was only a little behind, then I could just put in a bit of extra study at home every day. It was the perfect idea.

“Oh, but...what if I’m not good enough? Or maybe there’s some other reason why I can’t go to battle. Maybe that’s why Sirius isn’t so sure about letting me meet with the saints,” I muttered to myself on my sofa.

Right then, there was a knock on the door, and you know who walked in? Sirius himself.

He was always visiting my chambers after dinner and chatting with me about all kinds of stuff. Today, he was carrying a few picture books, which made me wonder if he was going to read me a story. When he saw the confused look on my face, he put the books on the table.

“Is there a problem, Serafina?” he asked. “You don’t seem to be in the mood for reading. Is something bothering you?”

I decided to tell him what I wanted. “Sirius, I...I want to join the Saint Knight Brigade and learn how to be a saint!”

This made him stiffen in shock for a moment. Then, without saying a word, he walked over and sat down next to me.

Well, that felt crummy. Did I upset him? He had this uneasy look on his face and remained silent.

“Sirius, if I’m causing trouble for you, just say so,” I said, tugging on his sleeve. “I don’t wanna do anything that upsets you.”

Sirius shook his head slightly, still grimacing. “You’ve done no such thing. I’m not upset, just thinking about what to do.” He put a hand against his lips, as if he was pondering something. “Right...I can’t just put it off forever. I do think it’s about time we have a talk about this.”

He took my hand and gripped it lightly.

“Serafina, I’ve been worried about your future ever since I brought you to the castle.”

That was surprising—he’d never shown any hint of that. “Oh? Really?” I asked

back.

Sirius's lips twisted into another grimace. "Yeah," he said, nodding. "Your saint abilities are so extraordinary that they stand out." He gazed out the window thoughtfully. "Can I tell you something about myself?" Without waiting for my answer, he said, "I am a knight, one many regard as the strongest in the brigade. So whenever a strong monster shows up, I'm always ordered to slay it. But...people never wonder *if* I can beat it—they assume that if I can't, then no one can. That's the burden I carry with me."

"Oh no, really?!" I gasped.

That sounded crazy—people would rely on Sirius if there was a strong monster around, without wondering whether he could even win or not? But what would happen if he was up against a *really* strong monster—one he couldn't beat?

The question probably showed on my face, because Sirius smiled wryly. "As you might have imagined, I've fought many battles where my odds of winning were slim. But I have to do it, so long as there are people who see me as their only hope. Helping those people is what keeps me going...but I have to admit that it's not an easy life."

Sirius let go of my hand, took hold of my shoulders, and looked me straight in the eye.

"Serafina, when people discover what a powerful saint you are, they'll start demanding things of you. You'll never *not* be a saint again. Everyone alive has to face things they don't like, things they fear—but you'll never have the luxury of running away. Take the stage just once, and the people will pin all their hopes and expectations on you. You will struggle to make your own choices and step off the pedestal. I won't sugarcoat it—it's hard."

I didn't understand half of what Sirius was trying to tell me. He fought on the battlefield all the time, and I'd never fought once—we were worlds apart. No way could I grasp the weight of his words.

Was Sirius right? My heart didn't agree with him.

But still...

“You might...have a point.”

When I gave the answer he wanted to hear, his face cleared with relief. He reached out and ruffled my hair. “Serafina, when I brought you back to the capital, I asked you to lend me your strength. I still want that just as much as I did back then. But it doesn’t have to be immediate—I know it’ll happen one day. And besides, that’s only what I want. If you grow up and decide that you don’t want to be a saint who participates in battle, or even a saint at all, I’ll respect that.”

“Sirius...”

His expression was much calmer now compared to when he plucked me from the Forest of Lent. This was surely the conclusion he came to after a lot of thinking and worrying. I knew I should probably let it be.

“Looking back on that day in the forest, I asked for your help without giving you time to think about it. I’m sure you felt obligated to live up to what I said. But I...completely forgot that you are only six.” Sirius looked regretful as he shook his head. “That’s too soon for a person to decide what to do with their life, not to mention much too young to have such immense pressure weighing on you. Now’s the time for you to experience things you find ‘beautiful,’ ‘fun,’ and ‘happy.’ Those feelings will guide you to what you want in your future.”

I said nothing. It was getting harder to simply nod along. Sirius was only thinking about *me*. After spending so much time with me these past two months, he’d realized that I was a kid who acted her age. He decided to treat me not as a saint but as a child like anyone else.

“Sirius...”

He thought only of me, not about himself at all. My heart hurt at his kindness.

Sirius held my hand. I think he saw my crumpled expression and was trying to cheer me up. “Serafina, you don’t need to hurry. I brought you to the castle on impulse after the talent you showed in the forest that day, but...you’re at an age where you should be playing and spending time with your parents.”

But what if Sirius got hurt in battle while I was playing? I bit my lip and stayed quiet, unable to bring myself to answer him.

Sirius spoke up again in a light tone, attempting to change the mood. “Besides, you have your lessons as a royal. The king and queen both hope you become a fine princess who shines for the people...enough to make up for the time you were away. They want you to make the most of your education.”

“Mhmm...” I could only nod when he brought up my parents. I knew that Father and Mother thought dearly of me, and I wanted to be a good daughter for them.

“Since coming to the royal capital, you’ve reunited with your family and met many new faces. I’m sure your world is going to get even bigger. I believe I was right in bringing you here—you should be living with people, not spirits. Even so, your spirit came with you to the capital,” Sirius said as he picked me up and put me on his knees.

He peered at my face.

“I swore to you as a knight that I would make you just as happy as the Forest of Lent did—and that I would show you what’s beautiful about the world. Let me live up to that vow before you think of doing anything for me. To be perfectly honest, I never really spent my childhood years living like a kid. Going through it with you has been a brand-new experience for me.”

Sirius spoke with such joy about the future, but...I couldn’t get what he said earlier out of my mind.

That he had to fight monsters he couldn’t beat.

It was a horrible way to live. And yet despite that, he wanted me to put off making my official battlefield debut until some vague, distant future. Was that really the right thing to do?

“Sirius...”

My heart throbbed with pain. I clenched my hand over my chest.

The reason I came to the royal capital was because I wanted to protect Sirius—because I knew that a brave and righteous man like him would surely come to harm one day. When it happened, I wanted to be there as a saint. I would rush to the field straight away if it helped him...but I just couldn’t say with confidence that I was *capable*.

I'd never seen a saint on the battlefield, so I didn't know how I measured up. Things went okay in the Forest of Lent, but that was because of all the strong knights at the scene, Sirius first and foremost among them.

Was I strong enough to make a real contribution? Sirius acknowledged my abilities, but that didn't necessarily mean they'd hold up in an actual fight. There was a big chance I would be deadweight instead. If there was one thing I *definitely* didn't want to do, it was exposing Sirius to danger because of my rookie mistakes.

That was why I wanted to do what I could to become a better saint. And if learning from the saints in the knight brigade was the quickest way to do that, then so be it.

I looked up at Sirius, my hand gripping his sleeve. "Thank you, Sirius. You have my best interests in mind."

Sirius's eyes lit up at this unexpected compliment, but I didn't stop to react to it.

"You don't have to worry about me," I went on. "I love doing fun things every day. Even funny things! Lots of funny things happen when Seven's with me."

"Right..." Sirius groaned. Maybe he was thinking about all those pranks Seven got up to after he came to the capital.

"But I also wanna be a strong saint. So yeah, I still wanna join the Saint Knight Brigade and learn stuff."

I was firm in my thinking: I wanted to become the kind of saint who could help Sirius, and I was happy with taking it one step at a time. As I waited for Sirius's reply, his mouth curled upward suddenly.

"Serafina, you won't be swayed no matter what I say. I'm betting that passion is the source of your brilliance. I admire it." He squinted in thought. "Still, you haven't seen other saints in battle. But in any case, the fact that you pulled off what you did in the Forest of Lent means you have a gift... Someone with your talent wouldn't need to hang around the knight brigade, but I'm sure there'd be a lot for you to take in regardless. You have a way of making the best out of any situation."

I gazed at him, eyes wide in anticipation.

Sirius gave me a defeated little smile. “All right, fine. Let’s pay a visit to the Saint Knight Brigade.”

Whoopee! A grin spread across my face. I had permission now!

“Thank you, Sirius!” I said with a smile and hugged him.

Being “competent” means being good at *everything*.

I realized this the very next day, when Sirius showed up at breakfast and declared that I would be visiting the Saint Knight Brigade in the afternoon.

“What? Today?!” I asked, stunned. “But I just asked you last night!”

Only the two of us were in the dining room, making me the sole witness to his very matter-of-fact expression. “Yup, it was yesterday.” He nodded. “And a whole day has passed since then. Plenty of time to get things done.”

“Yeah, but we talked at night...and it’s only morning now...” I mumbled, although it occurred to me that Sirius experienced time differently from the rest of us. This kind of lightning pace was probably an everyday thing for him.

Sirius calmly turned the subject away from the timing of the visit. “Serafina, there is one problem with visiting the knight brigade: Only adults can join the brigade, so you’re not qualified.”

“Oh no!” I had no idea.

In the Náv Kingdom, people normally had a coming-of-age ceremony when they were around fifteen or so. As a six-year-old, I still had a long wait ahead of me. The idea that a child couldn’t join the knight brigade was...well, a surprise, but kind of obvious when I thought about it. I mean, a saint wouldn’t have enough magic to use healing spells unless they had a spirit pact, and only adults could form pacts. It was similar to how people’s bodies weren’t fully grown until adulthood, so it made sense that the knight brigade would restrict itself to adult saints. Of course the knights in general would draw a line in the sand, right?

As I spiraled into gloom, a kind voice fell on my ears. “Every rule has its exceptions, Serafina. If you really want to join, I’ll make it happen for you. Don’t

worry.”

“You will?!” I lifted my head in surprise.

He nodded at me, his serious expression never wavering. “I’m the vice-commander. And you know what else? I get to make the final decisions because our commander doesn’t do a shred of paperwork. If you want me to, I can make a special exception for you. I could even change the rules entirely.”

“O-oh dear! You mustn’t do that!” I shook my head frantically.

Uh-oh. It wouldn’t be right if someone in charge did *whatever* they wanted.

Sirius furrowed his brow at my response, but he shrugged and continued, “Just go there today for a taste, Serafina. Try it for half a day and see how it goes.”

“Okay! I’ll try!” I nodded obediently. I got the impression that nobody questioned Sirius as an authority figure—or, to put it less nicely, he used his position to force his way through.

Sirius held a finger in front of my face. “All right, I want you to promise me two things. The first is that you hide your identity. You’re royalty. If we were following the formal procedure, you’d need to apply two weeks beforehand just to observe the knight brigade, and there’d be a lot of rules for you to follow. So today, you’ll be going as a different person.”

“Who am I going to be? Your daughter?” I asked, tilting my head.

Sirius scowled. “I’m nineteen, not old enough to be your father.”

“How about my brother?”

“Forget about my family. You’ll be...let’s see...a cute little flower spirit I found in a field. How about that?”

That sounded a bit too far from reality. I wasn’t even human anymore.

I threw an annoyed look at Sirius, causing him to make an awkward cough. “Sorry. You know I make bad jokes. But, you know, a flower spirit isn’t that far-fetched... All right, fine, I’ll stop. Don’t look at me like that.” He sighed.

“Okay, let’s go with something generic. You’ll be a young lady from a branch

line of my...the Ulysses family. Nobody will buy that, but I doubt anyone would challenge me to my face.”

I clapped my hands together at Sirius’s suggestion. “What a great idea! I always lived at the villa, so I’m still learning how to be a lady. Make sure you tell everyone I’m from the countryside, okay?”

“For a princess of the nation, you really put yourself down,” Sirius muttered.

But I definitely was a country bumpkin, still stuck on the basics of etiquette. Only Sirius and Father treated me like a proper princess. The problem was that they didn’t realize they were going easy on me.

Sirius changed the subject. “Anyway, the second thing you need to promise me is that you’ll keep your full saint powers hidden. You don’t want to cause an incident.”

“What?” I raised my head slightly. Since I was going there to learn, wasn’t I supposed to show what I could do?

“The saints will be shocked to the core if you were to say, ‘These are my saint skills,’ and then brandish spells no one’s ever seen before,” Sirius explained. “I can easily imagine pandemonium breaking loose.”

Brandish. Pandemonium. What big words.

Oh dear. Sirius always used big words whenever he got carried away about something. It was really hard for me to understand him when he got like that.

Seemingly unaware of my thoughts, Sirius went on talking with even more complicated words. “The knight brigade is a tight-knit order. Even if you were to reveal the extent of your talents, I could enforce a gag order. This is a way for you to experience what it’s like to be a saint before you make your official debut. Like I said before, just give it a shot, and if active battles don’t suit you, you can become some other kind of saint.”

“R-right...”

“But that’s a discussion for later. Today, you’ll be watching the saints at work. Stay put and don’t draw attention to yourself, otherwise everyone will want to know about your spells and it will defeat the entire point of the trip.”

“Okay.”

Phew. I think I got my head around that last bit. He was basically telling me to watch the saints and don't make a scene.

When I gave a big nod to show that I understood, Sirius patted me on the head with his large hand. “You'll be fine. I'll be there for you no matter what happens.”

That afternoon, Sirius took me to the Fourth Saint Knight Brigade, just like he promised. He should have been way too busy to hang around with me for half a day, but apparently that was the plan. Maybe he was worried about me because Canopus stayed behind—if he tagged along, everyone would know I was royalty. That was when it finally hit me that Sirius was being literal when he said, “I'll be there for you.”

When he left his office, there were a bunch of knights in tears. This made me worry that he might have ditched some kind of important job, but he bluntly said, “I've done everything I need to do.”

He and the knights were definitely not on the same page. I bet they wanted him to do more work, but they gave up on it because they knew that he wouldn't budge.

Seven wasn't with us either; he said he didn't wanna see the adult spirits. He probably didn't like the idea of them treating him like a child.

Since I'm only here to watch, I'm probably fine without him, I thought as I entered the Saint Knight Brigade's training grounds...

Only for all twenty of the saints to turn at the same time and look at me.

Well, that was a shock. My body instantly tensed up, and before I knew it, I was clinging tightly to Sirius's sleeve.

After my initial surprise faded, I took another look at the saints and realized that almost all of them had red streaks in their hair. They definitely had the skills, and they all looked really cool in their white-and-red uniforms. Their faces remained very alert as they studied us.

