







A Tale of the  
**Secret Saint**

NOVEL

**6**

WRITTEN BY  
**Touya**  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
**chibi**



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*Seven Seas Entertainment*



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## THE STORY THUS FAR

**F**ia, once the great saint in her past life, now hides her saintly powers and leads a new life as an ordinary knight—albeit a life fraught with its own challenges. But despite her best efforts, she has failed to completely hide her true capabilities and drawn the attention of many knights and captains.

Having received vacation time, Fia decides to visit her older sister—and, secretly, Zavilia. Kurtis, detecting her poorly hidden intentions, tags along. The day before they set out, they chance upon Green and Blue in the city. Fia is overjoyed to meet the two supposed adventurers again, but she is surprised to hear that they want to join her on the trip to Blackpeak Mountain.

Eventually, she meets her sister around the base of Blackpeak Mountain, followed by Zavilia on the mountain itself. For a few moments, she revels in nostalgic reflection...



# Náv Kingdom

## CHARACTER LIST



**FIA RUUD**

Youngest daughter of the Ruud knight family. A princess and the Great Saint in her past life. Currently hiding the fact that she is a saint and living as a knight...or trying to, at least.



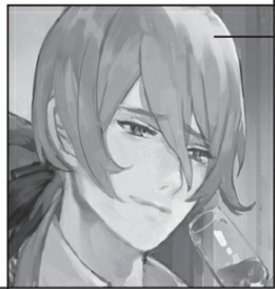
**ZAVILIA**

Fia’s familiar. The only black dragon in the world. One of the Three Great Beasts of the continent.



**SAVIZ NÁV**

Commander of the Náv Black Dragon Knights. The younger brother of the king and, as such, the heir apparent.



**CYRIL SUTHERLAND**

Captain of the First Knight Brigade. Head of the most prominent duke family and second in line to the throne. Also known as the “Dragon of Náv.” Knight Brigade’s strongest swordsman.



**KURTIS BANNISTER**

Captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade. Former knight of the First Knight Brigade. Canopus, the Blue Knight, in his past life.



**RED, GREEN, AND BLUE**

Emperor of the Arteaga Empire and his two younger brothers.

## 300 Years Ago



**SERAFINA NÁV**

Fia’s past life. Second princess of the Náv Kingdom. World’s only Great Saint.



**SIRIUS ULYSSES**

Said to be the strongest knight in the Kingdom of his time. Captain of the Royal Guard. A handsome man with gray hair and silver eyes.





Náv Black Dragon Knight Brigade

COMMANDER: SAVIZ NÁV

	Captain	Vice-Captain	Knight
First Knight Brigade ROYAL FAMILY GUARDS	Cyril Sutherland		Fia Ruud, Fabian Wyner
Second Knight Brigade ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Desmond Ronan		
Third Mage Knight Brigade MAGES	Enoch		
Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade MONSTER TAMERS	Quentin Agutter	Gideon Oakes	Patty
Fifth Knight Brigade ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Clarissa Abernethy		
Sixth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY	Zackary Townsend		
Seventh Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, NORTH			
Eighth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, EAST			
Ninth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, SOUTH			
Tenth Knight Brigade MONSTER EXTERMINATION, WEST			
Eleventh Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR NORTH	Guy Osbern		Oria Ruud
Twelfth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR EAST			
Thirteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR SOUTH	Kurtis Bannister	Cody	
Fourteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR WEST		Dolph Ruud	
Fifteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Sixteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Seventeenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Eighteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Nineteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			
Twentieth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL			



# Knight Brigades (300 Years Ago)

## THE NÁV KINGDOM KNIGHT BRIGADES

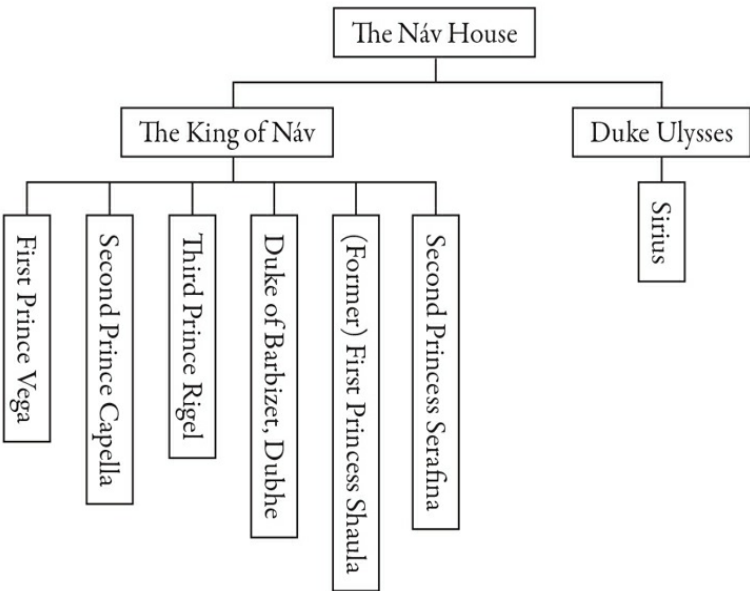
Knight Brigade Commander	Wezen
Second Knight Brigade Captain ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Hadar Bononi
Third Mage Knight Brigade Captain MAGES	Tsih Brando
Fifth Knight Brigade Captain ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Alnair Calandra
Sixth Knight Brigade Captain MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY	Elnath Cafaro

## THE ROYAL RED SHIELD

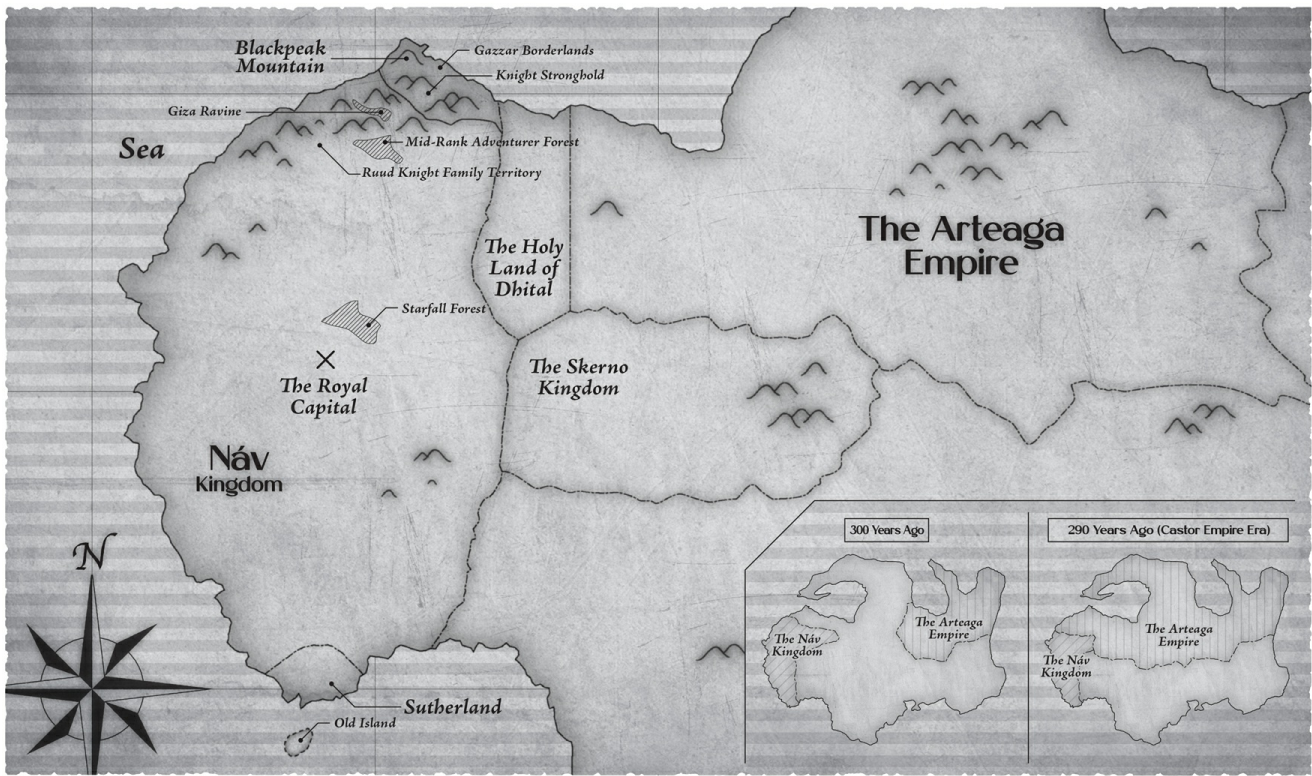
Captain	Sirius Ulysses
Serafina's Personal Knight	Canopus Blazej

# Náv Kingdom Royal Family Tree

## (300 YEARS AGO)







## Chapter 38:

### Blackpeak Mountain Part 2

I AWOKE the next morning feeling like a new woman. I tried to sit up but felt Zavilia sleeping on my tummy—he'd turned small again. Without getting up, I craned my head up to look at him.

*Oh, Zavilia! You're the perfect weight.* I didn't know how to explain it, but the way he weighed on my tummy was perfect for sleeping. It was probably thanks to him that I got such a good night's rest.

With his eyes still closed, he nudged his head closer to me.

*Aww, you're just adorable,* I thought, my lips forming a smile.

I couldn't resist teasing him a little. "Oh my, oh my! Looks like Mr. Dragon King wants to be pampered! Then I shall give thee all the pampering you desire, Your Majesty. It shall remain our little secret."

Picking up on the fact that I was pretending to be his servant, he chuckled and played along. **"Ah, yes. How very good, indeed. In that case, I hereby declare that I shall remain in this form and spend the entirety of today on thy shoulder, Fia."**

"Wait, *whaaaat?!'*" His words surprised me so much that I forgot all about the whole servant-king thing. "But would it really be all right for you to appear in front of the other dragons like that? You're a king! Don't you have to be majestic, like, constantly? Staying tiny and riding my shoulder wouldn't appear very kingly..."

**"Ha ha! Not one dragon here would think less of me for doing that. If they did, that would only show their foolishness."**

"Okaaay...but don't you think they'll at least be surprised to see you, the biggest thing here, suddenly riding on my shoulder all tiny?"

**"Why don't we find out?"**

And just like that, it was decided Zavilia would spend the entirety of the day on my shoulder in his tiny form.

*Oh, Zavilia, you goof. Don't come running to me if you regret this later!* I gave him a look of disapproval after changing my clothes, but he pretended to not notice as he flew onto my shoulder. Left with no other choice, I exited the cave. We walked past a number of other dragons on the way, and they all froze up upon laying eyes on tiny Zavilia riding my shoulder.

*Huh. I guess Zavilia was right. Even when he's this small, he's still got enough majesty to awe everyone.*

Having been proven wrong, I conceded victory to him. "It appears that I was mistaken, Your Majesty."

**"All is forgiven. I could never hold anything against thee, Fia."**

"Oh my! To say such a thing to an ordinary handmaiden such as I will have others think you are a no-good, silly king, will it not?"

We continued our back-and-forth like that. Before long, we reached the place we'd eaten dinner at the previous night and found Kurtis, Green, and Blue already awake and ready, all sitting across a log.

"Good morning...Fia?!" Blue was mid-greeting when he spotted Zavilia on my shoulder and immediately did a double take. "H-huh? Th-that's strange, I heard the black dragon was an ancient race that there was only one of, but...could this possibly be its child?"

I burst out into laughter. "Pfft! Ha ha! What an idea, Blue! Oh boy, here I thought this black dragon was a king, but it turns out it was actually a *wittle baby*! Ah yes, now that I get a good look, this adorable little thing can't possibly be anything but a wittle-ittle scaly baby! Pfft, ha ha! You all right with that, Zavilia?"

Zavilia kept an unruffled look throughout as I laughed. **"Indeed I am. So long as my dear Fia is pleased, I am content."**

"Pfft. You're really good at pretending to be a silly king."

He and I laughed our heads off together.

Unlike Green and Blue, who were astonished beyond words as they watched us, Kurtis seemed a little tired as he stood up from his seat. “Good morning to you both. I take it you both slept well? I could wish for nothing more.”

It was a bit odd of him to make a point of mentioning our good sleep. Perhaps he hadn’t rested so well. I took a long, hard look at his face and noticed some faint shadows under his eyes. “Did you have trouble sleeping last night, Kurtis? I didn’t know you were so sensitive that you had trouble sleeping in unfamiliar places.”

Or...maybe the cave he was given to sleep in was really uncomfortable? Zavilia’s bed was rather nice. Maybe it’d be good to switch with Kurtis tonight, for his sake.

Kurtis shook his head. “There’s no need to worry. I’m quite all right. I was simply reminded of...certain matters last night that kept me from sleeping. That is all.”

“Wait, what?” He was the type to pretend everything was okay no matter what, so there was no knowing if he was *really* okay. Still, he didn’t look *that* bad, so I decided to leave it.

I joined the group sitting on the log. Someone passed me some water, so I drank it and asked Zavilia something that’d been on my mind for a while. “What kind of training are you giving the other dragons?”

What I really wanted to know was what business Zavilia came to this mountain for—and when he’d be finished so he could return to my side—but asking that directly would be a little *too* pushy. Better to take things slow and start from the top.

Zavilia smiled. With joy in his voice, he said, **“I’m happy to see you’re interested in what I’m doing. We dragons, despite all falling under the same classification, are actually considerably varied in type. Right now I’m trying to gather these dragons of various types and teach them how to use their unique strengths to better serve the group as a whole.”**

“I see. Well, I’m surprised by how well everyone gets along despite being from different places,” I replied, remembering when I was shown the various dwellings of different dragons the previous day. There were red dragons and



blue dragons bathing alongside one another, and all kinds of other dragons working together to make their nests more comfortable. It was a strange and memorable sight.

Zavilia nodded. **“It’s in a dragon’s nature to flock together, which thankfully seems to have led our group to mix quite well. By hunting monsters for food collaboratively, the dragons are learning to work as one. The reason I wanted to become Dragon King in the first place was to gain the strength to fight the many other monsters who fight in groups. Having my dragons learn to fight together is exactly what I desired.”**

Yeah, monsters that fought in groups made for tough opponents. But the real groups to look out for weren’t the ones comprised of the same type of monsters living together. No, the truly dangerous groups of monsters came from all kinds of different areas and worked together to fight as a team. “It is pretty hard to fend off monsters that work together, yeah. Are you preparing for any kind of monster in particular?”

**“We’re practicing on the assumption we’ll fight monsters that make particularly big groups, like Fenrir. We’re also preparing for other powerful monsters that don’t necessarily make groups, along with the most dangerous of monsters: demons.”**

He said the word with no ill intent, but hearing that word—*demons*—was enough to send me spiraling into a panic.

\*\*\*

“Fia?” Green gave me a worried look upon seeing I had frozen up.

I wanted to say something to reassure him I was all right, but the words just wouldn’t come out.

Worried by my lack of response, Blue called out to me as well. “Is everything all right?”

I abandoned any thought of replying and lowered the cup in my hands down to the table. One by one, I focused on peeling my stiffened fingers off the cup, trying to calm myself by thinking of nothing but this simple task. Green and Blue, noticing how differently I was acting, said nothing further and just

watched.

*How kind of them.* The two usually acted a little rough around the edges, but they knew when to back off when it really mattered. Kurtis and Zavilia understood something was wrong too, of course, and also silently waited for me to decide when I was ready.

Eventually, I peeled all my fingers off my cup and let out a sigh. “I’m scared of demons...” I said weakly. Did I sound like a child? It felt like it, but...not a single person laughed.

In fact, Green repeated my words as though they held some sort of deep truth of the world. “I see...you’re scared of demons, are you?”

Wordlessly, Kurtis stood up and wrapped his jacket around me. It was too big and so basically covered my entire body, but that was just what I wanted right now. I liked how his jacket hid me away from the prying eyes of the world.

Almost as an afterthought, Kurtis murmured, “Take this. Mornings are cold this high up.” Of course, he knew that the chill I felt had nothing to do with the temperature.

I let out a sigh. *I can’t let myself be afraid of a mere word forever.* Just the other day, I was all shaken up by Guy just because I remembered he’d called himself a demon a long time ago.

I intertwined my fingers and let my thoughts wander back to three hundred years ago. Sirius, the captain of my Royal Guard, would never run from a challenge. Neither would Canopus. Even Castor, my sister’s child who went on to become a splendid emperor, persevered through many challenges. If I fled from my problems, I’d never have the right to look them in the eyes again.

I lifted my face and looked at Green directly. “How many...how many demons are remain in this world?” It was an incredibly basic question, but I was so ignorant of demons that I had to start from there. A long time ago, way back before I regained the memories of my past life, my sister Oria had told me stories about demons. From her, I learned that the demons were sealed up one by one after the Great Saint defeated their Demon Lord and that all the demons were sealed away now...but with my memories regained, I had a hard time believing those old stories. I simply couldn’t imagine a world in which the

Demon Lord's right-hand man was sealed away, not with his strength and cunning. What was more, I was certain he took the box his lord was sealed away in from my brothers before they could leave the castle. By now, the Demon Lord of the Thirteen Crests was surely free again, out in this world with their right-hand man at their side.

Green answered slowly, carefully. "In the Book of Beginnings, it is said that there are thirty-three demon crests in the world..."

"Huh?!" What Green had said was considered super top secret. How could he possibly know about that? Wasn't he an adventurer? No, wait, I *had* considered that he might actually be from a wealthy merchant family...but even then, how could he know about the Book of Beginnings?! Only royalty-level people knew that information! "G-Green, aren't you an adventurer? I only wanted to know about the demon rumors going around the empire to see if they matched the demon rumors in the Kingdom, the ones I'd heard from my sister. I thought maybe if they matched, then they might be close to the truth."

"Ah..." Green said, frowning. "Right, you wanted to go with *that* pretense. And so you haven't directly explained anything to Kurtis and the others..."

Kurtis squinted at Green. "I see. You're trying to probe me to see if I understand my position here. Unnecessary. A word of advice, Green: If you want to understand Lady Fi better, then you best take what she says at face value."

Green pondered this for a moment, his brow creasing, but he soon nodded. "Got it." He turned to me. "Fia, you wanted to learn about the empire's rumors, right? In that case, it is commonly believed that all the demons are sealed away."

Blue nodded. "Right. Demons are only mentioned when trying to make small children behave. 'Behave yourself, or the demons will come get you.' Stuff like that."

"I see..." I looked at my intertwined fingers. What they said lined up with what my sister had told me.

"To continue what I was saying earlier," Green continued, "an acquaintance of mine—something of a big shot—told me about a thing called the Book of

Beginnings. I'm supposed to keep the fact I heard about it a secret, but...I owe you my life, Fia, so I'll tell you whatever you want to know. If that's what you'd like, I mean."

"Huh?" I looked up at him with a start and saw his eyes were locked on mine.

\*\*\*

"Please...tell me what you know," I said, the words bursting from me as if my very heart now *needed* to hear what Green had to say. However much he knew, however accurate it was, I needed to know.

"Got it," he said with a nod, then looked up at empty air to gather his thoughts.