“Whoa, they’re so awesome!” I blurted out.

Sirius silently put a hand to my back and walked in step with me to the middle of the training grounds. He must have told the saints beforehand that we were coming, because they all seemed to know about him and greeted him with smiles on their faces. It was such a huge difference from the previous tense greeting that I found myself entranced.

They were adorable!

“Ahhh, I want to be just like them,” I mumbled vacantly.

Sirius looked down at me quizzically, clearly not understanding what was going through my head. Meanwhile, the captain and vice-captain of the Saint Knight Brigade hurried over to us.

“Vice-Commander Sirius, it’s a pleasure to have you!” Both the captain and vice-captain had gentle smiles on their faces.

Sirius definitely had the wrong idea when he said that the knight brigade saints disliked him. If anything, they were clearly fond of him, while he showed no interest back. That was the impression I got from him when he handed his documents over to them and talked about work-related stuff. He wasn’t mean or anything, just...indifferent. It was hard to imagine that this was the same person who always had a smile for me.

While I stood there in surprise, he looked up from what he was doing. When his eyes fell on my face, I took that as my cue to step up next to him and curtsy.

“This girl will be joining the Saint Knight Brigade for today,” he said. “Let me introduce her. Her name is Sera...Seraphi.”

Since we hadn’t decided on a name beforehand, Sirius came up with something on the spot. It sounded awfully close to my real name, though, I had to say. All he did was take off the “na.”

The captain was a handsome woman with short red hair by the name of Adara. The vice-captain was named Mirfak, and she had shoulder-length purplish-red hair. They looked like kind and helpful people.

Captain Adara faced Sirius with a confident, masculine smile. “Since you’ll be

with us for today, Vice-Commander Sirius, we're planning to take on some monsters in Starfall Forest. I think the best way for the young lady here to learn what we saints do is to watch us in action."

Sirius's brow knitted into a frown at hearing me called "young lady," but he didn't seem to want to pick a fight in front of me. Lowering his eyes, he swallowed his words.

Meanwhile, I was captivated by how cool and suave Captain Adara was—she had such slender limbs and a smooth, symmetrical face. I knew she was a woman, but...no, maybe her womanliness *was* what made her so handsome.

Sirius blankly looked at me as I mentally gushed over Captain Adara. "Very well. Our escorting knights will join the battle as well." Since Sirius was such an important person, he had three knights tagging along to protect him. I recognized them all from their visit to the Forest of Lent. When I gave them a little wave, they waved right back.

Starfall Forest was an hour-long horse ride away from the royal castle. Captain Adara and Vice-Captain Mirfak rode their mounts without any fuss, which told me that proper saints could manage a horse by themselves. I added this to my list of things to study.

Since I was the only one who couldn't ride, I went on Sirius's horse. I sat in front of him and giggled whenever the horse's trotting got me wobbling. But since we weren't making any progress that way, Sirius used one arm to hold me steady.

"Eek!"

When I looked up at him, Sirius frowned in worry. "When you ride, you're meant to rise and fall with the horse so that you don't bruise your rear. I don't think you're big enough to manage it since you can't even get your legs around its back. I'll hold on to you."

"Huh? You will?" Since I didn't know the first thing about riding a horse, I looked up at Sirius in surprise.

He nodded like it was obvious. I wondered if he was planning to hold me for

an entire hour—that seemed a bit much.

“Don’t you worry, Sirius. I have a hard butt, so I can handle a bumpy ride. You’re going to fight monsters—you wouldn’t want your arm to get all tired from holding me.”

“Ha ha, you’re joking. You think I can believe you’re all tough and strong when you lost your teeth from eating a nut? Either way, I wouldn’t worry about my arm; you’re as light as a spirit.”

Um, I was as big as your average six-year-old. I wasn’t *that* light. His arm would definitely get numb from the weight over time.

Or so I thought. Sirius didn’t even bother switching arms—he just held me with his left one the whole time. He even cheerfully pointed out the scenery on the way and never got out of breath once. When we got to the forest and he put me down, I poked his arm a bit because I was scared that he *had* to be secretly putting up with the pain, but he looked totally fine.

Wow, okay. To a person with a freakishly strong body like him, I probably *did* seem as frail as a spirit. I finally understood Sirius’s attitude.

Everyone walked into the forest after that. Our group was me, Sirius, Captain Adara, Vice-Captain Mirfak, and the three knights on escorting duty.

Since I was only familiar with the Forest of Lent, I looked around this new forest with a lot of curiosity. I noticed that Starfall Forest had lots of shorter trees compared to the Forest of Lent. It was just a small detail, but it made a strong impression on me. “It’s weird how this forest doesn’t have many big trees, Sirius!” I called out to him.

Captain Adara heard my voice and looked back over her shoulder at me. “Wow, you speak to the vice-commander without his title?” she said, sounding mildly incredulous. “I know you’re young, but some would call that rude!”

“Er, um, Mr. Sirius?” I said, flustered by the sharp comment.

“Stop that!” Sirius snapped. “Serafina—*na-names* aren’t an issue for me... Seraphi.”

Sirius's tone started off so sharp, but he got shaky in the middle there. It sounded like he accidentally said my real name and then tried to cover it up by turning it into a whole sentence... It was hard to say whether that fooled anyone.

"Um, okay," I said simply, since I didn't want to put my foot any further in anyone's mouths. I always thought that Sirius was a grand mastermind type, but the fact that he slipped up on my fake name made it seem that he was no good at being sneaky.

"Seraphi is a relative of mine," Sirius explained. "We don't need formalities."

"It's not about your relationship, it's about respecting the position." Captain Adara smiled in a way that half-looked like a grimace. "As far as I know, even the princes and princesses refer to you as Vice-Commander."

Then she glanced at me.

"Anyway, this young lady is, what, five? A girl this young isn't going to take in what she sees. Vice-Commander, you know as well as I do that showing her my magic is pointless, so I can't help but wonder why you were so insistent on bringing her along. We're busy people too—if the request hadn't come from you, I would've turned it down."

Vice-Captain Mirfak, who was walking next to her, nodded eagerly in agreement. "Captain Adara has a point. You and I are wasting half a day on this excursion, and young Seraphi is only going to remember it as a picnic."

Sirius glowered back at them. "If Seraphi only remembers this as a picnic, then it will mean that my knights and your magic failed to impress! If that ends up being the case, then I would feel ashamed of my skills!" Anyone could tell by his tone that he was angry. Captain Adara and Vice-Captain Mirfak both stiffened.

Frankly, it came as a surprise to me as well. Sirius always struck me as the type to shrug off light insults, but here he was standing his ground.

Once the two saints recovered from their shock, they gazed at Sirius in wonderment.

"Whoa, is this really the vice-commander?"

“I didn’t think he’d react so strongly.”

The three knights on escorting duty, who were following the saints from behind, shook their heads with a smug, knowing attitude.

“You’re behind the times!” they said teasingly.

“Yeah, the vice-commander is scarily devoted. It’s common knowledge in the knight brigade these days.”

“The Silver Knight has sworn his love to his princess!”

Sirius’s knights hadn’t changed one bit from their time at the Forest of Lent. They always seemed to be having a good time.

After an hour of walking about, our group finally ran into some monsters. My heart pounded in excitement at the idea of seeing other saints’ magic for the very first time in my life.

At Sirius’s signal, I trotted off somewhere where I wouldn’t get in the way. I’d only noticed this recently, but I had really good eyes. Since I could see what everyone was doing even from far away, I picked a spot that was definitely out of the action. I scrambled over to a distant rock and clenched my hands together.

“Yippee, I’m finally gonna see some saint magic!”

I watched in glee as half a dozen monsters came on the scene. Three of them were wolf-types, and the other three were hog-types.

Suddenly, I got a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. The wolves had these solid-looking manes on their heads. Were they fenrirs? I was pretty sure they looked just like the illustrations in the Monster Encyclopedia. But then I remembered that fenrirs were top-class monsters that only lived deeper in the woods. Besides, the book said that you needed dozens of knights to take down just one fenrir. Sirius strode toward them without a bit of hesitation, so...I guess they *weren’t* fenrirs?

As I watched, not feeling totally sure of what was going on, the three knights steadily followed Sirius’s lead. Meanwhile, Captain Adara and Vice-Captain

Mirfak stopped behind them and started calling for their spirits.

“O Spirit, I summon thee to lend me thy strength!”

“O Great Spirit, manifest thy form!”

This was what you said when you sealed a pact. Although the saints didn’t use the spirit language, the moment they chanted their summons, two spirits appeared in front of them. Both were the size of adult women. They had green hair and floated slightly off the ground.

“W-wow! Adult spirits!” I’d only ever laid eyes on spirit children, so it was thrilling to see a grown-up version. “Oh, yikes, I can’t keep my feet steady!”

My heart was pounding so quickly it took my breath away. I squeezed my hands together, trying to calm myself down as I peered straight ahead.

A two-meter-tall hog monster was the first to move. It stomped the ground threateningly a few times before charging straight at Sirius.

“That’s a violet boar! The ‘cyclopedia said that even when you can see it coming in a straight line, its speed can still blow you away.” I clasped my hands together, praying that Sirius would be unhurt.

Meanwhile, Sirius didn’t even flinch at the monster’s furious charge. He waited until the very last second to dodge, luring it in. Then, with a single flash of his sword, the monster’s head came flying off.

“Oh my gosh! I knew Sirius was strong from the battle at Lent, but I didn’t know he was *this* strong!”

Back then, I was the only saint at the scene, so the main thing on my mind was doing *something* to help. Although I got a sense of how strong both sides were in that battle, now I felt more like a captive audience member.

Oh, rats! I was here to observe the saints. “*Time to study up!*” I told myself as I shifted my gaze to Captain Adara and Vice-Captain Mirfak.

The two saints kept their distance from the knights. Surprisingly, they were further from the action than I was in my own battle in the forest. Was this normal?

“Oh dear! I bet everyone thought I was in the way because I was so close!”

I'm sure the knights were nice enough to look the other way since it was my first battle, but I had to do it properly next time. *Okay, I made a memo to myself, I'll stay faaaar away from the knights next time!*

I kept on watching, but the two saints didn't cast a single strength or defense buff.

"Oh, maybe they see how strong the enemy is and decide which spell to cast based on that. Now I feel like a total beginner for casting every spell I could."

I mean, it *was* my first battle. Of course I acted like a beginner. Now that I could clearly see where I lacked compared to the other saints, I really had to thank Sirius and the knights for praising my skills. They were being much too kind!

Meanwhile, the battle raged on. As I watched, my palms sweaty from anticipation, I felt somebody hit my back.

What? Who else was in this forest? I swung around in surprise, only for my feet to miss the ground altogether.

"Whaaaa—?" I squeaked at the same time a golden griffon appeared out of nowhere and lifted me by the back of my dress.

Griffons were dangerous monsters with the head of a hawk and the body of a lion. I hadn't noticed this one get so close because I'd been enraptured by the battle. By the time I realized what was going on, my feet were well off the ground.

"Eeeek!" I wailed.

Sirius's head sprang upward.

Even though he was in the middle of battle, he still reacted to my voice from far away. When he saw that I was in a monster's clutches—and that I was six or seven meters up in the air—his eyes boggled.

He instantly readied his sword as if he was about to throw it, but then his arm stopped mid-motion. It must have occurred to him that I'd fall if he killed the monster.

"Serafina!" he shouted.

Seeing him get so pale, I couldn't help but shout back. "I'm so sorry, Sirius!"

I felt terrible. He was so kind to bring me along to watch the saints, but now here I was, getting swiped up by a monster in the middle of the battle.

It hit me that Sirius was so nice and caring that he might just chase after me, but there were still three fenrir-looking monsters remaining—the others were going to have a rotten time if he left.

"Sirius! Don't you worry! I bet it won't eat meeee!"

So go beat the fenrirs first!

That's what I was trying to yell at him, but I don't think Sirius got the message because he had completely taken his eyes off the battle and was just staring directly up at me. Judging by his expression, he definitely thought that I was just saying stuff to get him to stop worrying. But his despair only lasted for a split second. The next moment, Sirius sheathed his sword and sprinted straight for the griffon.

There's no way, I thought. No matter how great Sirius was, not even he could catch a griffon in flight. And just as I thought, the griffon soared higher—far beyond Sirius's reach.

I waved my hands frantically to show Sirius that I was okay, but his distraught face very quickly disappeared from view.

The griffon took me straight to its nest, just like I thought it would. Griffons generally flocked in groups and built their nests on cliffs overhanging the sea, but sometimes there were ones who stayed on their own. This particular griffon was one of those, and she lived alone in a nest she built for herself in a cave on a steep cliff next to the forest.

Griffons only ever brought their prey to their nests, which meant that I was live bait...although I was pretty sure they only needed that for their children. It was meant to teach the young how to hunt.

I looked around the nest, and there were no baby griffons to be seen. So what was I here for? Maybe she wanted to finish me off at home?

I turned to the griffon nervously. “Madam Griffon, if you’re thinking of eating me, I... Wait, what? You’re giving *me* food?”

The reason my sentence suddenly turned into a question was because the golden griffon hurled something black at me. Since I’d just been talking about food, my first thought was that she was giving me something to eat, but it looked more like a big black furball than a meal.

No, wait. The furball had ears, and it was around the same size as me. I realized that it was a shaggy, fluffy black wolf.

“No, not a wolf, a monster,” I muttered to myself. “A fenrir? Oh, wow! A real one! Oh, but black monsters are special, right?”

Fenrirs were wolf-type monsters with stiff manes on their heads. I hadn’t been sure about the ones from before because I’d been far away, but I could tell for sure that this one was a fenrir—which meant it was pretty high up the monster food chain. It was probably stronger than the griffon.

But what was really interesting was...this one was black. Black was a sign that the monster had strong powers. The Two Great Beasts of the continent were both that color, in fact. One was the black dragon, and the other one was...I forgot exactly, but it wasn’t a fenrir. I was pretty sure those were the only two black monsters you could find on the whole continent.

So what was this shaggy little thing, then? As I peered at the round furball, it wriggled its arms and legs and stared up at me with red eyes.

“Huh?”

I had no idea what this pup was.

But it was definitely black, which meant it was unbelievably strong...