In the short silence that followed, Zavilia came down from my shoulder to rest in my lap, nuzzling his head against my stomach. The little guy was trying to encourage me. Happily, I took him into my arms in a hug. I looked back at Green and saw he was ready to speak.

"In the Book of Beginnings," he said gently, "it is said that there are thirty-three demon crests in the world. You likely already know this, but among monsters there are humanoid creatures called 'demons.' And among those demons, there are exceptionally strong ones with crests on their bodies. We call them 'crest-bearing demons.'"

"Right..." I listened, feeling like I was hearing a review of what I learned three hundred years ago. I was both a princess and the Great Saint in my past life, so I was given access to all manner of secret information. Naturally, that included the contents of the Book of Beginnings. As he spoke, I compared Green's words to my memories.

"A demon's strength is proportional to the number of crests they possess, which can vary greatly. One demon might have one crest, and another might have three. But in total, the number of crests will always total thirty-three—at least, that's what the Book of Beginnings says."

I'd heard that same information three hundred years ago. It was at this point, however, that I realized how abnormal my breathing had become.

*Oh...was it too soon?* I put my hand over my chest and fought to control my

breathing. Ugh, not again... Just thinking about demons made my heart pound like a drum. I took some deep breaths, trying to calm myself.

Looking worried, Blue reached out to me. “Are you all right, Fia?”

With the hand I held against my pounding chest, I took Blue’s hand and tried to smile reassuringly. “Yeah...I’m all right.” It felt good to know I had someone who would worry for me when I wasn’t feeling great.

With one hand on Zavilia and the other holding Blue’s hand, I told myself everything would be all right. I remembered Kurtis and Green were here as well and began to feel safe. Just like that, my fear slipped away.

Green looked as worried as his brother, but he continued, perhaps figuring this talk was best finished quickly. “It is commonly believed that the other demons were all sealed away after Her Holiness the Great Saint sealed away the Demon Lord of the Thirteen Crests. The truth, however, is that all the demons suddenly vanished from the world three hundred years ago for reasons unknown.”

“What?!” My heart had just begun to calm down, but now it was pounding again. Wide-eyed, I listened as Green continued in a soft, quiet voice.

“A crest-bearing demon with just a single crest is powerful, to the point that ordinary demons would serve them in forest castles or mountain fortresses. But when Her Holiness the Great Saint sealed away the Demon Lord, the demons quickly began to abandon their castles.”

“Huh? But...” Why? Was my thinking wrong? Was the Demon Lord actually still sealed away? Was that why the demons went into hiding? I...I couldn’t tell. I had too little information to work with. But reality always seemed to surpass my expectations in the worst ways possible. There had to be a ton of demons lurking in this world still, unseen...

As I went pale, Green nabbed my attention by unfurling his fingers. “Fia, you are not wrong to fear demons. Nowadays, they are half-forgotten, their memories only dredged up to frighten disobedient children. But if we assume their disappearance three hundred years ago had some motive behind it, they very well could still be around. Your fears are more than justified.” His way of phrasing it was peculiar, but I could tell he was trying to console me from the



expression on his face.

*You're so kind, Green.* I gave him a nod full of gratitude to let him know I was now all right, and then my thoughts returned to what he'd told me about the demons. So...the truth was slightly different than what I'd heard as a child. My sister had told me that after the Great Saint sealed away the Demon Lord, the rest of the demons were sealed away one by one. But in reality, they'd disappeared without a trace.

I put a hand over my chest. My heart still pounded abnormally fast. The sense of unease I felt whenever I thought about demons once again spread throughout my body. I squeezed Zavilia with the arm I held him in, then let out a shaky sigh. *You'll be okay. You can deal with the nausea too. You can do this.* I looked up at Green again, urging him to continue.

Green gave an understanding nod. "To avoid needlessly worrying the people, the official stance is that the demons were all sealed away. In truth, very few demons were actually sealed after the death of Her Holiness the Great Saint. Just 'The Moon Maiden of the Dual Crests' and 'The Maelstrom of the Five Crests.'"

"The Moon Maiden of the Dual Crests..." I repeated in a whisper, faintly feeling a chill from the name.

Green gently slapped my back to try and cheer me up. "Don't worry, Fia! Those demons are long since sealed away. What's more, Her Holiness the Great Saint sealed away twenty crests' worth of demons while she was alive, including the Demon Lord of the Thirteen Crests. Twenty-seven crests' worth have been sealed away in total."

It was true: In my past life, I sealed away twenty crests' worth of demons total, including the Demon Lord.

"There can only be thirty-three crests total among demons," Green continued. "Which means there are only six more crests left in the world, hiding somewhere."

He said that so matter-of-factly, but I wasn't so sure. I couldn't banish the possibility from my mind... What if the Demon Lord escaped the box I'd sealed them in? Perhaps there were six more crests left in the world, *plus* the Demon

Lord of the Thirteen Crests. Yes, that had to be it. And among those remaining six crests was surely the demon that killed me—the right hand of the Demon Lord.

Just as I had thought that, Green, by sheer coincidence, said something critical. “Of the missing six crests, we know of a demon with only one crest: ‘The Right-Hand Man of the Lone Crest,’ the aid to the Demon Lord.”

My body froze stiff, but my mind processed it with cold lucidity. *Ah...I knew it. He’s still out there. Of course he is...and he was the demon of the single crest. How could I forget?*

*(Except...wait, I could swear that—)*

For a moment, my thoughts diverged—but then I remembered the Demon Lord’s right-hand man, who I saw moments before dying, *without a doubt only had one crest on him. Yes. Just one crest. Yes.*

For some reason, I felt my thoughts settle, and I let out a sigh of relief. Zavilia, likely having read my mind, lovingly nuzzled up against me as though to calm me. I hugged him tight and gently stroked his back. By some miracle, my pounding heart began to gradually ease. *It’ll be all right. I have Zavilia, Captain Kurtis, Green, and Blue with me. It’ll be all right.*

Now that my heart wasn’t racing anymore, I let myself look up. This was the time to move forward. “Kurtis, would it be possible to visit the Cathedral and check on the Demon Lord’s box?”

All the churches in the world and all of their saints answered to the Cathedral. It was the heart of all that was holy, the most well-guarded place in the world, the place where all box-sealed demons were kept under lock and key.

Kurtis showed surprise for a moment and swallowed, but he soon shook his head apologetically. “I’m afraid that would be...difficult.”

“Figures...” I wasn’t disappointed by his answer; I’d expected that there was no way in. The doors of the Cathedral were open to all who wanted salvation, but only a select few could access the inner chambers where the sealed-away demons were kept—and by *select few*, I mean a small handful of clergy and the ruler of each country. If I wanted access to the Demon King’s box, I’d either

have to convince the clergy or the king of the Náv Kingdom himself. That, or maybe the emperor of the Arteaga Empire... “Welp, there goes that idea!”

There was no chance of an ordinary knight like me getting any favors from anyone. Having given up on the Demon Lord’s box, I began thinking about what the next-best plan of action might be.

That was when Green spoke up. “I think I can help you there, Fia.”

“Huh?”

“I mentioned earlier that I have an acquaintance who is something of a big shot, remember? Well, they...might be able to help us check on the Demon Lord’s box.” Green said, looking utterly serious. I was beyond shock.



## Side Story:

### Green Emerald, Prince of the Arteaga Empire

**T**HERE LIKELY WASN'T a soul alive that could understand the feelings I held for Fia—that is, other than my brother, the Emperor, who had lived and experienced the same things I had.

The Arteaga Empire was one of two superpowers on the continent. Our history ran deep, the land we ruled stretched wide, and our subjects were plenty.

My older brother Ruby, my younger brother Sapphire, my younger sister, and I were all born from Arteaga's previous empress, our mother. Being descendants of her ancient and noble bloodline, we were supposed to be the legitimate heirs to the throne. But any hope of that was dashed when we were cursed.

One of my father's concubines had a curse cast upon us, which caused Ruby and I to bleed from our foreheads from birth. We grew used to it, but the pain was ever present, and our bodies were left pale and weakened.

The people of the empire had no sympathy for us, and our claim to the throne was denied. We were given a remote estate to quietly live out our lives—it was just my brothers, my cursed-to-eternal-sleep sister, and my mother.

As I grew up, I began to understand some things. My mother had passed on to me a wonderful, healthy body. I was tall, bulky, and blessed with a rare physique that could put on as much muscle as I could manage to train. My mind was sharp as well; I could read books without ever tiring and memorized a number of languages with no difficulty whatsoever. And yet, all because I was cursed from birth, I was fated to never make use of my gifts. From the very start, I could only remain a nobody.

As the years passed, my resignation to my fate only grew worse. That was, until one day everything was flipped on its head. The fog that had covered my eyes until then was cast away, and the world was suddenly aglitter. I stood in a

daze before her, the Goddess who reversed my fate, as she encouraged me with a teasing look.

*“I have just given you the power to forge a new path. So, you know. Get to it.”*

True to her word, a new path had opened before us. The people of our empire, upon hearing of how our curses were removed, did a complete about-face and welcomed us with open arms.

*“Only the Goddess could have possibly removed such terrible curses! The Goddess of Creation herself must wish for you to continue the imperial line!”*

*“Oh, how wonderful! Truly, truly, wonderful! You have my house’s full support—we would love to see Prince Ruby take the throne.”*

In but an instant, our world had changed. All that had been kept from us was now ours, and more.

I was filled with an awe-inducing sense of gratitude. *Oh, Fia...I offer all my heartfelt thanks to you. For you, who has given me everything, I am prepared to give even this world...*

Later, my brother became emperor of the Arteaga Empire, and I his spare. If something were to happen to him, I was to take over as first-in-line to the throne. It was a position of considerable influence. All doors were open for me. So when Fia requested something from Kurtis that he could not grant, I *knew* it was my time to step up and fulfill my duty.

Fia wished to go to the Cathedral to check on the Demon Lord’s box contained within. The Cathedral was the headquarters of all the churches scattered throughout the world. Only a select few were allowed access to its inner chambers where the boxes that contained sealed demons were kept. There weren’t even ten people in this world who could be granted access...but I was one of them.

“I think I can help you there, Fia,” I said without hesitation. I fully believed that *this* was the duty I was meant for.

Oddly, Fia seemed surprised. “Uhhh...sure...?” She cocked her head, flummoxed.

Fia was, without a doubt, the Goddess in human form—as was clearly evident by her powers. Which meant she surely knew that my brothers and I were of the Arteaga imperial bloodline. Why was she so surprised now?

Ah! Perhaps she thought my status wasn't enough to gain access to the inner chambers of the Cathedral. *It's a test: How well can I utilize my lineage? Do I have the wisdom and bravery to see things through and do what must be done?*

"I understand completely, Fia." *If she's testing me, then I must meet her expectations in kind. I'll spare no effort and bring about what she desires with perfection.* With utter sincerity, I said, "I will see through your request."

"Huh?" she replied, sounding worried. "Uh, really? Um...thank you. Just don't push yourself if it turns out to be impossible."

"I won't," I lied. This was a request from Fia herself. How could I *not* push myself, even if faced with the impossible? I swore to myself that I would see through her request with nothing less than perfection, and she was...worried? Just what could those worried eyes be trying to convey?

She wanted to check on the Demon Lord's box. *Why?*

It was common knowledge that the Great Saint brought peace to the world by sealing away the Demon Lord. That was why none doubted the fact that the Demon Lord was sealed away, or even thought of the box...and yet Fia wanted to confirm whether it was in the Cathedral?

A chill ran up my spine as I realized the conclusion Fia's doubts pointed to. I cast my gaze to Kurtis, then the black dragon. Both had expressions that told me they understood what I hadn't, a truth laid out so clearly before me: The world was in danger.

The color drained from my face at once, but Kurtis and the black dragon showed no surprise nor confusion as they watched me. Indeed, they seemed to have already known this truth that I had only just come to understand. I swallowed apprehensively and balled a hand into a tight fist. *I stand where I am today to protect those who cannot protect themselves. And yet...I was ignorant of such a present danger. What a fool I am!*

Belatedly, I had grasped Fia's true intentions. While dressing it up as a request

of hers, she revealed to me two things: One, the world was in danger. Two, I had a duty to fulfill. As prince of the Arteaga Empire, I must go to the Cathedral.

In my heart, I swore I would do whatever it took to find out the truth for her.



## Chapter 39:

### Blackpeak Mountain Part 3

**“H**HEY, ZAVILIA. Do you think entrusting Green with the Cathedral thing was a good idea?” After breakfast, I sat atop the grass with Zavilia in my arms as we chatted.

Kurtis, Green, and Blue had just left to go explore Blackpeak Mountain for a bit, leaving me alone with Zavilia to think over my exchange with Green. In the end, it was decided that Green would go check up on the Demon Lord’s box for me. He seemed confident he’d be able to do it, though I had my doubts. How would he even get access to something like that?

“He’s chivalrous,” I murmured, “I’ll give him that...” He probably volunteered himself because he felt bad that Kurtis shot me down, but his family were only fishmongers, butchers, or maybe merchants at best. I couldn’t imagine how a normal citizen like him could reach the Cathedral’s inner chambers when not even Kurtis, a knight brigade captain, could. Still, Green made a promise. I could only hope he didn’t do anything reckless.

Zavilia looked up at my worried face and gave me an unbothered reply. **“I wouldn’t worry. I’m sure he has connections you wouldn’t even dream of.”**

“Be serious, Zavilia! This is important.” *That* Green? Connections? Pssht! Sure. There was a chance Green’s big-shot acquaintance was actually someone really, really high up, but I doubted it. This was Green we were talking about, after all. “Green’s the type to try and force his way through without relying on anyone else’s help, but there’s only so much he can do alone...”

Zavilia nodded in agreement. **“You’re a good judge of character; Green is indeed quite the individualist. But isn’t that precisely why he might actually find a way alone?”**

I gave Zavilia a look. *Hey, didn’t you just say you thought Green had connections?* I frowned—maybe Zavilia wasn’t really paying attention to the conversation.

“But this is the Cathedral we’re talking about. It’s not some place you can just waltz in and...” I stopped, however, as I realized the reason Zavilia was so bored was because he had little interest in human affairs whatsoever. Besides, I had already requested Green’s help. There was no point in worrying about it any further.

I shifted my train of thought and stroked Zavilia in my arms. The demons haven’t appeared in the world for over three hundred years now. The chances they would appear anytime soon, like today or tomorrow, were infinitesimally small. There was no reason I had to be so hasty, or so I told myself to push away the fear that gnawed at me. But what if...

Ugh, I was simply looping back to the same thing I’d been agonizing about just a while ago. I cut my thought short and sighed.

*I can’t believe it took me so long to remember that the Demon Lord’s right-hand man had one crest.* A demon’s strength was proportional to their number of crests, so, logically speaking, the Demon Lord’s right-hand man *wasn’t* significantly strong. So...why did I fear them so much? Was it just because they killed me in my last life?

*Maybe that’s it. Besides, I’ve only just remembered they had one crest.* It seemed I still didn’t remember all my past life’s memories. I remembered most things the first day my memories came back, but some things appeared to trickle in late. That’s why it took me so long to remember the Demon Lord’s right-hand man only had one crest...so why was I still so scared of him? He waited for me to expend all my energy on sealing the Demon King before making his appearance, so there was no doubt he was cunning, but he *couldn’t* be that strong.

Somewhere, a part of me disagreed. *No. That demon is strong.* I didn’t know where the feeling came from. Perhaps there was still something I couldn’t quite remember yet. The thought scared me, but I felt reassured at the same time... It felt like I finally had a clearer image of what I was facing: There were a total of six crests left among the demons and an unknown number of non-crest-bearing demons. Of the crest-bearing demons, the one with a single crest was the Demon Lord’s right-hand man, also known as the Right-hand Man of the Lone Crest. There was a chance that the Demon Lord of the Thirteen Crests was also

free. That was everything I knew.

I let out a deep sigh and told myself everything would be all right, hugging Zavilia tightly. I don't know how Green knew so much about demons—maybe his big-shot acquaintance had ways to gather information—but from Kurtis's reaction, I think Green's words were accurate. As my personal knight in my past life, Kurtis had all the information I received as Great Saint, including info about demons. On top of that, he also received a lot of information from Sirius, the pillar of the Kingdom, and was around after my death. If anything Green claimed had been wrong, Kurtis would probably have stepped in and said as much.

In truth, it would've been faster to ask Kurtis directly for information, but I wasn't sure if he could take it. He cried when I talked about how I died in my previous life. I even lied to soften things, claiming I died a painless death trading finishing blows with the Demon Lord, but big, round tears still trailed down his face regardless. If I were to ask him about demons, he might remember how I died and get all teary again, and I didn't want that. At any rate, I was able to find out many things without asking Kurtis this time, so...all's well that ends well?

I didn't expect there to be so many demons left in the world, but the situation wasn't hopeless. For the time being, however, dwelling on demons could only make me anxious. For a change of mood, I looked to Zavilia. "Hey, Zavilia, um..." I hemmed and hawed, however, unsure how to broach this new topic.

**"Yes, Fia?"**

"Well, uh, I was just wondering...how long do you plan on staying on this mountain?"

I saw how taken aback he was and immediately regretted my question. I mean, it sounded like I was practically begging him to come home. Zavilia was trying to become a king, after all, and I'd told myself countless times over that I wouldn't get in his way. Still, my true wishes just sort of slipped out.

Frantically, I tried to cover for my mistake. "I wanted to know becaaaaause... you're kind of a big presence here! I heard that the moment you returned, a bunch of monsters started migrating out of the area because they were scared

of you.” Suddenly, I remembered the request from my sister. “The knights in the area have their hands full keeping a lid on the monsters migrating out, so they asked me to try and find a way to lower their numbers somehow.”

Zavilia’s ear twitched as though he were amused. **“I see. I suppose I should do something then, seeing as it’s a request from your very own sister.”**

“Huh? When’d I mention my sister?” I looked at him with wonder, impressed by his astuteness. Or maybe this was thanks to the miracle that was our connection?

He gave me a playful sidelong glance. **“’Tis only natural that the King of the Mountain is aware of all that occurs upon it.”**

“The king returns! Oh please, Your Majesty, heed this pitiful handmaid’s request.”

**“There’s nothing pitiful about you, Fia, but I’ll heed your request nonetheless.”** His next words *really* surprised me. **“I shall remove the cause of the outflow of monsters by joining you when you depart this mountain.”**

My jaw dropped. “Wha—*huh?*”

He gave me an amused look, then stiffened. For a moment, he craned his neck as though searching for something before going stock-still. I watched him quietly and carefully, knowing that something serious had just happened. But after some more silence passed, I couldn’t wait any longer and trepidatiously called out to him. “Zavilia?”

After a delay, he put on a sour look and shook his head. **“Speak of the devil and he shall appear, huh...”**

“Huh? What do you mean?”

**“It would appear as though the three men have encountered a demon.”**

“What?!” My eyes shot wide as I repeated the word. “A...demon?”

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I was in disbelief. Zavilia gave me a firm nod and said, **“Yes. They don’t seem to have particularly powerful magic, however. Maybe a crestless?”** He shrugged his shoulders and stretched his body out lazily. **“I’m sure the three of**

**them can handle a crestless demon just fine.”**

I was nowhere near as relaxed as him, however. With my body rigid, I looked down at him in my arms. “B-but I thought nobody’s seen a demon in three hundred years...”