I stared at the black fenrir, trying to get my thoughts in order. Maybe it was because of the Spirit Lord’s blessing, but my eyes were getting better at taking in details by the day. I could tell that the black fenrir was absurdly strong. It was a newborn, though, judging by its size, so maybe it didn’t know how to use the power brimming inside its body.

Was that why the griffon brought me here—to feed it?

“Ah!”

It was at that moment when I noticed all the red feathers scattered around my feet. I picked one up and—yes, it belonged to a griffon. And a much tinier one than usual, at that.

“Oh, is there a red griffon baby here?” I took another look around and noticed the eggshells in the corner of the nest. “Ah! Oh?”

I could piece together what happened based on the clues. I bet the golden griffon gave birth to a red griffon chick. Then maybe the mother caught the black fenrir, hoping to feed it to her child...only for the black fenrir to eat the chick instead.

Being a red griffon, it would have been stronger than other, regular-colored griffons, but the black fenrir was even stronger. In a clash between two babies, black would have beaten red.

“Oh my, the monster world is ruthless...”

I shot a nervous look at the black fenrir, then at the golden griffon beside it. The next thing I knew, the griffon crouched down and used its beak to straighten my hair, which had gotten ruffled from the flight.

When I saw the monster’s tender gaze, a new thought occurred to me. “Oh! Have you mistaken me for your child?”

Come to think of it, I was wearing a red dress and my hair was red. Maybe the griffon mistook me for her chick because I was red all over. Sirius said I looked like a spirit because my dress sleeves flapped in the wind, but who would have thought I’d be mistaken for a monster!

“Oh, I get it,” I said, after some thought. “You must have gone looking for your child after it went missing all of a sudden. You brought me to your nest, thinking the search was over, and you gave me the black fenrir to eat.”

But I wasn’t hungry—and black fenrirs weren’t my thing anyway...

As I stroked the black fenrir’s tummy, wondering what to do, I noticed something slick sticking to my fingers.

“Huh?”

I looked down at my hand in surprise and noticed it was smeared in bright red blood.

My eyes went back to the black fenrir. On second look, its body was covered in wounds. I hadn't realized at first because of all the black fur covering it, but it was bleeding all over. It had only one ear poking out from its fluffy fur—the other was gone.

"Oh dear!"

While I gripped with shock, the black fenrir pulled in its arms and legs, turning back into a black furball. I suppose it smelled danger and brought out its limbs when the griffon threw me to the ground, but then it decided that there was no urgent threat and chose to save its strength instead. Seeing as it was hurt all over, I bet it barely had the energy to stand.

Did the golden griffon wound it? No, I think it was more likely that the griffon found it when it was already injured; that would explain why a weaker monster was able to catch a black fenrir in the first place.

I approached the black furball nervously. After a bit of hesitation, I called out to it: "Um, Little Black Fenrir... If you, um, swear not to eat me, I'll heal your wound, I promise."

I didn't sense any hostility from the black fenrir, maybe because it was weak and exhausted. But from inside the ball of fluff, there was a reaction: Its single ear twitched.

The fur gave way ever so slightly to a pair of red eyes. The black fenrir looked at me carefully, as if taking stock.

And then...it seemed to nod in agreement.

"Oh! So that's a promise, then?" I was just about to remind the black fenrir not to eat me when I remembered that Seven taught me a song and dance that would *"definitely stop monsters from eating you."*

"Oh, right! I forgot I was meant to perform this."

Seven told me to put on a show if I ever crossed paths with danger. It totally slipped my mind, but good thing I remembered it just in time!

I scrambled to my feet and curtsied to the black fenrir and golden griffon. Then I did a dance—with a musical number, of course.

“Hey, you guys, my name’s Serafina!

It’s a bad idea to make me your dinner!

I’ve got red hair, my friend is a spirit.

I might look yummy, but I taste like grit.

I’m full of poison, so you better watch out!

One bite of me and you’ll cringe, no doubt!

Not all that looks tasty is good for you.

So don’t eat me, I’m off the menu!”

I put my hands together in the shape of an X for that last bit.

Phew, I was pretty sure that was all I had to do. I looked at the two monsters, panting. They looked back at me with wide eyes.

“I knew I could count on Seven! Looks like that worked.”

Seven said that if the monsters got entranced by my song and dance, they wouldn’t do anything bad to me. Yup, all it took was a dance to win over monsters and turn them into friends!

I approached the black fenrir, this time with a happy grin on my face. It looked up at me quietly with an expression that I thought looked full of trust.

I stroked its neck, then put both my hands onto its black body. And then I chanted...

“Heal!”

At the sound of my voice, a sparkling red light sprang from my hands and fell onto the black fenrir. Within the blink of an eye, all the wounds on its body disappeared.

The black beast immediately sprang up in surprise. The movement was so

swift and effortless that I got a clear sense of the great power stored in its body.

“Uh-oh...” Flustered, I gazed at the black fenrir. Now that its wounds were healed, the monster was terrifyingly strong. “Well, it *is* a child. The injuries made me think it was weaker than it actually was. Now that it’s healed, you’d think it was another monster entirely.”

Yikes! I thought. *Was it a good idea to heal such a powerful monster?* As I gazed fretfully at the black fenrir, it started wagging its tail.

“O-oh, have you realized that I was the one who healed you? Well, you’re a special type of fenrir, so I bet you’re a really good boy! Phew, I’m glad you aren’t turning on me now that you’re all better.”

The relief sapped all the energy from my body.

The black fenrir nuzzled me as soon as my bum hit the ground. Not to be outdone, the griffon snuggled close to me as well. How nice it was to have two soft and cuddly creatures curl up with me!

I smiled...and my eyelids flickered shut.

Before I knew it, I was feeling really sleepy.

I usually had a nap after lunch every day, but today I went straight to the Saint Knight Brigade after eating. With a full stomach, a shaggy black fenrir, and a fluffy griffon around, it was only natural that a pleasant drowsiness came over me.

We were all about to fall asleep together, but then the two monsters suddenly sprang up, which made my eyes snap open too. I saw the black fenrir at my right, growling at something. To my left, the griffon was beating its wings threateningly.

Startled, I looked over where the two monsters were glaring and saw a whole bunch of yellow eyes gleaming at the cave’s entrance.

“Oh no, a pack of fenrirs?!” I gasped.

The fenrirs had appeared out of nowhere, blocking the entrance.

The griffon had built her nest within a steep cliff, but the cliff itself was slanted diagonally, not vertically. Powerful monsters like fenrirs were probably able to run down the cliff, so...



Uh-oh. I didn't have to count them to know that there was a crowd. I couldn't see how many fenrirs were behind the pack closing off the entrance, but there had to be over fifteen of them for sure.

But I had to wonder: Why would the fenrirs expose themselves to danger by running down a steep cliff?

Before my thoughts could get any further, I heard a low growl to my right.

The black fenrir.

As soon as I remembered its existence, I just knew: *Oh, of course that's what the fenrirs are here for.* In fact, the fenrirs were looking only at the black fenrir and nothing else.

Actually, I had to wonder if these fenrirs were why the black fenrir got so awfully hurt in the first place. That would explain why they were pursuing him—they wanted to finish him off.

"Oh!"

It also hit me that Sirius and the others had been fighting a group of monsters with fenrirs in it. I'd been wondering why they showed up when they were supposed to live deeper in the forest. Now I was certain that those monsters had been after the black fenrir too.

"Gosh, you're all supposed to be friends..."

And yet the pack decided as a group to attack the black fenrir, even though it was just a pup—something the fellow fenrirs should have been protecting.

"What do I do? I dunno how to protect the black fenrir and griffon from so many monsters."

Although I knew it wasn't right to butt into fights between monsters, the black fenrir warmed up to me after I healed it, and the griffon doted on me as its child. I really didn't want to see them hurt.

But although I wanted to protect the black fenrir, it stepped out in front of me. It was a mind-boggling sight. "What?! Y-you're protecting *me* from the monsters?!"

Monsters cared about protecting themselves before anything else—so why did the black fenrir jump in front of me and bare its fangs at the others? It looked like it was raring for a fight.

As I puzzled over this strange sight, the golden griffon stepped in front of me too, as if she didn't want to be outdone.

"Huh? Aren't griffons supposed to be weaker than fenrirs? Why is this one trying to pick a fight?"

It was unheard of in the natural world. As I gaped at the strange scene unfolding in front of me, one of the fenrirs suddenly lunged forward.

"Ahh!" I shrank back.

The black fenrir jumped out to block it, sinking his teeth into the other fenrir's neck. The beast fell to the ground, writhing furiously.

"Oh my!"

The moment the black fenrir landed on the ground, there was an eerie cracking sound, and streams of blood poured out of the other fenrir's mouth. Shockingly, the tiny pup took down a massive fenrir many times its size.

The black fenrir was swifter and stronger than the others—watching it fight confirmed it for me. Given how it was wounded earlier while the other fenrirs were unharmed, you'd think the black fenrir was much weaker. But right now, the black fenrir was capable of wiping the floor with the rest. It must have gained this strength over a very short period of time. That...was a scary pace.

The other fenrirs must have caught on to this too, because they took a few steps back, bristling with caution. But still...my heart pounded in fear. There were way more of them. As I tried to steady my breathing, I clenched my fists—I *had* to fight.

"O-okay! So it's come to this! Time to unveil my Serafina Punch!"

I raised my fists as the fenrirs came rushing in, one after the other.

"Ahh! Eeeek!"

My desperate attempt at throwing a punch went nowhere—my body froze up entirely.

Before the first fenrir could get to me, the black fenrir jumped out and sent it flying. Then the griffon instantly swooped in for a follow-up attack. (Did they set up a silent communication pipeline at some point?).

Those were some impressive skills for sure, but they were still outnumbered. While one of the fenrirs was down, the others set themselves upon the black fenrir and griffon. The two monsters were covered in cuts and gashes in no time flat, but even then, they refused to move out of the way.

They were protecting me. It was clear as day.

“Oh no, what do I...?”

What do I do?

Even if I were to tell them to get out of the way, I couldn’t fight on the front lines like they could. So no, I was in no shape to protect them—but at this rate, they were only going to take even more damage for me.

“Heal!” I chanted, removing their wounds.

But it only worked for an instant. Before long, they got hit with brand new injuries—and they felt the pain every time. It was an endless cycle.

“I’m sorry...” Tears sprouted in my eyes.

I was useless. All I could do was stand by and watch as they took the hits that were meant for me. We were close enough to touch, and so whenever they got hurt, I felt their pain as if it were my own.

But that was only my imagination, really. *They* were the only ones getting injured over and over again.

I felt so rotten.

“Sirius...”

As the tears poured down my face, I murmured *his* name. I wasn’t even hoping for him to come save me—he was just the only thing I could think of.

Sirius was busy fighting the other monsters. He chased after me when the griffon took me, but now I was far out of reach. He didn’t know where the griffon’s nest was either, so I knew there was no hope of him coming for me...

But I called out for him anyway.

The odds of anyone rescuing me at all were almost zero, but if anyone *could* do it, it was Sirius.

That's what I thought.

"Sirius! *Sirius!*"

And then, a split second later, a voice called out back to me.

"Serafina!"

My head jolted up, because it was the voice of the very person I had called for.

"No way..."

Standing at the entrance of the nest with a grim look on his face was Sirius himself.

I tried calling out his name again...but my voice got stuck in my throat because the moment he saw me, his face took on a look I'd never seen before. It hit me that I must have truly gone overboard this time.

Sirius closed his eyes for a brief second as if to pray, before immediately snapping them back open. He drew his sword, his expression a picture of deadly serious intent.

The next moment...there wasn't even a sound. All I saw was the flash of a sword. One of the fenrirs let out a high-pitched snarl and attempted to lunge. But before it could, it fell to the ground, split in two.

"Sirius..."

A wave of relief came over me. Seeing Sirius as cool and strong as always told me that everything was going to be okay. My racing heart finally slowed down.

Looking around the nest with a clear head, I could see what I had to do. I was a saint, after all; there was plenty I could do aside from healing magic. It hadn't even occurred to me until I saw Sirius and stopped panicking.

I whipped my head up. "*Hey, Seven?*"

Seven appeared as soon as I called out for him in the spirit language. *“Hey, Fi, what’s up?”* He was all smiles until he spotted all the fenrirs and the griffon. *“Hold up, what’s going on here?! What’s with all the monsters?!”* He jolted back in surprise.

“Er, um, it’s a long story... I’ll explain later. Could you fight with me right now?”

“Sure thing!” he said crisply, always quick on the uptake. I grinned.

He floated all the way up to the ceiling and started channeling his spirit magic to me. I lifted a hand and unleashed a spell aimed at the black fenrir, the griffon, and, of course, Sirius.

“Heal!”

With that single word, the two monsters and the sole human were back to perfect health.

I was pretty sure that Sirius must have gone through a huge ordeal in order to find me. His uniform was torn up all over, and there was blood dripping from all of his gashes.

“Invigorate! Attack $\times 1.5$; Speed $\times 1.5$!”

I hesitated for a moment, but I ended up casting buffs on Sirius. He was the only knight in the area, and there were still ten fenrirs left to beat. Also, I was pretty sure that Sirius would try to take down all the monsters by himself—entirely for my sake.

The strength he showed a moment ago was clearly beyond a normal human’s limits. Most people couldn’t slice a fenrir in two with pure upper body strength alone. If he was going to insist on pushing himself harder than anyone else, then the least I could do as a saint was lend him my fullest power.

Finally, I looked at the black fenrir and griffon. Could I buff them too? Probably. But monsters were independent and generally relied purely on their own strength to get by. There was a chance they wouldn’t appreciate the outside help. Besides, I had no idea what they would do with the extra strength. Maybe they wouldn’t be able to use it, or maybe they’d be afraid to even use their normal strength.

After going back and forth about it in my mind, I decided not to cast magic on the two monsters because of all the uncertainty. Besides, now that Sirius was here, we had all the fighting power we needed...

I clasped my hands together tightly and turned my eyes to Sirius once more.

As far as I knew, a single knight couldn't possibly take down a fenrir. Unbelievably, though, Sirius was lopping them down one after the other. Next to him, the black fenrir and griffon helped in the attack. Of course, there were still a lot of fenrirs left, so the three fighters on our side still got plenty hurt - after that...

But before long, Sirius skewered the last fenrir. When he pulled out his sword, there was a sort of *shfff* sound, and the beast crumpled to the ground.

I clenched the front of my dress and cast a nervous look around. The only ones still standing were me, Sirius, the black fenrir, and the griffon. All the fenrirs were collapsed on the ground—I was pretty certain that was all of them, at least.