**“Yes, this is quite the coincidence. One of those three must have some unbelievably bad luck.”**

“O-or maybe...” I began to feel panic creep in.

Zavilia lazily rested flat in my arms. His ear then twitched suddenly. “Hm?” He raised his head and peered far off into the distance, farther than my eyes could possibly see, and slapped his tail against his body. He let out a small, exasperated sigh. With some admiration, he said, **“This one can actually control magic, if you’d believe it. I was wrong, Fia. This one is a crest-bearing demon. Heh heh...this is shaping up to be interesting.”**

Perhaps it was his instinct as a monster, but he smiled happily after gauging the demon’s strength. I, on the other hand, was full of worry. My heart began to race. *Kurtis! Green! Blue!*

To think that the first demon in three hundred years would appear before those three—and a crest-bearing demon at that! One of them must have luck just that unbelievably bad, like Zavilia said—or maybe *all* of them did!

I pressed my hand tightly against my chest and remembered that Kurtis had encountered a crest-bearing demon three hundred years ago, back when he was my personal knight. Since this wasn’t his first time, he should know just how strong of an opponent he was facing, as well as how to handle them. While I was happy to find something positive in this situation, I knew better than to let that make me optimistic. Against a crest-bearing demon, a single mistake spelled death. Green and Blue have never fought any demons before, let alone a crest-bearing one. The deck was stacked against the three of them.

I bit my lip and looked to Zavilia. “Take me to them.” My voice was faint due to my fear, but it still reached him.

However, he refused me. **“Fia, I’m fairly sure those three are strong enough to escape on their own. They might lose an arm or two along the way, but I**



**seriously doubt any of them will die. So you see, it's better that you wait here for them. You can even heal them when they come back."**

My safety was Zavilia's number one priority. Even if he worried for the others, they fell to the wayside the instant my own safety was in question. On top of that, he could clearly see that, with my fear of demons, I was in no state to think rationally. It was reasonable for him to want me far, far away from them. But I just couldn't bring myself to abandon my friends.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go to them!"

**"Yeah, I knew you'd say that."** He let out a sigh of resignation and leapt out of my arms. Before my eyes, he quickly returned to his original size. Zavilia stooped his massive, beautiful body down and expanded his wings. **"Get on, Fia. I'll split apart the sky to get there for you, so hold on tight."**

## Interlude:

### The Crest-Bearing Demon

**“W**OW. This mountain has more diverse plant life than you’d expect.”

Admiringly, Blue reached out and touched some ivy drooping off a branch. Ahead of him, Kurtis and Green stopped in their tracks to look back.

Right after breakfast, Kurtis had announced his plan to explore the mountain. Green and Blue both asked to join him. The mountain was still silent this early in the morning, making for a pleasant stroll. As the area was under the black dragon’s control, no monsters bothered them, allowing the three to take their time doing what they liked.

Seeing Blue’s look full of wonder, Kurtis courteously added, “Indeed, and quite rare plant life at that. Perhaps unique life grows in the black soil of this mountain.” He plucked a few plants as he went and put them in the bag on his back.

Noticing how oddly accustomed to picking plants Kurtis was, Green and Blue gave him an inquiring look.

Kurtis paused his plucking. “Oh, Lady Fi is greatly interested in medicinal herbs, so I make an effort to bring some back to her whenever I find any that look rare. That being said, I am not all that well versed in medicinal herbs, so the majority of what I gather are likely weeds.”

“I see!” Green and Blue both exclaimed in tandem. They began to fiercely gather plants as though competing with one another. The problem was, they clearly couldn’t differentiate between medicinal herbs and common weeds, so the ratio of useless plant matter in their finds was higher than Kurtis’s own.

After covering a wide, circular breadth while gathering anything that remotely resembled an herb, the three found a large, comfortable-looking boulder and sat atop it. Their time together had been surprisingly pleasant. The only thing they had in common at all was that they held the same person dear, but they had all still come to understand one another in their short journey from the

kingdom to this mountain. Kurtis found the two brothers to be rather modest despite their backgrounds and approved of their ability to make themselves useful, whether through their own skills or their high status. Meanwhile, Green and Blue found Kurtis to be prudent and talented, as well as an exemplary example of a man dedicated to supporting Fia. Through observing one another's actions, they grew to understand how earnest in nature those of the other side were and came to accept them. This acceptance was reflected in their interactions as they freely made idle chatter.

Just then, as Blue let out a jovial laugh, the soft sound of a pebble sliding underfoot could be heard. Immediately, all three snapped their heads in the direction of the sound's source.

"Hello." Standing there was a girl perhaps around fifteen years old, wearing a yellow one-piece dress that a village girl might wear. She had shoulder-length black hair and black eyes. Her arms held a basket, and she had a smile on her face.

The three men stared at her wordlessly. At first glance, she seemed ordinary enough to most, but the three men seemed to think differently. They soon stood and reached for their weapons, keeping their eyes locked on the girl.

Her appearance here on the mountain was far too strange. This was the mountain ruled by the black dragon, home to many fearsome monsters. There was simply no way a young girl would go for a picnic here. Moreover, the three were generally well aware of their surroundings, but they hadn't noticed the girl until she was already within five meters. That raised their guard and made them maintain a distance.

The girl took another step closer. The men took another step back. And again.

"Oh my," said the girl, rolling her eyes and running a hand through her black hair. "Could it be that the three of you are wary of me? How come? I'm just an ordinary girl! So mean. Boo-hoo." She began to mock cry.

Fear washed over the men, covering their skin with goosebumps. Unblinking, Kurtis succinctly asked, "Hair and eyes of darkest black...are you a demon?"

The moment he said those words, Green and Blue tensed up at his side. They didn't say a word, however, as they merely gripped their weapons tighter.

The girl, conversely, continued to fake cry into her hands. Her voice muffled, she said, “Oh, you’re terrible. Calling a girl you just met a demon? Brutish! Nasty! I bet women don’t even give you the time of day! Such superstitious thinking, to believe that someone is a demon just because their hair and eyes are black!”

Still maintaining the same distance from the girl, Kurtis responded matter-of-factly. “And yet a demon you are. It’s pride that undoes you—so fond of your black hair and eyes, you demons never consider changing to anything else.”

“Is that right? Don’t you know that black is all the rage? With a little coin, you can change your hair to any color you want.” As she talked, she removed her hands from her face to reveal a sneer. She twirled some hair around her finger. “Although all the money in the world couldn’t buy a black as pretty as mine. Hee hee! What you *should’ve* said was ‘Hair and eyes of darkest black—how dazzling, how gorgeous! How beautiful. How wonderful. How superb... Why, are you a demon?’” She batted her eyes flirtatiously.

The three men said nothing.

She grinned. “But even if you asked me in such a way, I’d still say, ‘I’m a human, mister. Don’t you know all the demons are sealed away?’ Because they are, aren’t they?” She made a show of waving her hands and then touched the top of her head, drawing two lines from the back of her head to her forehead. “See? No horns. *Noooot* a demon.”

She cast her gaze toward Kurtis. “Goodness...is this not enough for you to believe me? That bloodlust rolling off of you, it’s quite something! I can tell you *reaaally* want to kill me more and more with each and every passing moment.” She gasped. “Don’t tell me you’re the kind of guy that likes to kill girls out in the mountains. Oh no! Sure, you can bury all the evidence in the forest without leaving a trace, but I’ll have you know that murder is *widely* frowned upon!”

Even when egged on, Kurtis maintained his silence. He looked as calm as ever at first glance, but his hand gripped his still-sheathed sword so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Seething, he held himself back. His usual soft eyes were intense, filled with nothing but the thought of killing.

Green and Blue, though still processing the situation, understood Kurtis was

ready to leap forward at any moment and quickly moved to calm him.

“Kurtis, I understand how you feel, but don’t be hasty. Murder is a serious crime. And while many things about this girl are odd, she looks human to me,” Green said.

“No demon has been seen in three hundred years. It’s unlikely we’d encounter one now,” Blue said.

But neither of the two brothers could confidently state she *was* human, leaving their words tainted with uncertainty. What was more, the two knew how exceptional Kurtis was and understood there was a chance he had knowledge they didn’t. Hence, they didn’t actively try to stop him but instead nervously looked between the girl and him, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

Kurtis continued the struggle to keep his fury in check as he glared at the girl. “The fact that you are here on this monster-infested mountain with that black hair, with those black eyes...that is enough proof that you’re a demon. If I’m mistaken, then I’ll offer my condolences to your grave.” He drew his sword and lunged.

She stood stock-still, unable to react due to the fluidity of his movement. The sound of flesh being cut could be audibly heard as his sword sunk into the left side of her chest. Blood sprayed onto him as his blade remained buried in her body. The basket on her arm fell to the ground, its contents spilling out.

“Kurtis!” Green and Blue cried. To them, it appeared as though Kurtis had attacked a defenseless girl.

The girl coughed up blood, then spasmed with her head tilting back to face the sky. Her eyes rolled back, showing all white. A silence followed, filled only by Green and Blue’s heavy breathing. After some seconds had passed, the girl remained as she was—but her black pupils suddenly rolled back into focus.

Green and Blue’s eyes darted wide as the girl lifted her head back up. With an unfocused gaze, she looked at Kurtis.

“Wow. I sure didn’t expect you to actually attack. Oh gosh, oh no, you got me—bleh!” she said, deadpan. “You still got that bloodthirsty look on your face



even after ‘killing’ me?” she scolded. “Wow, you’re a real sicko. Sick and insane, since you attacked without proof that I’m a demon. Yeah...you’re a monster.” She looked at him with emotionless eyes, glossy like a glass marble. “How could you murder a fellow human in cold blood?”

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“You’re...no...human...” Kurtis managed to speak through tightly clenched teeth.

The girl looked offended, as if a large sword were not still protruding from her chest. “Excuse me? But I *am* human, can’t you tell? I have no horns, and my blood is red! Look! I may still be speaking through some miracle, but I’m going to drop dead any moment now with my heart pierced. Ahh, what a short life I’ve lived. So many unfulfilled dreams...”

She glanced down at the sword, then laid her head on it like a pillow. “Oh dear, I’m starting to feel tired. I think my last moments are here. You two, with the blue and green hair. Go tell this area’s lord I was killed by this light-blue-haired man here, won’t you? Gracious me, I can see my whole life flashing before my eyes...”

She remained silent for a few moments before speaking again. “Ugh, but three hundred years’ worth of flashbacks? No thanks. Whoops, did I say that out loud?” Suddenly, she let out a shrill noise like the cry of a bird. “*Peet-peet-peet!*” She lifted her head again, then pointed at the sword in her chest. “Hey, mind pulling this out already? I mean, I’ve totally bled a lethal amount out already, haven’t I?”

Kurtis didn’t reply, his grip on his sword remaining firm.

“Don’t tell me you *can’t* pull it out?” she mocked. “My rigor mortis must’ve already begun, I guess. Aww, that must mean I’m completely dead now, one hundred percent! That makes you a murderer, by the way.”

She took a large step back, and the sword slid from her body. At that moment, Kurtis leapt away, sword in hand. With the sword that had plugged her wound gone, she began to gush blood...blood that rapidly changed from red to black. She wiped her hand across her chest, smearing the black blood over it, then looked at her open palm with a twisted grin.

“Oh no, my blood’s starting to turn a weird color. It’s been such a long time since I’ve been stabbed, I suppose, *peet-peet*. Black blood. As though I’m not human at all.” She roared with laughter in her strange voice. “*Peet-peet, pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi...*”

Disturbed by her bizarre laughter, the three men took a step back and spread out from one another.

Which made her roar again with laughter. “*Peet-peet-peet, pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi!*”

As she laughed, she put her hand over the hole in her chest. It began to seal up before their very eyes. She gazed down at it, pleased, and then rubbed her bloodstained hand against her cheek. “*Peet-peet, pi*, oh, don’t my mind my way of laughing. When I was young, I lived in a house with some pet birds. They’d been left, you see, after I slaughtered the ones who once lived there.” She licked the black blood on her hand. “I was at such a tender age. Still learning to speak, you see! So my laugh now sounds like that of a bird. *Peet-peet-peet*. Perhaps that’s why everyone calls me the ‘Bird Cryer.’ Nice and simple, don’t you think?”

The black of her eyes expanded until there was hardly any white left, making her look uncannily inhuman. A shiver ran up the spines of the three men.

Heart pounding, Green recalled what he had read before in the forbidden tome. “The Bird Cryer... You’re ‘The Bird Cryer of the Dual Crests,’ one of the demons who vanished when the Demon Lord was sealed away.”

The girl narrowed her eyes and grinned like a cat looking over a fresh bowl of milk. “Bullseye. I’m honored to be remembered even after all these years.”

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The moment the demon confirmed her identity, two sinister-looking horns sprouted from her head.

Green and Blue gasped and took a step back. Not knowing what distance to take against a demon, they played it safe, but her overwhelming presence pushed them away. Small as the demon was compared to the three, the energy she exuded had transformed as if she were somebody else entirely, as if an

invisible power overflowed from her form. Her hair, once shoulder-length, now stretched all the way down her back, and her yellow dress was soaked black with demon blood.

The three men stood, overwhelmed by the demon's sudden transformation.

She rolled out an eccentric laugh. *"Peet-peet-peet, pi pi pi pi pi pi..."* Raising a hand, she wiped the black blood off her cheeks to reveal two crests. Each crest took the shape of a wing, bringing to mind the image of a bird.

*"Peet-peet-peet, pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi..."*

The three men readied themselves to fight, weapons in hand. Their fingers felt numb with the tension that came from confronting a strong foe. This was Green and Blue's first time fighting a demon, yet one glance into the emotionless eyes of her was enough for them to know the stakes they faced: A single mistake meant death.

Whatever she truly felt did not resemble human emotion in the slightest; all she had expressed was a hollow mimicry. In all likelihood, human emotions like joy and sadness were something demons lacked as a whole. Demons could not comprehend emotions at all, only imitate them. But that also meant they were not bound by emotion and could kill without a second thought. This firm and unwavering will combined with their innate strength, creating the strongest and most feared of all beings.

The demon's laughter subsided. She gazed at the three men with nearly solid black eyes. With no pupils to make it clear who exactly she was looking at, each of the men felt her eyes watching them.

"Aww, you killed me? I suppose now I can't be a human anymore. But, what! Then who am I, standing here now? *Peet-peet!* Oh no, it seems I've become something quite scary, *peet-peet-peet!* But you *did* kill me, so I guess you reap what you sow."

The demon took a reckless step forward, then another.

"Say, what do you think I am, with my hair blacker than the dark of night and my black eyes that signal no hope? Tell me, what do I appear like to you, with these horns that show I've been chosen by a higher power and these crests that

I gained from slaughtering two demons?" She swept the hair that fell before her face behind her. "Call me by my name again, the one I haven't heard in so long. As a special treat, I'll properly respond this time."

Kurtis rose to the challenge. "You're the Bird Cryer of the Dual Crests."

"Ah...it really has been too long since I've heard that name! So, what do you want?"

"To put you to rest."

"Oh?" The one known as the Bird Cryer narrowed her eyes with suspicion. "Not to kill me, but to put me to rest? How interesting." She seemed to be pushing for him to elaborate, but he said nothing further. Seeing that, she pointed her finger at him. "Just for future reference, would you mind telling me why you thought I was a demon? Not to brag, but for these past hundred years, not a soul has doubted me."

Kurtis kept his lips tightly shut.

The Bird Cryer sighed. "What a smart cookie you are. You can't give away information if you don't speak. I'm sure there's sooo much you want to say to me right now...but your eyes speak volumes. Ah, you positively despise me! I've seen humans who've lost family to demons look at me like that before, but no demon has publicly done anything in three hundred years. So just where does that well of anger come from, hm?"

Kurtis said nothing.

The Bird Cryer let out a murmur of praise. "*Peet-peet-peet*. Not a peep, huh? I admire your spirit. Such admirable self-control."

In truth, however, Kurtis was nowhere near as calm as she said. Demonstrating just that, he slowly released a shaky breath, then wordlessly took up a stance with his sword.

"Ho! So you're going to fight me? But you *do* know that fleeing is the only option, do you not? Did I not make myself clear? I can take your sword from you just by flexing my muscles a bit after you stab. What's the point of even trying to attack when you'll only lose your weapon?" She spread her arms out wide. "But, be my guest; take a stab at me if you like...though I should mention

that my body isn't quite as fragile as it was before."

She was clearly provoking him, but he did just as she wanted and rushed forward, bringing his sword up for a powerful stab. He aimed right for her heart, but she twisted her body slightly. The blade plunged instead into her shoulder.

"Kurtis?!" Green and Blue both exclaimed. They hadn't expected Kurtis to actually attack but moved to support him, coming along the opposite sides of him with their weapons ready.

The Bird Cryer laughed at the three. "*Peet-peet-peet!* I don't know if I should praise you or mock you for your simplemindedness! Did you really think it was worth losing your weapon just to land a scratch on me, fool?"

Kurtis showed no sign that her roaring laughter affected him, instead staring at the sword embedded in her. "Invigorate: Attack ×2!"

"Hm?"

Paying no mind to the Bird Cryer's surprise, Kurtis put strength into his arm and pulled his sword out of her body, then took up a stance again.

The Bird Cryer's mocking smile faded as she took a step back for the first time. "Huh. Interesting. I thought that magic disappeared together with the red-haired saint. How can you use it?"

"A beast like you needn't know," Kurtis said, his voice low with fury.

Just as the words left his mouth, the heavens split apart.

It looked as though a sword had been diagonally run across the clear, blue skies. The scar widened, forming a rift to a different realm of space where an even bluer sky shone. From within, an enormous black dragon languidly emerged. It descended, its scales shining brilliantly in the sunlight. On the slowly descending dragon's back was the person the three men wanted to see the least right now.

"Lady Fi!"

"Fia!"

"Fia!"



As the men watched the red-haired girl ride the dragon down, they cried out to her, worry creeping into their voices.

## Chapter 40:

### The Bird Cryer of the Dual Crests

**Z**AVILIA GENTLY LANDED about twenty meters or so from the three. I put a hand over my chest, felt my racing heart—it hadn't stopped beating like that since I'd heard about the demon—and quickly surveyed my surroundings. Kurtis faced a black-haired girl with Green and Blue standing defensively behind him. Seeing the three standing on their own two legs, seemingly uninjured, I breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank goodness... I feared the worst when I heard they encountered a demon, but they're all okay.*

I hurriedly began to run up to them but then got a clear look at the girl—or what I'd believed to be a girl. My heart, which had just begun to calm down at the sight of them, began pounding a mile a minute again.

*A demon...?* I reached Kurtis, somewhat certain of what I saw but also feeling something was off. I stared at her from five meters away, not uttering a word.

Two horns protruded out of her head and her eyes had hardly even a fleck of white—just like a demon. But her expression and clothes felt like a mismatch to what I knew. Demons were typically known for their expressionless visages and black clothes made with unique designs.

I tried to quickly compile in my head all I knew about demons from my past life. Demons lived an existence far different from anything human. That was why it was easy to differentiate them by appearance even if they did resemble humans. And yet, the demon before me now didn't have the icy look they were known for but instead wore a sneer. The clothes she wore appeared to be black at first, but its original color, yellow, wasn't uncommon. If it weren't for the horns on her head, she'd look just like any old human. Unsure what to make of this, I bit my lip.