We were safe now, right? That was what my brain was telling me, but my body stayed frozen. I couldn't even make a sound.

But when I saw Sirius shake the blood off his sword and return it to its sheath, a bit of the tension left my body. "*Sirius*," I was about to call his name, but I only managed to open my mouth before my voice got stuck in my throat.

You see, I thought that Sirius was just going to come close to me—I didn't expect him to march all the way up to me, scoop me up in his arms, and squeeze my body tightly.

"Aaack!"

Sirius was a powerful knight—*and* he had a strengthening buff on. A proper hug from him was absolutely *strangling*. The noise that squeaked out of my mouth sounded like a dying frog. I seriously thought I was getting squeezed to death.

Sirius quickly snapped to his senses and relaxed his grip. "Are you all right, Serafina?!"

“Haa...haa... Phew. Wowee, the air tastes nice.”

Sirius gazed down sheepishly at my bright red face. Then his clean-cut features twisted sharply. “Oh, Serafina, I’m so glad you’re safe. If something happened to you...I...”

“Nothing would’ve happened! Not with me around!”

Seven sure was being haughty for someone who took longer to get here than Sirius did. But, well, he *was* napping until I summoned him, and I did indeed feel at ease with him around.

I grinned. “You’re right, Seven. Thank you! We all pulled through today because of you.”

Seven seemed to sense something, because he blinked for a moment and looked off into the distance. *“You’re welcome!”* he answered, speaking quicker than usual. *“Hm, well, I’ll let you off lightly today, Sirius, as thanks for helping Fi. Tootles!”*

And with that, he disappeared without even waiting for a response.

“Where did your cheeky spirit go?” Sirius asked, looking confused. He was probably wondering why Seven ran off without even getting through half his usual rant. My spirit friend always really let Sirius have it whenever he was upset with him.

“I think he went back to the castle garden,” I said. “He doesn’t want to meet the other saints’ spirits, or so he says.”

“Oh, I see,” Sirius said with a little nod, looking exhausted.

I was still in his arms. So to thank him, I gave *him* a big hug this time. “Thanks for coming to save me, Sirius! You were a big help to everyone.”

By “everyone,” I was referring to me, the black fenrir, and the griffon.

But Sirius’s face took on a dark scowl, the complete opposite of my sunny smile. “No, I should’ve rescued you before you got dragged into this nest. It’s my fault you ended up here in the first place.”

From his agonized expression, I could tell how deeply he must have been worrying.

“Oh, don’t say that! It all happened because I wanted to watch the saints from a distance.”

I insisted that Sirius had nothing to do with it, but he wasn’t buying it. “No, you shouldn’t have been so far away, and I should’ve put a knight with you.”

“Ohh, that’s smart. It’s amazing how you can come up with so many ideas. Just keep it in mind for next time, okay? No use crying over past mistakes.” I clung to Sirius’s neck, thinking about how tough it must be to be a genius with a lot of responsibility. “Hey, Sirius. I was crying until you came for me, but now that you’re here, I’m smiling. Thank you, Sirius! So until you say ‘you’re welcome’ and admit you did good, I won’t stop thanking you!”

“Serafina, I...”

“Thank you, Sirius! Thank you, Sirius! Thank you, Sirius! Thank you, Sirius! Thank you—”

“I get it, Serafina! You’re...welcome.”

Sirius didn’t sound like he meant it. He still looked like he thought of himself as a screwup. But I didn’t say it out loud.

Instead, I smiled at him. “Sirius, thanks for coming to my rescue! You’re my knight in shining armor.”

Sirius frowned uneasily at what I said. “Me? Today’s the first time I’ve felt like such a pathetic excuse for a knight. I was powerless and couldn’t keep my promise.”

“Promise?” I tilted my head, confused about what this promise was.

Sirius nodded with a completely straight face. “Yeah. I’m the one who dragged you out of the Forest of Lent. And because of that, I made a vow to you as a knight that I would give you the same happiness you got from there. I told you I’d show you what’s beautiful about the world. But today, I only gave you fear and anxiety.”

“Oh, Sirius!” I looked at him, startled at the extent of his devotion and sense of duty. “Yeah, I was scared when all those fenrirs attacked, but now I’m okay, all because you came. Besides, making me happy or showing me what’s

beautiful doesn't only mean giving me nice things, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

Sirius's shocked expression was making *me* feel surprised. "Well, you know, it's impossible for everything to be completely perfect. Like yesterday's dinner. There were things I liked and things I didn't like in it. But it had more of the things I liked, so when I finished, I thought, 'That was yummy.' That's what I'm talking about. Even if some things are a little sad or scary, it's fine as long as most of it was fun and happy."

That was my best attempt at an explanation, but Sirius shook his head to it. "Serafina, I'm not going to settle for second best."

What a stubborn and single-minded knight. I pulled on the collar of his uniform, brought my mouth to his ear, and whispered a secret that was only for him. "Sirius, I want to protect you as a saint. This is a secret, but when *you're* happy, I'm happy."

Plus, I made a decision, one which was even *more* secret.

I'll train real hard and become an awesome saint who can protect you, no matter how little I am.

"Serafina!" Sirius cried out my name.

I stiffened—he couldn't have heard my inner voice. I pulled my mouth away from his ear and peered at his face.

What I saw made my eyes widen. "Sirius?"

He reacted by taking one of his hands from my back and covering his face with it. "You...must be some kind of spirit. You're a handful, is all I can say. I'm the vice-commander of the Horned Beast Knights, and I'm still no match for you. Not much I can do about it when you beat me down by saving me."

"Sirius?" I tilted my head, not understanding what he was saying, but Sirius kept his hand over his face and didn't even notice my confusion.

"You save me, you fill my heart," he went on, still hiding himself from me. "I can't see anything in it for you. In fact, there's only a downside since I might get clingy. Ah, maybe I am just a kidnapper."

This reminded me of what Sirius said once back in the castle hallway: *“Didn’t the king and queen tell you to watch out for kidnappers because you’re too cute?”*

He was joking, of course, and we laughed about it. But...maybe Sirius thought I was so cute he wanted to kidnap me? Now that was a happy thought—why, it sounded great!

I grinned. “So what you’re saying is that you want to be with me foreeeever and ever? I like the sound of that!”

“Serafina...that’s enough temptation,” Sirius groaned.

With a big shake of his head, he put me to the ground. Then he started repeating words like he was chanting something to himself.

“You’re the vice-commander of the Horned Beast Knights, got it? You’re the vice-commander of the Horned Beast Knights.”

The black fenrir and the griffon quickly took the chance to sidle up to me. The black fenrir dove straight into my arms—what joy! I hugged the pup tightly. Meanwhile, the griffon groomed my frizzled hair back into shape with its beak.

Sirius remained close by, peering at the two monsters with deep wariness. Eventually, he seemed to run out of patience, and he said, “Serafina, care to explain those two? I refrained from cutting them down in the battle because I could tell that they were protecting you...but the enemy of my enemy isn’t literally my friend, you know.”

“So, um, you see...”

Yup, I’d noticed that *he’d* noticed. He didn’t lay a hand on the two monsters because he saw they were fighting the fenrirs to protect me. However, the fact that he scooped me up away from the monsters after the battle was a sign that he wasn’t totally relaxed. Even now, he had a hand on his sword, prepared to strike at any moment.

It was obvious that he still didn’t trust the two monsters since he was still on guard against a possible attack. I had to explain that these monsters were my friends so that he could properly understand.

I gave a reassuring look at the two monsters by my side before clasping my hands together and turning to Sirius. “This golden griffon sees me as her missing chick. And this black fenrir got attached to me after I healed its wounds. They both protected me from the fenrirs.”

“I see...but...”

Sirius looked like he wasn’t about to let the subject go, but then a stream of anxious voices came sounding from outside the nest.

“Are you okay, Vice-Commander Sirius?!”

“You’re in that hole, right? Hold on, we’re coming for you!”

“Hang in there, Lady Serafina!”

“Vice-Commander! Lady Serafina!”

Captain Adara, Vice-Captain Mirfak, and the three knights were calling out to us.

“They’re finally here,” Sirius said.

He tried to pick me up, so I quickly reached down to the ground and held the black fenrir. Sirius grimaced as if he wanted to make a comment, but he held back and strode briskly to the cave’s entrance. The griffon trotted after him.

When we came out from the hole, five voices cheered: “Phew! You’re alive!”

I felt bad about their over-the-top joy. *Oops, I must have worried them sick.*

Meanwhile, Sirius started unbuttoning the jacket of his knight uniform. It looked like his plan was to put me in his jacket and carry me down the cliff.

“Oh no, won’t doing that tire you out?” I asked.

“Heh, so my intentions aren’t ‘dangerous,’ just ‘tiring,’ are they? I take it you’re finally starting to trust me?” Sirius said.

I rolled my eyes at him and then turned to the griffon. “Madam Griffon, I know it’s a bit of a strain on you, but could you help take us down the cliff?”

The griffon gave a clear nod.

Oh, goodie! I looked up at Sirius. “The griffon’s willing to help us down.”

“You’re not serious? Since when have you been able to converse with monsters?”

“Huh?”

Looking at Sirius’s incredulous face, I realized that he’d gotten the wrong idea. He seemed to think that since I could talk with Seven, who was a spirit, I could talk to monsters as well. We obviously couldn’t understand each other—we basically communicated through vibes...but something told me that Sirius wouldn’t go along with something based on “vibes.”

“Tee hee hee, the weather’s so nice today, I bet it gave me all kinds of powers.”

So I avoided Sirius’s eyes and gave a sort of nonsense answer.

But maybe he was used to me saying nonsense on the regular, because he just said, “All right,” and accepted my theory.

After that, I clutched the black fenrir, while Sirius held me with one hand and the griffon’s leg with the other.

“Huuuuuh?!”

“Whaaaat?”

As the griffon took flight, shouts of disbelief rang out at the bottom of the cliff. From everyone else’s perspective, the griffon was the bad guy who snatched me away. No wonder they couldn’t wrap their heads around what was going on.

The griffon didn’t seem to mind, though. She traced an elegant circle in the air before making a slow landing.

When we were a few meters off the ground, Sirius let go of the griffon. He clutched me with both arms and fell safely on the grass. The other humans came running to us, shouting excitedly.

The black fenrir seemed surprised by the commotion. As soon as Sirius let me down, the pup jumped out my arms and scampered a short distance away.

“I’m so glad you’re unharmed, Vice-Commander! Princess Serafina!”

“Ohhhh, thank goodness!”

The knights and saints cheered with visible relief. It made me realize all over again how much I must have worried them.

My face fell, and I said, “I’m soooo sorry for all the fuss! I’ll make sure to finish everything on my plate from now on so I’ll be too heavy for a griffon to pick me up!”

But Captain Adara put a stop to my earnest suggestion. “You’ll make yourself sick well before you get *that* heavy, so please refrain from doing that.”

Then she and Vice-Captain Mirfak bowed their heads at the same time. “Your Highness Princess Serafina, we deeply apologize for our disrespectful conduct.”

I blinked, startled at the “Your Highness.” Wasn’t that supposed to be under wraps? “Umm, I’m not Princess Serafina. I’m Seraphi, a distant relative of Sirius,” I said hurriedly, remembering how I’d promised Sirius to keep my identity hidden.

At the mention of Sirius’s name, Captain Adara spoke up: “Vice-Commander Sirius kept referring to you as ‘Serafina’ when you disappeared.”

“Serafina is, um, a nickname for Seraphi,” I insisted (although I wasn’t quite sure if nicknames were allowed to be longer than the full name).

But then Captain Adara continued with a completely stone-cold expression: “The vice-commander has very few relatives. The only ‘extended family’ he has within our kingdom are members of royalty. To be perfectly frank, we did not think you were royalty at first, so when the vice-commander introduced you as ‘family,’ neither of us believed him. We assumed he was lying—hence our disgraceful conduct. We cannot apologize enough for the distress we put you through.”

Um, so basically, they were suspicious of my background from the start? And there was no point trying to hide it anymore?

“...I am Serafina. Second princess of the royal family.” Now that I knew that hiding it was no use, I easily admitted defeat.

When I bowed my head, Captain Adara, Vice-Captain Mirfak, and even the three knights did the same thing.

Then the two saints came up to us, peered at Sirius's body at close range, and sighed. "Your uniform is torn up all over, but you don't have a scratch on you. Your Highness, you must have healed him, I take it?"

"Er, um, yes." I nodded. Sirius told me earlier to stay quiet about my abilities, but I figured that there was no harm in admitting to this one since every saint could use healing magic.

Their eyes widened in disbelief. "What remarkable power. Vice-Commander Sirius didn't stop to get healed after he fended off the monsters chasing us. His wounds were terribly deep when he came rushing to you, and yet you managed to heal them all without even calling a spirit. And at such a young age too!"

"Er, um, uh...I suppose." I was going to deny it at first, but then I stopped myself. I actually did call for Seven, but then again, I healed the black fenrir and the griffon without his help, so the saints technically weren't wrong.

Captain Adara brought a hand to her chest and peered straight at me. "I apologize once again for my incivility, Your Highness. For a self-taught saint to unleash such powerful healing magic is a sign of extraordinary talent. Regardless, I am deeply honored that you came for my instruction. I would be more than happy for you to observe our magic again when your schedule permits."

"Oh my! Thank you so much! I'll come visit you again for sure!" I walked over to Captain Adara and squeezed her hand on impulse.

The captain reacted with a breathtaking smile—and as if on cue, Sirius picked me up. "I'm glad we're all on the same page now. Sorry for hiding Serafina's identity, but you should have had a bit more forethought about the possibilities. Your conduct was unsuitable for royalty," he said coldly.

Captain Adara and Vice-Captain Mirfak bowed wordlessly in response.

"And you, Serafina, acted superbly. You abided carefully to my instructions and did your best to keep your secret. You get full marks."

"Huh? S-Sirius?"

I mean, sure, I was just a kid, but wasn't Sirius showing *too* much favoritism? But before I could say as much, though, I noticed one of the knights was carrying what looked like a red bundle of feathers.

"No way..."

There was a red griffon chick in his arms.

"How did you find that little one?" I asked.

"Oh, it was stuck in a crack in the ground not far from here. I think it fell from its nest and couldn't find its way back."

The knight went on to say that the mother probably went out to search for the chick after it fell. Maybe so, but I couldn't help but wonder: What if the baby griffon knew it would get eaten by the black fenrir when it came running down the cliff? Perhaps the chick slipped out when the black fenrir was about to attack. That would mean this little one was a clever bird indeed, running when it sensed danger to its life.

"We suspect this chick belongs to the griffon that abducted you, so we were planning to use it as leverage."

"What? Oh no, you mustn't!"

I jumped out of Sirius's arms, sprinted to the knight, and yanked the baby griffon from him. I then quickly ran over to the mother, who was standing some distance away, and presented the chick to her.

The griffon gave a startled jump and looked at me and the chick in turn. I placed the chick at the griffon's feet to reassure her...and at that moment, the little one scampered to its mother and started making high-pitched squawks. The feathers on its head were completely ruffled.

The griffon gazed softly at her chick's unruly head before gently pecking it back into shape. Awww, how wholesome.

"What a relief." I sighed. "I'm so glad the baby bird is okay!"

Okay, what next?

My eyes turned to the black fenrir standing a short way off. I walked over and patted it on the head. "Thank you too, black fenrir. We're all going back home

now—I hope you grow up nice and strong.”

“Serafina.” At this point, Sirius, who had made sure to stick close behind me, spoke up. “I understand that these monsters helped you out. As much as I’d like to let them go, monsters hurt people at the end of the day—it’s in their nature. The griffon is one thing, but black monsters are considered calamities. They’re not creatures you can just *let off the hook*.”

He seemed firm about that. “But, Sirius, they saved me,” I pleaded. “So can’t you look the other way, just this once?”

“Serafina. You saw for yourself how the fenrirs left their ravine—their safe zone—to chase after the black fenrir. I’m sure they saw this pup as a future threat to the pack.”

“Yeah...” I nodded in agreement; I’d been thinking the same thing.

“Fenrirs normally raise their young as a pack,” Sirius went on—I could tell he was trying to persuade me. “But this black fenrir’s birth gave them so much fear that they broke their custom. It’s why they tried to kill it...and yet, even as a newborn, it still managed to make it this far.”

I understood what Sirius was trying to say.

If the black fenrir could fight toe to toe with the adult fenrirs as just a little pup, then how terrifying would it be as an adult? His concern totally made sense. But...

“Sirius, this pup is a smart cookie! He understands what I say. I’ll tell him to never attack people ever. So please!”

“Serafina.”

“I’m a saint! I cast my magic to save them...”

Sirius reacted to my desperate plea with expressionless silence. When I refused to look away, he let out a weary sigh.

After a very long pause, he said...

“You’re a true saint, aren’t you? You try to save every creature.”

“Sirius.”

“Just this once.” Sirius pulled his hand away from his sword. “Next time I cross paths with it, I’ll slay it,” he said, sounding defeated.

I jumped up and gave him a hug. “Thank you, Sirius!”

Monsters hurt people—and it was Sirius’s duty as a knight to protect people from the monsters. It only made sense that he would try to slay any monster he saw.

But...the black fenrir and griffon weren’t hostile—they saved me. So I wanted to return the favor.

Besides, the fenrirs and griffons normally lived deeper in the forests and mountains. They rarely came down to human settlements, and they didn’t typically attack people. What’s more, I got the vague feeling that they understood me somehow. I was pretty sure that they would take what I said to heart.

I looked at the black fenrir and slowly crouched down in front of it. It came toward me, nuzzling my neck affectionately, and I stroked its neck gently.

“Thank you so much for saving me. I’m happy we became friends. And...I’m sorry. You have to live on your own from now on.” I took a deep breath. “Hey, Little Black Fenrir, promise me one thing—never ever attack people. Then we can be friends forever.”

“Arf!” the black fenrir barked back without a lick of hesitation. Its red eyes peered straight into mine, giving me the feeling that it understood and agreed to what I was saying.

“Thank you.” I stroked its firm mane. “Live strong...Little Black Fenrir.”

The black fenrir must have understood that this was goodbye, because it gazed up at the sky and let out a howl.

“Awoooooo!”

It then ran deep into the forest without looking back.

In nature, only the strong survived. There was no guarantee that a pup—even a black fenrir—would live to see another day.

But still, I prayed from the bottom of my heart that this one would pull through.

After that, I made a similar request to the griffon and her child and then said goodbye. The two of them also nodded as if they understood what I said, then returned to their nest.

A strained silence fell over the scene as soon as the monsters were gone.

The first to break the silence was—as you’d expect—one of the good-natured knights. “Well, today was...well, how do I say it? Everything was so surreal, I can’t make heads or tails of it!”

He said that, but his eyes were sparkling as if he’d just had the time of his life.

One of the other knights gave a big nod in agreement, looking just as entertained. “Yeah, when Princess Serafina got swiped, Vice-Commander Sirius cut through those beastly fenrirs like they were chumps! And to top it off, we picked up a mutant griffon, saw a black monster, *and* let it run off... Chaos, to put it simply!”

Then the third knight spoke up. “Nah, the biggest surprise was when Serafina yelled ‘Don’t you worry! I bet it won’t eat meeee!’ while the monster was carrying her off. I’d have been bawling in fright if I were her.”

At this point, Sirius’s cheek twitched. “Exactly. Just where did Serafina get the confidence to say that? It was on my mind the whole time I was running through the forest.” Then he turned and stared at me. “Serafina, I expect a full explanation from you.”

“Ooooh...”

I clammed up, sensing that it might not be a good idea to show him the dance Seven told me about.

But then Sirius’s mouth curled in amusement. “You don’t need to tell me today. You’re safe—that’s all that matters. Now then, shall we head back?” he suggested.

“Yes, sir!”

Everyone was in sound agreement about that.

Unfortunately, it took quite a bit of time to get back to the entrance of the forest, since the griffon's nest had been very deep in the woods. Sirius offered to carry me because he was worried about me getting tired, but I waved both my arms to tell him no.

"Sirius, you've done a lot of fighting already. I'll walk by myself."

"But it's a long way to the entrance—too far for you to walk." He looked at me worriedly.

"It sure is! Oh, but it's fun walking home together!" I said cheerfully. "It's like we're coming back from a picnic!"

But for some reason, everyone recoiled as if I'd declared a death sentence.

"A picnic!"

Oh yeah, Vice-Captain Mirfak did say something along the lines of "Young Seraphi is only going to remember this day as a picnic." And then Sirius told her in no uncertain terms...

"If Seraphi only remembers this as a picnic, then it will mean that my knights and your magic failed to impress! If that ends up being the case, then I would feel ashamed of my skills!"

Recalling that conversation, Sirius threw his head up in total defeat.

"Okay. Point taken."

Two weeks later, I spotted a hole in my personal garden. It was juuuust big enough for me to crawl inside. My curiosity won out, and I got on all fours...only to find the black fenrir waiting.

"Whaaaaat?!" I was flabbergasted.

Meanwhile, the black fenrir wagged its tail in delight and jumped at me. The next moment, it was on top of me, licking my face.

Uh-oh, now what? I thought, but gosh darn it! The black fenrir was soooo

cute, with the way it was wagging its whole tail. I couldn't help but cling to its soft and fluffy neck. Yeah, I knew it was a monster, but this one wouldn't do anything bad to me, right?

And hey, I didn't have a reputation for being the smartest. *Of course* I wouldn't notice a lone wolf pup in this massive garden. *Right?*

From that day forth, I pretended not to notice the black fenrir, not even telling Sirius.

Serafina's Decision and Sirius's Vow

THE DAY AFTER the Saint Knight Brigade visit, I was a nervous wreck. I'd gone into that visit all fired up, thinking, "I'm gonna learn from the saints!" but then a monster plucked me away, and in the end, I didn't even get to watch a full battle. I was sure that Sirius would tell me off.

But surprisingly, he didn't scold me at all. In fact, in the three times I'd met him since, he didn't mention the incident once.

Weeeell, Sirius can be bighearted like that, I thought, so I bet he's letting me off the hook. So that night, I pranced over to Sirius's room, where I munched on some snacks and read a book.

Then Sirius said, "Ah," as if he had just thought of something. "By the way, Serafina, for my future reference: Why did you say 'Don't you worry! I bet it won't eat meeee!' when the griffon took you yesterday?"

"Asdfghj!"

It was then that I remembered.

Sirius said: *"Just where did Serafina get the confidence to say that? It was on my mind the whole time I was running through the forest. Serafina, I expect a full explanation from you."* Basically, he was waiting for the right time to grill me all about it.

Sirius squinted suspiciously at my startled face. *"Asdfghj? Is that some kind of chant? I'm not versed in healing magic, so I don't quite understand what you're saying. Explain it to me simply."*

What a funny coincidence.

I had no idea what the "Asdfghj" meant, and I didn't have the foggiest clue what Sirius meant by "versed" either. Also, I had the feeling that my answer to his question would be *very* humiliating...but it wasn't like I could avoid answering him either.

Seeing his stubbornly expectant face, I gave up and said, "Okay, you see,

Seven taught me a song and dance that would *definitely* stop monsters from eating me.”

Sirius stared skeptically. “A song and dance? You thought *that* would do something against a monster? And it was your prankster spirit that gave you the idea?”

Oh dear, Sirius didn’t seem to like my answer. But hey, it worked in the end, right?

I stood up from the sofa and moved over to Sirius. “Do you want me to show it to you?”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

“Look at me and pretend you’re a monster.”

Sirius folded his arms and watched as I spread my arms for the first dance move. And then I began to sing:

“Hey, you guys, my name’s Serafina!

It’s a bad idea to make me your dinner!

I’ve got red hair, my friend is a spirit.

I might look yummy, but I taste like grit.

I’m full of poison, so you better watch out!

One bite of me and you’ll cringe, no doubt!

Not all that looks tasty is good for you.

So don’t eat me, I’m off the menu!”

I finished off by putting my arms together in a big X shape.

Wowee, I sure nailed that one! Panting, I looked at Sirius. He stared back at me, not even blinking. Heh, so I was *that* good—I grinned.

“What do you think, Sirius—no, Monster Sirius?”

“I’m a monster now?!”

“Uh-huh, I told you to pretend. The dance only works on monsters, not humans,” I explained, exactly as Seven told it to me. “It won’t have any effect if you see yourself as human!”

Sirius frowned and fell silent.

“Sirius?” I nudged him, confused.

All of a sudden, he shoved a hand into his hair and started ruffling it furiously. “True, there are poisons that work selectively on certain targets, like weed and bug killers. But...I have to question whether that applies to your dance. Just because it does nothing on me, a human, doesn’t mean it’ll work against a monster. Or would it?”

Seeing Sirius clutch his head in confusion made me worry that the dance might have worked a little *too* well against him. “S-Sirius, are you okay? Did you get too into being a monster and now you’re all hurt?”

“No, I... Sorry, but I was never going to be a monster.” Sirius sounded like he was trying to say something, but his words got all muffled halfway through.

So I said, “Anyway, the griffon and black fenrir didn’t attack me when I did the dance.”

“Oh, really?” Sirius lowered his hands from his head and gave me a look of deep skepticism.

To which I replied cheerfully: “Yup!”

For a moment, he was silent. Then finally, he said, “Okay. So you believe that the monsters didn’t eat you because of the dance your spirit taught you. Do I have that about right? It all sounds fishy to me, though, I have to say.”

“Oh, Sirius, you never believe anything! Actually, I also came up with my own idea for not getting eaten, but I went with the performance because Seven said that would work for sure.”

Sirius straightened up. “What was your idea?” he asked cautiously.

So I told him the theory I came up with a while back. “So you know how because I’m a saint, I can dispel any poison I take? I figured I could do the

opposite and fill my body with poison if a monster tried to attack.”

Judging by his shock, my idea must not have occurred to Sirius. “What?!” he yelled, more loudly than usual.

Wow, my idea had to be great if it could take Sirius by surprise. *Nice going, me!* “I’ve never tried it out, so I don’t know if it would actually work. I bet it would hurt loads so I couldn’t do it for long, but it would probably be a strong warning to the monsters, right?”

Sirius said nothing.

“They’d take one bite of me and run away in pain! Then I’d dispel the poison and heal the bit they chewed off me! Easy-peasy! Oh, but when I told Seven my idea he got really flustered and said, ‘No, no, anything but *that*! I know a dance that works way better!’” That reminded me of an important detail. “Oh yeah, he also said I should call for him before I ever do it. I forgot about that part!” I said, clapping my hands together in apology.

When I looked up at Sirius, his face was deathly pale. “Oh...now I get it. The point of that weird dance was to be a diversion while calling for your spirit. Well, that makes sense, at least.”

“Uhh, Sirius?” I pouted—I couldn’t believe he called my dance “weird.”

But he seemed too preoccupied to care about what I was doing. “I’d suggest the same thing in your spirit’s shoes,” he went on, still looking awfully pale. “Because your idea is the worst I’ve ever heard! No sane person would sacrifice their body like that! I can understand why your spirit would try to stop you from trying that.”

Sirius covered his face with both hands and sank into the sofa in exhaustion.

“All right, Serafina, I get the picture, so let’s not dwell on the reasoning any further.” He sighed. “I suppose your spirit incorporated his disgruntlement in the song—hence the heavy allusion to poison in the lyrics. Either way, this means you need to be kept under guard. In any case, what book were you reading?”

With a fed-up look, Sirius turned the conversation away from the dance in favor of the book I was reading—so I showed him the cover.

"Oh, I see, the *Herb Almanac*. This is for advanced students, isn't it? You're an eager learner, Serafina." His expression eased into a smile.

He sounded impressed, but I couldn't help but think of what my three big brothers said.

"Serafina, you're a real dummy, you know that?"

"You're six, and you can't even write? You're not living up to your royal name, that's for sure!"

"And what're with those weird dances you do for no reason? You don't have a lick of common sense!"

It was logical for them to say that. I didn't know much about the world, and plus I was behind on my studies. Of course I failed as royalty.

I hung my head and said gloomily, "It's nice of you to praise me, Sirius, but I'm only good at learning saint stuff. I can't write, and I'm always dancing without thinking. I'm no good as a princess."

"Don't say that, Serafina! You were blind for so many years! Of course it's going to take you time to pick up those things. As for your impulsive dances... well, that's just your personality. You don't need to change that about yourself."

Aww, he earnestly tried to cheer me up. I was so happy that I gave him a big hug. "Thank you, Sirius! But it's my fault for not trying when I already know where I'm not good enough. I put all my effort into being a good saint instead of a good princess 'cause I'd rather heal people than go to parties."