“Oh, what's this?” the demon casually called out. “I knew this was the home of the black dragon, but I'm surprised that you'd teleport out here just for me. *Peet-peet-peet*. What a warm reception.”

“Wha...?” A sound that wasn’t quite a complete thought escaped my lips. A strange, unplaceable sense of unease crawled up my spine. Eyes wide with fear and astonishment, I murmured through trembling lips. “You’re...talking...?”

The demon frowned. “How rude. Did you think I was too stupid for conversation? Human speech is easy to reproduce, I’ll have you know.”

*But...that can’t be!* Demons believed themselves to be superior to all other creatures, so they rarely spoke anything but their own language. What’s more, it was unthinkable for them to spout inconsequential nonsense like the demon before me just did, no matter the language.

Baffled, I stared wide-eyed at the demon. The demon seemed to ponder something, bringing a hand to her forehead. Such a gesture was terribly human, further confusing me.

“Oh, right, right. We hardly spoke the human language three hundred years ago when we disappeared, so it’s no surprise you’d think we only spoke the demon language.” She nodded understandingly as she murmured to herself. “We’ve changed as a race, huh? Just as they wanted...”

As though to clear the air, she fanned out her fingers and looked at me with great interest. “*Peet-peet-peet!* That’s some nice red hair you got. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a vivid red before. Reminds me of a certain princess from some three hundred years ago.” She continued to stare, transfixed. In a small voice I couldn’t make out, she murmured, “Yes...just like a certain happy-go-lucky princess...”

Frowning, she continued, “At any rate, I can’t very well let you all go home now that you’ve seen me. As they say...dead men tell no tales.” Her human-like smile didn’t reach her icy black eyes.

Three hundred years was a long span of time. Many things had changed over the years. The saints had grown weaker, for one, and spirits were nowhere to be found. Even demons, then, weren’t free from the changing times. In the past, demons avoided humans by living in castles deep within the heart of forests or high up on mountains, but judging by its speech and actions, this demon before me didn’t seem like they avoided humans at all. Was she simply unique? Or have many, if not all, of the remaining demons blended into human

society?

“No, that can’t be,” I murmured. “We’re nothing alike. There’s no way we wouldn’t notice them being so close.” Feeling a chill creeping up my spine, I said what I could to cast it away. I shut my eyes to calm myself and counted to three, taking deep breaths as I did so. Slowly, I then opened my eyes and re-examined the demon, this time as an opponent to defeat. I observed her as a whole, horns and all. She mimicked humanity, but her mimicry was imperfect. Her heartlessness seeped through.

I was...afraid of her. She wasn’t the Demon Lord’s right-hand man. I knew that. But my body still felt numb with fear, from head to toe.

Noticing my turmoil, Kurtis reached out with his free hand to squeeze my own, even with how tense the situation was. “Lady Fi, please feel free to stand back. This Bird Cryer is only a two-crest demon. There is no need for you to trouble yourself.”

It was only after I felt his warm hand that I realized my own hands had been so cold with fear. As I was, I could not fight like I normally did... What if I couldn’t protect everyone?

Gripped with apprehension, I said, “Th-then, let’s retreat. We don’t even have a box to seal her in, and it’s not as if we have to fight her now.”

The demon didn’t know I was a saint, so it shouldn’t be a big problem if we retreated.

Kurtis wanted to do anything but that, however. “Forgive me for not being able to do as you say, but I’ve vowed to seal every demon I encounter without fleeing, even if I must do so alone. And I cannot break my vows.”

Such a vow was noble. Demons were belligerent and intelligent beings. They built castles, commanded monsters, and did whatever they pleased, sometimes bringing much suffering to humans in the process. Demons were also fickle by nature, so even ones that had been harmless could suddenly turn violent at the drop of a hat. To vow to seal every such wicked being one spotted was nothing less than noble—that is, if one had a hope of winning. To fight a losing battle only brought a loss for humanity as a whole, and a gain for the demons who learned how to better fight saints. What was more, we currently had no box to

seal the demon in. I hadn't expected to encounter a demon, or even considered the possibility.

Kurtis certainly knew we had no box, but he still insisted we fight regardless. He looked calm on the surface, but his heart must've been blazing with rage if he was being so reckless.

To remind him, I said, "Kurtis, I don't know how the demons have been living recently, but in the past, they lived apart without interacting with one another much. If we seal them away, it's unlikely the other demons will notice their absence. But if we just kill them...every demon will immediately sense their disappearance."

Kurtis should want to avoid that if possible. It would be a problem for us if the demons knew there was someone strong enough to defeat them around.

I looked up at his face. He squeezed my hand tightly for a moment, then let go. "You needn't worry about that, Lady Fi."

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I searched his face, trying to see if he truly meant his words, and he gave me a nod in return with his usual composed look. Perhaps I was wrong about him losing his cool. If he said he had something planned, he surely meant it. I gave him a nod in return to show I understood.

Demons could understand human speech. For that reason, we both understood it was best to leave our discussion at that so we wouldn't give anything away. I took a few steps back, then looked at my trembling hands. *What can I do here?*

Kurtis readied his sword before charging the demon without any hesitation. Green and Blue charged with him, flanking him on either side.

The demon grinned with excitement as she watched Kurtis approach in the middle of the trio. The ends of her long hair rose with a start as though alive, then formed a number of bundles that lunged toward Kurtis.

Demons could transform a part of their body into a weapon. What part depended on the demon—some used hair while others transformed their arms—but the weapons they made were always more powerful than conventional

swords and axes. Blocking with an ordinary weapon would typically only break said weapon, but Kurtis deftly parried all of the demon's hair attacks.

The instant I heard the dull sound of something heavy being repelled—the very instant combat began—a terrible chill came over me. *Just what in the world am I doing?* I felt an awful sense of dread, like a blade was being held to my throat. Here I was, idling around in the middle of a battle without doing a thing to help...and yet I dared to call myself a saint?

I bit my lip and watched Kurtis exchange blows with the demon. From the way he repelled her hair, I could tell he was using strengthening magic on himself. I cursed myself, frustrated at how I only watched him fight, only watched him give it his all. I then carefully examined the demon, taking in her short, female form and the imitation of human emotion on her face.

*See?* I thought to myself. *She's nothing like the Demon Lord's right-hand man. He was bigger, and his face never bore any emotion at all.* At that, my body's trembling began to subside. My narrowed vision quickly re-expanded, and my senses turned sharp again.

From directly behind me, I heard a faint exhale. Recognizing it as Zavilia's sigh, I felt my heart warm. Without looking back, I said, "Thanks for worrying about me, Zavilia. I'm calm now."

Zavilia had sensed my turmoil, perhaps because of our connection. That was why he stood behind me. To protect me.

*I'm surrounded by such good people.* Kurtis fought the demon without hesitation, saying I needn't bother helping so I wouldn't feel bad. Green and Blue aided him without a second thought, even though they had no idea how strong their enemy was. And finally, Zavilia went along with my request and brought me here, protecting me without a word.

I took a deep breath and exhaled. Having calmed down considerably, I now understood just how shaken I had been, just how out of character I had acted. I'd even run up to Kurtis without gauging the distance between me and the enemy, like a fool.

**"It's all right, Fia. I'll protect you no matter what happens, as is my duty as your familiar. If it winds up that I don't have a role to play, you're free to use**



**my extensive mana for yourself, however you'd like."**

"Thank you, Zavilia."

*What a wonderful dragon you are,* I thought. Zavilia was holding back out of consideration for Kurtis's wish to seal the demon himself.

There was only one thing I could do to repay everyone's kindness. It was time to fulfill my duty as a saint. Locking eyes on the demon, I raised a hand.

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I felt nerves come on at the thought of fighting the demon. Things were different now than in my past life. I always had a spirit to lend me power then, but he was no longer by my side. Perhaps he'd reappear if I called his name like I used to, but...no, I could never do that, not when the Demon Lord's right-hand man might notice. It was pointless to even consider such a thing.

I brought a hand up to my lips, then said what I always said before fighting demons, only this time just in my mind. Even if I couldn't summon him now, I could at least still keep my ritual in some form for good luck. ...*Se\*\*\*, lend me your strength.*

I felt a strange warmth fill my chest, sourced from all the lovely memories my spirit gave me in my past life. In my heart, I thanked him.

Shifting gears, I looked at the Bird Cryer, then Kurtis, Green, and Blue. Under Kurtis's guidance, the three men had surrounded the demon and were successfully working together to block her attacks. I was surprised to see Green and Blue able to repel her attacks just as Kurtis did. Looking closely, I noticed their weapons were of a quality rarely seen, enhanced with magic to boot. *Incredible. Even royalty and titled nobility would have a hard time getting their hands on weapons like that.*

Still pleasantly surprised, I looked at the Bird Cryer, only to see her defending against the attacks of the three men with utter ease, wearing a look of triumph. She was even preparing her attacks as she defended, and she had injured Kurtis's arm, Green's forehead, and both of Blue's legs.

Scattered red blood flooded my vision, almost making me reflexively use my healing magic, but I bit my lip and held back. *No, not yet...*

The Bird Cryer didn't know I was a saint. If she found out now, she might change tactics and draw this fight out longer. My duty was to end this confrontation with as little sacrifice as possible, and joining the fray at the moment ran counter to that goal.

Kurtis—in consideration of how I died in my past life—declared he would defeat the demon without my help, but I just couldn't see that happening against a crest-bearing demon. Without healing magic, it would be nearly impossible to corner and seal her. And even if he somehow came out victorious, he'd surely be greatly injured in the process. He had to know all that, and yet he still insisted for my sake. For such a loyal man, the best thing I could do right now was wait for the right moment to turn the tables. For starters, I focused on the demon to appraise her strength.