"Serafina..." Sirius blinked, looking conflicted.

I decided to tell him something that had been weighing down on me since the other day, when I nodded along to what he said even though my heart wasn't in it. "You told me before that I made the choice to become a saint too quick. But I know what I want to be. Even when I'm ten or fifteen, I'll still make the same choice."

Sirius frowned and blinked in silence.

To me, he looked uneasy. I bet he was surprised by what I said and couldn't

figure out how to react.

It was now or never. So I pleaded: "I'll tell Father! If he lets me become a saint, I'll work really, really hard! And then...could I fight with you?"

"Serafina..."

Sirius's voice sounded shaky. I knew that now was the time to strike. With my arms still around him, I lifted my head and smiled.

Then I told him a secret.

"Hey, Sirius. The reason I decided to go to the royal capital is because I wanted to protect you."

"Serafina!"

The moment he heard my words, Sirius moaned my name and buried his forehead against my shoulder.

"Serafina, I told you to put off going to battle until you were grown up... It's not a decision I made lightly. Don't think you can change my mind just like that."

"I'm sorry." My words sounded insincere even to my own ears.

Sirius lifted his head and peered at me, biting his lip. We were so close, I felt sucked into his eyes. "What am I supposed to do about such an adorable, one-of-a-kind saint?"

Oh my, what a stupid question.

I'd been repeating the same thing for ages, so of course I was going to say it again now. "Take me with you, Sirius! I wanna be a saint who can protect you," I declared with my biggest smile.

Sirius closed his eyes and sighed very deeply. "You know how to get me." He picked me up, strode to the window, and said, in a very tired voice, "Serafina, just a simple sentence from you can throw me straight off track. You've slayed the part of me that listens to reason. All that's left is my selfish, egomaniacal soul..."

He paused and then said...

“I’ve always dearly wanted you to be a saint. I’m not going to stop you anymore.”

“Sirius!” I wrapped my arms around his neck in glee.

He stroked my head gently. “Serafina, the night is dark, but when the sun rises, it’ll be a new day for the kingdom... Let’s go and see the king then. I’ll ask if you can take your first step to becoming a saint.”

“Thank you so much, Sirius!”

When I let go of his neck and smiled at him, he gazed back at me seriously. “I’m the one who should be thanking you,” he said in a voice choked with emotion. “Thank you, Serafina. I don’t know how deep your resolve goes, but I know you are sincere. I will never forget your decision today. Here and now, I swear to you as a knight that I will protect you for my entire life.”

“Wow! Oh, gosh. Um?” My eyes widened—that was a really, *really* heavy vow.

Sirius chuckled in amusement. “Ha ha ha, this isn’t the right place for that. I’ll make a proper vow befitting of you some other time. But just for this moment, let me swear to be your eternal knight.”

“Gosh, Sirius...”

I looked at him worriedly, but his expression was totally sunny. There was no point in trying to stop him.

“Tee hee hee!” I couldn’t help but giggle. “Okay, then I’ll be your saint!”

“Well, now... How could I refuse such a gracious offer?”

At his words, he and I locked eyes and declared our vows, smiling all the while.

That night, the kingdom’s strongest knight and saint found each other.

Point of View: Sirius

The Tragic Tale of the Poetry Recital

“SHE’S FLUNKING POETRY?”

I couldn’t say I was happy when I saw Serafina’s academic report.

Serafina’s education was entirely within my jurisdiction. I kept track of her studies and built a month-to-month curriculum that took into account the overall balance of her workload. So how could the report from her poetry tutor say that she was doing so poorly?

“‘Her poems are unique and eccentric. By most sensibilities, they would be considered bottom-tier.’ This can’t be!” As I read through the report, I shot a look at the attendant by my side. “Poetry is all about saying things like how the stars glimmer at night or how love brings you pain—things like that. Everyone’s got a different sense for these things. The tutor must not have a good grasp on Serafina’s personality if they are rating her skills so poorly.”

In spite of what the report said, it was wrong to expect a six-year-old to have an expressive grasp on language to begin with. Wasn’t it better to validate the emotions she was describing?

As I was scowling at the report, the attendant said meekly, “A poet has to be a master at their craft to teach a princess. Sir Sirius, you’re always saying it’s best to get both sides of a story, so why don’t you ask Princess Serafina for her opinion?”

“That makes sense.”

I nodded and headed for Serafina’s chambers.

Fortunately, Serafina was in her room reading a book. I took a seat next to her and asked her casually about her poetry lessons.

Her eyes immediately lit up, and she forgot all about the book on her lap. “I love my poetry lessons! I’m allowed to say whatever I’m feeling!”

But then her face clouded over.

“Oh, but when I say exactly what I’m thinking, they tell me I’m being ‘too liberal.’ I thought I was doing good, so what have I got wrong?” she muttered, before looking at my face. “Sirius, would you like to listen to my poetry? Tell me where I screwed up.”

“All right,” I answered hesitantly, for I was certainly no master poet myself. Far be it for me to tell her what was good or bad about her work.

To hell with it, I thought. I decided to praise her no matter what she recited. I straightened up in my seat, ready to hear her out.

She promptly stood up and began to speak in a very...individualistic way. At some point, she even got carried away and started moving her arms and legs to an original choreography.

“Hey, hey! Squids are ink-redible!

They’ve got ten-tickles, you hear? An octopus only has eight!

Boy, oh boy, they kraken me up!

Hey, hey! Octopus has puss in its name!

Meow, meow, meow, meow, meow, meow, meow.

With so many cats around, where are all the furballs?”

I was speechless.

My entire being screeched to a halt. My mind went totally blank. What the hell *was* that? Nothing about that performance made sense. Was that really a poem? No, it couldn’t be. Impossible.

The clock ticked, and still my lips couldn’t form any words.

Confounded, I couldn't tell whether it was good or bad—it was *that* inscrutable. Also, I only noticed when she started dancing that her legs were awfully short. Er, well, not that this was relevant in the slightest.

A myriad of thoughts flashed through my head, none of them useful. As I continued to sit there, unable to utter a single thing, Serafina gazed up at me with sparkling, expectant eyes. Past experience told me exactly what she was thinking:

She wants praise...

For no reason that I could discern, she was brimming with confidence. In fact, she took it for granted that I would praise her.

“Um...let's see...er...”

Oh, no. I couldn't bring myself to say that her poem was “great.” And I couldn't follow up with any sort of compliment—my mind had drawn a complete blank.

“Canopus, uh... Oh, right! Canopus can tell you what's good about your poem! Serafina, you did a wonderful job!”

I outsourced all the detailed praising to Serafina's personal knight.

“Uhh?” The normally unflappable Canopus let out a strange noise the likes of which I'd never heard before. He looked at me, eyes wide in disbelief, but I dropped my gaze and refused to make eye contact.

Canopus, this is your watershed moment as a knight! What doesn't kill you will make you stronger.

He gazed at me for a little while longer, but when he saw that I wasn't going to help him, he turned back to Serafina. Then, with an audible swallow, he began to speak nervously.

“It was, um...a splendid poem. It was very on-theme. I was especially impressed when you repeated ‘meow’ seven times in a row.”

“Yes, Canopus has it right! The seven ‘meows’ were the best part!” I chimed in.

Honestly, I thought the “meows” were less on-theme so much as plain old

repetition, but I made the rational decision not to quibble when Serafina was beaming.

“Thank you, Canopus! Sirius! The teacher made a frowny face, but I really liked it! I knew you two would get it! Tee hee hee, I made a ‘Squid and Jellyfish’ poem too. Wanna hear it?”

“Urk... I’ve, uh, got a meeting with the knight brigade...”

I said the first excuse that came to mind, but it only made Serafina clap her hands together happily. “Isn’t the meeting room super far away from here? Can I walk with you? I can show you my poem on the way!”

She was planning on showing off more of *that*? In front of however many people were in the hallway?

“No! I’ve got time! All right, Serafina, show me more.” I sank back down on my seat and steeled myself.

My (well, *our*, since Canopus was here too) trial went on for a while yet.

Several days after that ordeal, I got a message from the poetry tutor.

In it, the teacher remarked that Serafina was elated by my praise and had now taken to making poems that just repeated the same word over and over. Attached to the message was her latest creation.

“My New Poem, by Serafina

Snake, snake, snake, snake, snake... (×30), lizard!”

Not a single word passed through my lips.

After a long moment of staring silently down at the message in my hands, I called on my attendant to deliver a special bottle of wine from the storehouse to the poetry tutor.

From that day forth, I resolved never to question the teachers’ judgment again.

As a side note, Serafina handwrote the “Snake and Lizard Poem,” so I had it framed in my room. Since she was the only person allowed in my private

quarters, I never had to fear that others would lay eyes on it.

Point of View: Sirius

The Tragic Tale of the Hair-Washing

“PHEW, THAT WAS a nice bath.”

When Serafina came back to her chambers with unwashed hair, declaring that she was done with the facilities in a highly affected tone, my eyebrows silently knitted into a frown.

It was just a short while ago when her lady-in-waiting confided in me. Apparently, Serafina wanted to wash her hair by herself once every two days.

She was a princess. It was standard protocol for ladies-in-waiting to attend to her when dressing or bathing. When she insisted on washing her hair alone, her attendant reluctantly left the room, but...she was clearly not actually washing her hair in there. Yet whenever her ladies-in-waiting tried to point that out, she would declare, “I did wash it.” Unable to get to the bottom of the matter, the attendant came to me for help.

And so I waited in her room to see what was going on, but when she came back from the bath...

She’d only wet her bangs, leaving the rest of her hair dry. So the lady-in-waiting was right—Serafina wasn’t washing her hair.

“Serafina, I know you’ve been having fun washing your hair by yourself, but won’t you have an easier time of it if you let your lady-in-waiting help?” I tried to broach the question indirectly.

She blinked and said, “Does a lady-in-waiting help you, Sirius?”

“I’m an adult. I do it myself, of course.”

I immediately regretted my honesty as soon as the answer left my mouth. Darn it! I should have lied and said I got help.

“I can do it too,” Serafina said, averting her eyes. “Washing my hair and stuff. I don’t need anyone.”

I walked over to Serafina and patted her on the head. “Your hair seems dry to me.”

“What?! No, it isn’t! S-see! Touch this bit.” Flustered, she placed my hand on her bangs.

This told me that she deliberately wet her bangs just to make it look like she washed her hair. She could have at least dunked her whole head under water if she wanted to sell the deception...

“Yes, your bangs are wet,” I said, thinking that Serafina had made an awfully weak argument. I grabbed her hand and placed it on the top of her head. “But the top is dry, see? I wouldn’t call this washed.”

She groaned. “I-I did wash it! It just didn’t turn out right.”

She was completely avoiding my eyes now. What else was this but the look of a liar?

Silently, I picked Serafina up and sat us down on an armchair. “Just tell me, Serafina. I won’t get mad. Why aren’t you washing your hair?”

It didn’t make sense to me. She probably thought it was a hassle to wash, but then she could have just let her lady-in-waiting handle it.

For a moment, Serafina didn’t respond. She merely hung her head in shame. “I heard lots of great saints have bright red hair. I don’t wanna lose mine.”

“What are you talking about?”

She was evidently trying to explain herself to me, but it didn’t make the foggiest sense.

I squinted at her, trying to work out what she was thinking. She looked back at me, dejected. “Rigel said that if I wash my hair every day, the color will go away. He said that’s what happened to him because he washed his hair too much.”

Okay, I figured out what was going on here. “That punk,” I muttered under my breath, as Serafina hung her head in sadness.

Rigel, the third prince, had red hair. It wasn't as bright as Serafina's, though. It was a paler shade—and it had been that way since birth. Despite that, he fed his sister a blatant lie about losing his color from washing it. And Serafina, the honest and trusting girl she was, believed what Rigel said without question.

"Um, Sirius, is something wrong?" Serafina asked hurriedly. She hadn't heard my muttering. Seeing her earnest expression made me extra livid at Rigel and his pathetic lie.

"Serafina, Rigel was joking with you. His hair has always been a fainter shade, and it hasn't changed since he was born."

"Really?"

"Besides, when people say that red-haired saints are talented, what they mean is that high-level spirits are fond of red hair, so it's easier for people with that hair color to form strong pacts. You already have a pact, so losing your hair color won't affect you. I doubt that your abilities would suffer."

"Oh? Um...r-right!"

I was telling the truth, of course, but seeing her guileless expression made me understand why she fell so easily for Rigel's nonsense. All the more reason to resent him for being such a brat...

Serafina abruptly lifted her head, interrupting my bitter train of thought. "Thanks for telling me, Sirius!" She hugged me tightly around the stomach. "I actually wanted to wash my hair today 'cause I did a somersault in the garden!"

Looking closely, I could see bits of dried grass sticking out of her hair. "Yes, that would warrant a washing," I answered as I picked out a blade of grass.

"Yup! I'll go wash it right now! Be right back!"

She disappeared back into the bathroom, a bright grin on her face. I smiled as I watched her go...

But when she came back, the smile dropped from my face.

"Sirius, it feels soooo nice to wash your hair! The shampoo smells nice."

“Well...yes,” I answered noncommittally as I peered at her hair.

To be precise, I looked at the blob of shampoo still left on her head. It wasn't that there were traces left behind after rinsing—she'd never washed it off to begin with. I was certain of this, since the foam was still there.

“Uh, Serafina, have you ever washed your hair by yourself?”

“Never! But I got the job done.”

“Not...”

Quite, I was about to finish, but I couldn't muster the word.

Serafina looked so proud of herself, and her expression was unbearably adorable. So instead, I handed her a glass bottle. I'd prepared it in case she insisted on not washing her hair.

“Serafina, this is Rainbow Hair Conditioner. It's the biggest thing in the capital right now. It involved two hours of standing in line to get some,” I said, not mentioning that I made my subordinate do it. “Your hair should shine if you use this after shampooing.”

“Wooooow!”

Serafina clasped the bottle with both hands and peered into it with sparkling eyes. Personally, I thought it was a load of bull, but it did have a rainbow liquid in it, and it seemed like the kind of thing kids would enjoy.

While Serafina was engrossed with the Rainbow Hair Conditioner, I stood up and swiftly called for the lady-in-waiting. “Serafina is going to try using the conditioner. Give her a hand.”

Serafina heard me, because she lifted her head as if to say, “I can do it myself,” but I continued before she could butt in.

“That conditioner is special. It's hard to use it by yourself. Why don't you learn the right way to use it and make your hair shine?”

Serafina trusted my words, nodded happily, and said, “Okay!” She then disappeared into the bathroom with the lady-in-waiting, who was still looking down at her foamy head in disbelief.

Needless to say, I made sure to praise Serafina plenty when she reemerged—without the bubbles this time.

It also went without saying that Third Prince Rigel got served an intense training course the day after, enough to leave him reeling for days.

Point of View: Sirius

My Little Saint

“W*HO AM I? Where did I come from?”* Everyone has wondered this at some point. It’s part of growing up. Anyone who hasn’t thought once about their family background has probably taken it for granted.

“Who’s my father? Who’s my mother? Who am I?” Those people never had a shred of doubt about any of these questions.

“I finally have an answer to a question from my childhood,” I muttered to myself.

In a dark room, lit only by a single candle, I swished a glass and downed its contents. It was well past midnight, and I was alone in my room in the castle. Nobody would walk in on me here. This was my haven—I could drink myself silly and not have to worry about a thing.

It was hard to say whether I could actually do it, however, given my body’s stubborn resistance to alcohol. But as I gazed at the numerous empty bottles on the floor, I thought: *“Please, I want to get drunk, at least for today.”*

I then reached for a new bottle.

Ever since I was young, I’ve always questioned my appearance. Where did my gray hair and silver eyes come from? My father was blond, and my mother’s hair was bright vermilion. My father’s eyes were blue, while my mother’s were green.

None of the members of Náv’s royal family had gray hair or silver eyes.

So where did I get it from? I’ve always wondered about it.

I got my answer from the high-ranking noblewomen. When I turned six, they told me something I wasn’t meant to know. *“It’s for your sake,”* they said. *“It’s*

best if you know the truth.”

According to them, the continent’s biggest superpower—the Arteaga Empire—arranged my parents’ marriage. My father was the king of Náv’s younger brother, while my mother was the daughter of an Arteagian duke, and their wedding took place the day my mother arrived in the Náv Kingdom. Although they were prominent members of the nobility in their respective countries, forgoing an engagement period notably went against tradition.

I was born seven months later, the ladies told me.

“As you know, Master Sirius, a baby grows inside its mother’s stomach for ten months before it is born.”

“If a baby is born at seven months, it would be tiny enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand. Yet despite your premature birth, you were a larger babe than average.”

That was how I learned about me and my parents. They said it as if anyone could see it.

It was terribly unfair. Because I came from my mother’s stomach, I was unquestionably her child. But even though my mother was married to my father, there was no guarantee that I was *his* child.

What those ladies told me was gossip, not fact, but even if the truth was unclear, I still loved my father. He was a sickly man but possessed a strong will and fine character, and he loved and cared for me as his son from the start. I wrote off the story about my parents as rumor and always treated Father as my kin. But...

“To think the truth would come to light after nineteen years,” I muttered as I gulped down another glass.

Not long ago, at the eastern edge of the kingdom’s borders, I met my very young cousin—and I saw her converse with a spirit child.

Spirit children never appear in front of humans.

Such was the conventional wisdom about spirits... But after seeing Serafina at

work, it hit me that Náv's royal family was the exception to the rule. The Spirit Lord was their ancestor, which made them exceptionally receptive to the spirits.

Serafina's talent as a saint stood out so much that I assumed that she must possess a unique sensitivity to spirits, but then I remembered something King Procyon had told me once before: *"The Forest of Lent at the eastern edge of the kingdom is also known as the Forest of Beginnings. The Spirit Lord passed that land down to the royal family so that our future could thrive. Unfortunately, I am not able to see the forest's dwellers myself, but I can always sense a warm presence there."*

The king often visited the forest before Serafina was born. I suspect that he made it a point to present his children to the forest that protected the royal family since he wanted them to meet the forest dwellers and their children. The three princes and the first princess had said the same thing the king did when they returned from the forest: *"I felt a warm presence."*

Looking back, the "warm presence" had to be the spirit children. The king's vague story finally made sense to me when I saw them for myself.

The forest was probably why half the women in this kingdom carried sainthood potential. From what I'd heard, hardly any spirits lived in other countries, which explained the scarcity of saints abroad. Only the Náv Kingdom had plenty of both to spare, and that was because the spirits were born in that forest.

The royal family saw it as their duty to cherish and protect the forest across the generations. And because the Spirit Lord's blood ran in their veins, they could sense the spirit children and perceive the land's value. It made them care for the forest all the more.

"I see. So that's why the king never invited me to that forest."

My father's frail constitution made excursions a rare occurrence for him, and so the king often treated me as his representative. He invited me on many of his trips outside the castle, family outings included.

But he never once took me on his near-annual trips to the Forest of Lent.

“He was being considerate. What if I didn’t sense anything in that forest?”

If any member of the royal family—the king, the princes, the first princess—could sense the “warm presence,” then I would surely have questioned it if I was the sole exception: *“I’m part of the family, so why don’t I have this blood-inherited trait?”*

And indeed, I couldn’t sense a thing when I went to the Forest of Lent for Serafina. I only saw a spirit when they removed her blindness spell. Until then, nothing.

That right there was the answer.

“I’m not a descendant of the Náv royal line...”

My voice resounded quietly in the room.

Saying the truth aloud, it suddenly occurred to me that my late father might have known all along. An ironic smile formed on my lips.

“He was a sharp man. He had to have known...”

When I recalled my father’s perceptive nature, it hit me that I was the only one living in blissful ignorance. What a fool I was. There were so many clues, so why did I never doubt that he was my biological parent?

I knew, of course. I always wanted *him* to be my father.

Knowing the truth must have been so painful for him. He must have been conflicted. The sight of me, who didn’t take after him in the slightest, was harsh proof of my mother’s betrayal. I’d always believed that he loved and cared for me, but learning that I was an illegitimate child changed everything.

To the royals, passing on their bloodline was everything, and my father should never have loved a boy who tainted that. And yet he was so, so kind to me—enough that I felt needed. Loved.

“He was a greater man than I deserved...and I took it for granted...”

Putting it in words made me feel worse.

I downed bottle after bottle after that, but the drunken stupor I was pining for never came.

My mother never bore any children other than me.

Given that I was an illegitimate child, this meant that my father—Duke Ulysses, the king's younger brother—never passed on his blood. At this point, what could I do for this man who had been saddled with a false son?

The answer came to me immediately.

If I never inherited his blood, then I should at least carry on his will.

Long before I discovered the truth about my heritage, this was something I had gravitated toward. For all his desire to do something for the country, my father's physical frailness confined him to bed. If not for that, his standing would have ensured him a position as commander of the knight brigade.

I swore anew that I would become the commander in his place. Even if everyone else had their vague suspicions, nobody would say to my face that I was not my father's son. Through my upright conduct, I would pass on his good name.

It was the least I could do for the man who gave me everything, save for his blood...

"Dry your hair, Serafina! You'll catch a cold!"

In reality, I was living my life far from my lofty ideals and was entirely wrapped around my young cousin's little finger.

Although the king had asked me to look after Serafina, that wasn't the reason why I did it. I simply enjoyed her company. She was only six, but she was already a fine saint.

Her life thus far had certainly not been easy. She was blind for many years, for one thing, and her movements in the villa had been restricted. At her tender age, she must have expended a great deal of effort to wield magic that no one else could.

In spite of all that, she never showed a hint of worry or misery. Her eyes were always sparkling, and she smiled without a care in the world... I frequently

found myself marveled by Serafina's zest for life. As I sat on the sofa and dried her hair, she peered up at my face.

"Are you okay, Sirius? You seem out of it."

"Don't you worry. You're the only one I'd let my guard down for," I answered as I finished wiping down her hair and threw the towel into a basket.

She shuffled up to me, a cheerful smile on her face. "Sirius, you brought the griffon book?" she asked, pointing at the cover of the book on the table.

"Yeah, you said you were interested in monster facts, so I got you something from the library."

"Yay! Thank you! I was wanting to learn about griffons after that golden griffon helped me!" said Serafina as she took the book and started flipping through it. "She mistook me for her child, you know. I was wearing a red dress that day, so I think I looked like her chick."

"I see. So the parent-child bond was what made it go out of its way to protect you. Blood is thicker than water, as they say."

We were talking about a monster, but my thoughts drifted toward myself. If blood was thicker than water, then...my father must have been an exceptional man for loving me...

These were strictly my inner thoughts. I didn't speak a word of it, nor did I let it show on my face... But for some reason, Serafina was staring right at me.

"Your daddy passed away, right, Sirius? Are you sad?"

My heart jolted. She was one clever child—nothing about my words and actions were out of the ordinary, and yet she worked out that I was thinking about my father.

But still, my thoughts were honestly far different from what she verbalized. A self-effacing smile came over my lips. "Ah, that's not what I was thinking. I would never be so audacious."

"Ordasheeus?" She tilted her head up at me in confusion.

For some reason, I got the sudden urge to tell her the truth. Maybe I wanted to confess my sins to a girl who was purer and fairer than anyone else. Even as I

knew that this was not for a six-year-old's ears, the words came spilling from my mouth.

"Serafina, I tricked my father. Even though I don't carry one drop of his blood, I pretended to be his son for a long time. I stole so much love and time from him—and I didn't deserve any of it."

Strangely, Serafina seemed dejected by my story. "Does that...mean you don't want to be with me anymore?"

"What would make you think that?!" I shot back, unable to wrap my head around this out-of-the-blue statement.

"You think that people who aren't blood-related shouldn't share love, right?" she said glumly. "So if you know that we're not related, doesn't that mean you don't wanna look after me anymore?"

It never even occurred to me that we had no blood ties until she pointed it out—but that was a different matter entirely from love.

"Don't be silly!" I barked. "I'm not with you because of blood! I just *like* looking after you!"

Serafina's eyes widened at my reply. "Then...wouldn't the same be true of your daddy?"

"What?"

I was no dullard by any means, but Serafina's comment was so disconnected from what we were talking about that I struggled to grasp her intent.

Serafina grinned at my question. "I bet your daddy loved and cared for you, because who wouldn't? You're Sirius!"

"You...think that's what my father was thinking?" I asked, not realizing how plaintive I sounded until after the fact.

Serafina nodded forcefully. "For sure! Your daddy would be my uncle, right? That makes us really close relatives! I bet he thinks just like me! Take it from me—if I were him, I'd be super proud of you and give you looooots of love!"

Her face turned bright red from her excitement. Watching her gush, I could not see a single trace of my father's calm and collected demeanor. I suspected it

was rare to find close kin with such a poor resemblance to each other. Her words should not have been persuasive in the slightest...but for some reason, the weight in my heart was gone now.

In its place, a warm glow began to trickle through me.

"I see," I muttered, chewing on my words. "You *are* closely related to my father. If you say that's what he'd do, then you must be right."

"Yeah!" she agreed eagerly. "I'm definitely right!"

Then she jumped up and flung her arms around my neck.

"I love you, Sirius! If I love you thiiiiis much, then your daddy must've super loved you!"

The sight of Serafina giggling in delight was the most adorable thing in the world. If my father felt even half the affection flowing through me right now, then he must have enjoyed the time he spent with me. The love and care I sensed from him had been true.

I was only able to realize this because I met Serafina—because I doted on her, the way I had once been doted upon. For the first time, I recognized how it felt to simply enjoy someone else's company and to *want* to do anything for them.

"I'm always learning new things from you." I buried my head in Serafina's neck. She smelled like the sun and wind. "You're a true saint, Serafina. You're always saving me. I'm forever second best to you, my little saint."

My strangled whisper caused Serafina to flit her head away, before hesitantly peering back at me. "When you put it that way, you're the winner, Sirius. My tutor said 'losing is winning.'"

She was always saying such kind and considerate words. I couldn't help but bite my lip. "You're right. When you're in my arms, I have everything I want, that's for sure."

"Sirius?" It was adorable how Serafina tilted her head when she didn't understand.

"What I'm saying is that when you're with me, I'm not going to worry about minor losses. I promised to show you what's beautiful about the world, but in

the end, you're the one showing beautiful things to me. At this point, let's just forget the metaphor. Take a break from your studies—I'm going to show you some beautiful scenery. Your spirit can come too, of course."

As the loser, I decided to embrace an unconditional defeat.

I could admit it: Being with Serafina was my idea of fun. So here I was, getting my fill of her.

"Oh! Really?"

"Yeah. The trip's just as much for me as it is for you. I have fun when you're around."

I smiled and gave Serafina the kindest expression I could. She returned it with an even brighter smile.

See what I mean? I was always losing to her. Despite that, my heart felt light and buoyant.

From then on, I would think of my father the same way I did before I learned of my birth. He was the man who loved me, nothing less.

And that was how the three of us—me, Serafina, and her spirit—decided to go on a trip together.

In reality, it wasn't just us three. Two dozen knights came along for the ride as well... Also, the king just *happened* to bump into us at our destination.

But that was a story for another day.

Point of View: Sirius

The Happiness of Serafina and Sirius

THIS STORY HAPPENED when I was waiting for Serafina to fall asleep in her bedroom.

I was sitting on the sofa reading a book with the aid of a single candlestick when I sensed movement in Serafina's bed. I looked up and saw Serafina licking the palm of her hand. Her eyes were scrunched shut, already well on the road to slumber.

"Serafina, why are you licking your hand?" I asked, puzzled by her behavior.

"Is yummy," she mumbled, not opening her eyes.

"Yummy?" I parroted, taken aback by the unexpected description.

But Serafina was already in dreamland. Her hand fell on the bedding, and she started snoring softly.

And so, still in the dark about what she was saying, I stood up from my seat and walked over to the bed. As I was tucking her hand under the sheets so that she wouldn't catch a cold, I noticed the sugary scent wafting from her hand.

"Now I get it..."

A very short while ago, Serafina had been shoveling sweet-looking cookies in her mouth with both hands. "*Don't eat right before bed,*" I told her. Looking forlorn, she went off to brush her teeth...but she apparently hadn't washed her hands. The scent remained on her palms, and she must have licked them as one last little pleasure before bed.

"What a funny little girl," I said with genuine admiration. "She never fails to surprise me."

I wet a towel and wiped Serafina's hands.

I generally had a good read on most things. Although I was taken by surprise every so often, it was very seldom. Serafina, though, always came up with

something out of the box.

“So she licked her hand before she slept to enjoy the taste,” I muttered to myself. “I came up with all sorts of theories before she could answer, but none of them were even close. Seems my imagination is still lacking.”

I gazed down at the smile on Serafina’s slumbering face.

“She looks happy,” I found myself murmuring. “Amazing. She’s always coming up with ideas to make her day more exciting—right up until the moment she falls asleep. I’ve been so caught up in work and duties that I lost the ability to enjoy life... No, that’s not quite right. I never had the ability to imagine how to enjoy myself to begin with.”

Before I knew it, I was leaning over Serafina, stroking her head.

“Enjoying life... You’re so young, and yet I never stop learning from you.”

Serafina was snoring pleasantly, but then all of a sudden her foot snapped up and kicked the sheets. “Got it,” she mumbled. “Butter pancakes for breakfast tomorrow...”

As soon as I heard those words, a smile sprouted on my face. “Heh, never mind what you do *before* bed—you’re always hungry for ways to enjoy yourself even while you’re asleep. And it’s all food-related too. Not that I would expect anything different from you.”

I adjusted her blanket and quietly snuck out of her bedroom.

Then I headed for the kitchen—so that I could tell the chefs to make the most buttery pancakes tomorrow morning.

The next day, Serafina’s eyes widened at her breakfast.

“Something the matter, Serafina?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

Serafina took a bite of her pancakes, and her expression melted. “Sirius, my breakfast is soooo yummy! I had a dream last night that I was eating nice pancakes, but these are even better than in the dream! The dream ones had only butter, but the real ones have honey on them too!”

“Oh? Glad to hear it.”

It was a good thing I dragged those three knights to Starfall Forest after I was done giving instructions to the kitchen. The honey from the berserk bees was famous for its exceptional sweetness.

The knights were reluctant...

“Vice-Commander, I’ve got night blindness! Don’t count on me to be useful when I can’t see a thing!”

“Grrr, you lout, why’d you mention that berserk bee nest in front of the vice-commander?! Now I’m mixed up in this too!”

“Please think this through, Vice-Commander! Do you really need that honey right this minute?! Surely you don’t!”

Yes, they certainly had a lot to say on the matter.

Nevertheless, they were good at the job. Guided by the moonlight, we found the berserk bee nest and dispatched the monsters in short measure...

“Have a taste, Sirius! It’s super yummy!”

Serafina’s voice brought me back to reality. Urged on by her wide, sparkling eyes, I swallowed a mouthful of pancake.

Strangely enough, it tasted better to me than any pancake I’d ever eaten—even though the castle chefs never changed their style and I was no stranger to the taste of berserk bee honey.

If there was anything different about this time, it was...Serafina peering at me in delight.

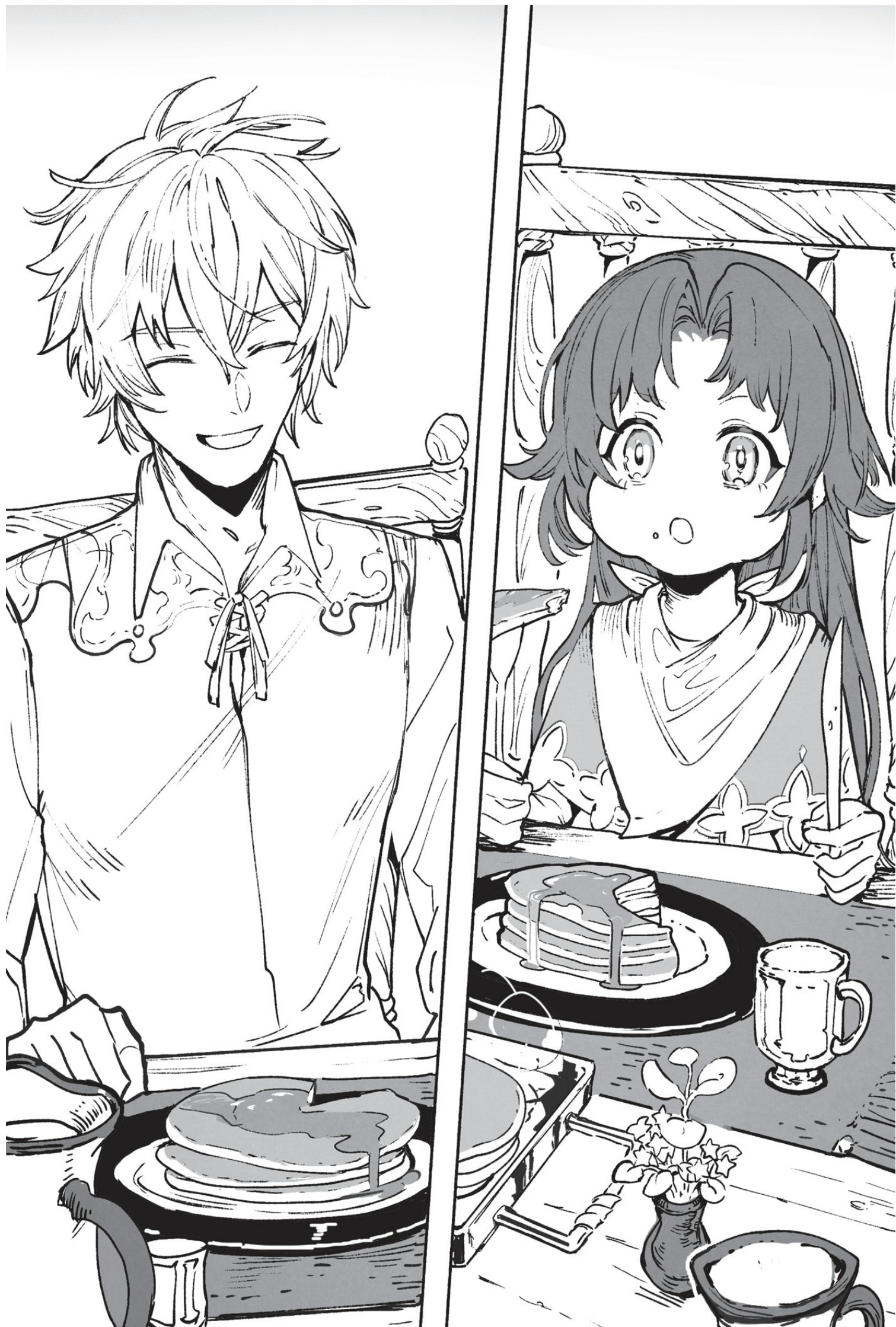
“I see, having you around changes the taste.”

“Mweh?” Serafina looked at me inquisitively, her cheeks stuffed with pancakes. She looked so much like a squirrel that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ha ha ha, the world’s brighter when you’re around!”

“Simmus?”

The sight of Serafina trying to speak with her mouth full brought another smile to my face



“What? Can’t say my name?” I chuckled and then said, “Serafina, I’m really glad that I didn’t turn down the king when he asked me to come find you. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been because of you. And I’m sure it’ll stay that way, as long as you’re around.”

Those were my heartfelt feelings.

Ten years later, I truly understood the significance of my words—my happiness came from Serafina.

I wasn’t wrong about that.

Point of View: Sirius Bonus Story

The Serafina Quiz, Hard Mode Challenge!

I WAS IN MY OFFICE burying myself in paperwork when I heard a knock on the door.

That's funny, I thought. Nobody should have been able to reach my door without getting through the knights guarding the corridor outside. It's not like I had any appointments at this hour either...

Then I saw that my subordinate was standing stiff as a pole as he opened the door.

"What's the matter?" I asked him, only for him to point wordlessly at the floor.

Mystified, I stood up from my chair and looked where he was pointing—and saw a red lump wriggling about on the floor. No, that was no lump, it was...

"Serafina?!"

The tiny thing crawling on the floor with swaying red hair was, without a doubt, Serafina.

When I rushed over to her, worried that something was amiss, she said in a muffled voice, "I'm not Serafina! Whoooo's that?"

"Excuse me?!" I looked down at her, frowning at her incomprehensible words.

She was lying with her face flat on the floor, her arms flailing around her. Then she started scooting her way forward with a most undignified-looking crawl.

This went on for a while before I asked, "What on earth are you doing?"

As I stood there, utterly baffled by this inexplicable behavior, my subordinate closed the door.

"Um," he said hesitantly. "I have a five-year-old daughter who likes pretending she's an animal. She quizzes me on which animal she's imitating..."

“Oh! So Serafina is pretending to be something?”

The hint was what finally made me realize what game Serafina was playing. Carefully, I scrutinized her movements. Judging by that inelegant crawl...

“I’ve got it! She’s pretending to be a knight who failed the admission exam!” I declared confidently—nothing else came to mind.

But before Serafina could even respond, my subordinate contradicted me. “That can’t be it, Vice-Commander. It’s got to be an animal or something! For the purposes of this quiz, Her Highness is no longer human.”

What a challenging rule. What did Serafina look like, if not a human?

As I puzzled over this quandary, Serafina stopped moving forward and lay on her side instead. She started doing a strange sort of wriggle, drew her hands to her back—and then sprang up, flapping her arms up and down.

“Oh, you’re a dream bird! Nice job, Serafina!” I answered, convinced I had it this time.

But my subordinate shook his head at me again. “Vice-Commander, a six-year-old girl is going to imitate something she likes! It couldn’t be a monster!”

“Oh, really?” Sadly, nothing else came to mind, so I raised my hands. “Serafina, I admit defeat. Tell me what you are.”

With a big, bright smile on her face, Serafina started crawling on the floor again. “Wriggle, wriggle!” she chirped and did her ungainly squirm again. “I’m a caterpillar.”

Then she went on:

“The wings come out my back and whoosh! I’m a butterfly now!”

“Oh!”

Incredible. Even with her explanation, her choreography made no sense at all. She didn’t move like a caterpillar in the slightest, nor did she look remotely as if she were shedding skin or gaining butterfly wings.

But she was looking at me with sparkling, expectant eyes, so I felt the need to say something, even if it was the opposite of what I was thinking.

“Wow. Just like a real butterfly.”

“Tee hee hee!”

I couldn't have sounded less natural, but Serafina giggled with such genuine delight. I felt bad—next time, I would have to put a bit more emotion into my acting.

Meanwhile, Serafina pulled out a small wrapped item from her dress pocket. “Nice effort, Sirius! Here's a candy for you!”

“Thanks...” I didn't exactly have a sweet tooth.

“I made it myself,” she went on.

“Oh, really?”

Which meant that there was a slight possibility that she might have mixed up salt with sugar, resulting in a not-so-sweet snack.

Bracing myself, I opened the wrapper—and found five cookie-like objects. It was hard to tell what exactly they were, owing to their inscrutable shape.

“So what are these, exactly?” I mustered the question finally.

“You don't know?!”

Well, that was a surprise. Was this another quiz question? I looked up at my subordinate, but he shook his head silently, all but telling me to give up.

“Urk!”

I'd never spent time with little girls before. How was I supposed to solve *this* conundrum?

Calm down, I told myself. Going by the previous quiz, it was safe to assume that this was something a child liked.

With fresh resolve, I pinched a cookie between my fingers. It looked somewhat like a thick pole. Before, this shape would have baffled me, but my quiz experience served me the answer.

“I have it!” My face split into a grin. “This is a caterpillar! Ha ha, not bad, huh?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my subordinate frowning in exasperation. Quietly, he told me, “The answer to the previous quiz was a butterfly, not a caterpillar! Caterpillars and pupae are the middle stages, not the actual answer! The cookie can’t be a caterpillar either.”

I frowned, not fully understanding what he was getting at.

Serafina rapped my hand playfully. “Nooooope! This is Sirius’s sword!”

“What? This is my favorite sword? But Serafina, the handle has distinctive features...” I drew my sword from its scabbard in an attempt to explain...

Only for Serafina to shove the thick pole-like cookie into my mouth. “How’s it taste?”

Reflexively, I bit down on the cookie. It made a loud crunching sound in my mouth.

After a long pause, I said...

“It’s sweet. Looks like you used sugar instead of salt. And I can see its use in training one’s jaw. Now I know why these cookies remained intact even after you rolled on the floor.”

I chewed on the cookie, producing a series of bone-crunching noises.

Seemingly oblivious to my predicament, Serafina smiled with gusto. “Tee hee hee. There’re four more cookies, Sirius.”

I said nothing—my trial was far from over.

The next day, I added an insect encyclopedia to my light reading list. I would have to be well-informed on these topics if I was ever going to keep up with Serafina.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for picking up this book! This is a spin-off of the *A Tale of the Secret Saint* series.

The main series focuses on Fia, Serafina's reincarnation, but as the story goes on, the past resurfaces more and more. I wanted to delve a little further into it, but I ended up writing so much that it threatened to ruin the pacing of the main series—hence why I decided to make a spin-off instead.

chibi has reprised their role as illustrator from the main series. I requested this so that the world remained consistent for readers of both series. The illustrations are as wonderful as ever! The main characters look great. Seven's outfit has such an intricate design, and the backgrounds have a lot of detail—perfect marks yet again! chibi, thank you so much for the incredible art.

Bringing the topic back to the main series, I'm excited to say that it has a million copies in circulation! Every single copy counts, and now we're at a million. I'm so incredibly grateful to each and every one of my readers. I'm just stoked that so many of you would even read my story at all! Thank you so, so much!

I plan to keep on writing, so I would very much appreciate your continued support.

This is a bit off-topic, but you know how there's a scene in this novel where Sirius and Serafina ride a horse? It was only for a short while, but I've actually ridden horses myself. I learned from a vegetarian girl in England.

"I love horses. They're my friends, so I would never eat meat," she told me with a smile. I didn't have the heart to mention that I'd eaten basashi, which is basically horse meat sashimi, so I remember answering, "I'm a veggie fan too."

The girl spent most of her time with horses. She took very good care of them, so you can imagine that she was very skilled at handling them. She showed me the ropes, and we ended up riding in a forest. It was absolutely exhilarating to feel the wind as our horses trotted along the serene landscape. I got so caught

up looking at the scenery that I screwed up my posture and got caught in the tree branches, but that was fun in its own way. I took genuine joy from the experience.

One day, I'd love to visit that forest again.

Finally, I'd like to wrap up by thanking you all for reading this far. Thanks to all of you, this novel was able to take shape. It was a lot of hard work since it's a new spin-off series and all, but I enjoy the process of putting out a book.

I hope you can enjoy this new tale about the Great Saint!



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