“Let's see, her total health is twelve thousand, and her remaining health is one hundred percent... She's strong.”

I clenched my hands into fists. A-rank monsters, which were plenty powerful already, generally had about one thousand health. S-rank monsters existed, but they only came up to the level of non-crest-bearing demons. Anything beyond that, however, could not be divided by rank. Anything stronger than an S-rank monster, like SS-rank monsters and crest-bearing demons, were considered powerful beyond categorization. They simply overflowed into their own category for which there was no defined cut-off.

Don't get me wrong, I knew that Kurtis, Green, and Blue were strong. But there was a great difference in strength between them and a crest-bearing demon. Crest-bearing demons were born with more powerful bodies and were much longer-lived, granting them more experience to draw from. One could not hope to defeat them without knowledge of their workings. What was more, crest-bearing demons were all uniquely different, so the first thing one had to do when fighting them was calmly analyze them.

The Bird Cryer looked down on the three men condescendingly. She knew she was dominating the fight, knew that her superior weapon was wiping the floor with them.

The three had strong footwork and swung their weapons skillfully, wasting no

strength in their attacks, but even that wasn't enough to so much as injure the Bird Cryer. Kurtis was using his strengthening magic and the brothers had magic-enhanced weapons, so they should be stronger than usual. Despite those advantages, the Bird Cryer's defense was too high for the men.

In contrast to them, the Bird Cryer didn't step in or move much at all as she attacked, landing hits on all three. Noticing the difference between them, Green snarled, "Bah! Your defense is surprisingly solid! I strike at you with all I got, yet every time you come out unscathed."

Green put his whole body behind another attack and, sure enough, the Bird Cryer blocked it with her hair before it could reach her body.

Kurtis calmly spoke to Green as he parried a strike. "The fact that you haven't been sent flying away with your weapon broken is impressive enough."

Blue cut in, "I'm afraid it isn't as impressive as you think, Kurtis! I'm sure you've already realized, but the two of us have only lasted this long because our weapons are masterpieces from the Golden Age! After we succeeded our family, we were able to take them out from the treasury—hah!" Blue grunted as he withstood a few slashes from the Bird Cryer.

I watched the three carefully, my hands balled tightly into fists. I agreed with Kurtis; Green and Blue were holding up amazingly well. Kurtis had experience fighting demons, as well as a proper reason to fight one, but this was Green and Blue's first time encountering a demon. They didn't even have a reason to fight one to begin with. Regardless, fight they did without cowering one bit against a foe far beyond them...but I suppose they've always been like that. Back when we first fought together against that powerful monster to undo their curses, none of them cowered away, Red included. All three of the brothers were heroically brave.

Abruptly, the Bird Cryer broke into her hideous laughter. "*Peet-peet-peet-peet!* You lot weren't bad for humans, but this battle's as good as over if you can't even land a blow on me. I was surprised to see you all could block my attacks, but I suppose a somewhat capable group is bound to crop up every three hundred years or so." She made her hair come to a sudden stop before she turned to face Kurtis. "You know, it's become too much of a pain to think

about why you're so knowledgeable of demons, and you don't seem too keen to answer my questions either...although I suppose it'd only be more of a pain if you did answer. Then I'd have to check if what you said was true, huh? *Peet-peet-peet-peet*...anyway, I'd say it's about time to put an end to all this."

Without warning, the Bird Cryer doubled over. Her back rapidly swelled in size before her clothes ripped as two large wings sprouted from the shreds of fabric. She glanced up with a proud expression, then extended her wings to their full size. In that moment, brief as it was, she left herself unable to attack.

*Now!* Without hesitation, I cast my magic on Kurtis, Green, and Blue as they charged forward. "Invigorate: Attack ×2! Speed ×2!"

Kurtis swiftly stepped in and swung the moment his empowered strength took hold, lopping off one of the Bird Cryer's wings at its base.





“Huh?” The Bird Cryer was left confused, unable to grasp what had just happened. Green moved to her opposite side and cut off her other wing at its base as well.

“Huh?” Even now, she was still in a stupor, unable to comprehend what had occurred, but she instinctively moved to defend herself by making the ends of her hair rise up again before jutting them out horizontally. Realization hit a second later, after which she let out a screech of shock. “My...myyy wingggs?!”

Black fluid dribbled out from where her wings had been lopped off and pooled at her feet.

Carefully keeping my eyes on her, I yelled out to the three men. “The demon’s weak spot is right where her wings were cut off!”

Kurtis knew this already, but it’s worth noting that crest-bearing demons have multiple hearts, unlike non-crest-bearing demons. For every crest a demon has, they gain another heart, and the location of said hearts differed between demons, but they were always situated where the demon needed the most power. There were many demons who changed their form, and it was often the case that their hearts were located near the part that transformed.

In other words, the Bird Cryer’s hearts should be at the base of her wings.

The location of their hearts was a closely guarded secret among demons. As proof of that, the Bird Cryer seemed overcome with murderous rage upon hearing my words. “You... How do you know that?!”

Her hair spread wide to cover the entirety of her back, where her weaknesses were. Meanwhile, I cast my healing magic and left the three men without a trace of injury.

“You always find new ways to awe me, Fia” Green murmured with admiration after seeing his scars disappear. “Just how do you heal us so quickly? Hell, how do you even make us so strong? I can’t wrap my head around it at all!”

“Brother, it’s blasphemy to try and comprehend acts of the Goddess!” In good spirits now, Blue was spouting nonsense.

Kurtis, standing between the two, calmly readied his sword. “Lady Fi, your



assistance is appreciated.”

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I looked at Kurtis’s tense face and wondered, was he not putting more strength than necessary into his blows? It felt as though he had a personal grudge against the Bird Cryer, even though this seemed to be their first meeting. Perhaps his regret over failing to protect me in my past life fueled his hostility toward all of demonkind now. My death was no fault of his—there was no way he could protect me when he wasn’t even at the Demon Lord’s castle—but he was loyal to a fault and surely blamed himself regardless.

I moved my gaze toward the demon, determined to help Kurtis as much as possible to repay his loyalty. The Bird Cryer dug both feet into the ground and kept her arms extended by her sides, glaring at the three men surrounding her.

She noticed my gaze, however, and quickly turned to scowl at me. “You, Red Hair, what are you?! How can you use lost magics?”

Her confusion was understandable. There were many saints in my past life, but I was the only one ever able to make use of strengthening magic and protection magic, so it was reasonable to think they were lost to the world with the Great Saint’s death. And yet here I was, using said magic before her.

I hemmed and hawed, pondering how I should answer her, when Kurtis cut in with a chilling tone. “How insolent. The likes of a demon have no right to speak to Lady Fi! Especially not with such a tone!”

*Oh yeah. I suppose I didn’t have to answer just because I was asked something, huh? How silly of me. I almost gave something away for no reason.*

Kurtis readied his sword and approached the Bird Cryer. She responded by bundling her hair to block like before, but this time a high-pitched ripping noise resounded as the blade sliced into her hair.

“What?!” She spun around to look at him in surprise, but he simply swung his sword again and stoically cut off another bundle of hair.

I was in admiration of his sheer swordsmanship. You see, while not widely known, the main difficulty a saint faced lay not in overcoming the enemy’s strength but in supplementing the combat abilities of one’s allies. An

inexperienced fighter moved about unpredictably and was easily hit by the enemy's attacks, making them difficult to support. But Kurtis was an ideal partner to fight with for his lack of those very flaws. Furthermore, as my personal knight, he had participated in almost all of my past life's battles, so we understood each other like no other...although I suppose there was one other I understood just as well—the gray-haired, silver-eyed captain of my royal guard. But he was much too powerful to act as a fair point of reference. I shook the thought of him out of my head and refocused on the fight.

We had managed to cut off the Bird Cryer's wings, but she still remained frightfully strong. About half of her lopped-off hair had already regenerated, and she was largely unharmed beyond that. Still, she was up against three first-rate fighters. Her health was slowly being whittled away. The three continued to carefully block her attacks as they landed heavy blows whenever an opening presented itself.

"You three really are something else," I murmured. They had the courage to fight with their lives on the line, the nerves to calmly make decisions, and the skills of top-class fighters. I was in awe. However, if they wanted to land a decisive blow, even all that was not going to be enough.

Perhaps they understood that fact and began to rush, or perhaps fatigue was slowly piling on as Green and Blue began to make mistakes, allowing the Bird Cryer to land blows on them. Of course, I instantly healed said injuries, but you couldn't call that situation favorable. If we couldn't at least maintain the status quo, the gap between us and the demon would widen.

The demon, with all its experience, knew better than to let an opportunity slip and hardened both her arms like swords. She attacked, cutting Green on his flank and Blue on his thigh. Their wounds were deep and sprayed fresh blood.

"Heal!" I wasted no time in healing them, but the sensation of their bodies being gouged couldn't so easily leave their mind. Mentally, the damage remained. Their fatigue only increased with each of the demon's attacks.

In contrast, the demon showed no signs of slowing, attacking with the same agility she had at the start. She wore a look of utter confidence, as though certain of her victory. Her confidence likely came from her attribute. Monsters

each had an attribute—like earth or water—that influenced them, and demons were all of the darkness attribute. Those with the darkness attribute were blackhearted by nature. They were extremely weak to the light attribute, sure, but they were strong against all other attributes. And so the attacks of the three men didn't do much damage.

I could lower her attribute's effects to try and break us out of our deadlock, but...lowering the effects of the darkness attribute in particular was a bit tricky. I would need to wait for the moment she used a lot of magic at once, like a big attack, to manage any real effect. The problem was...I'm not super great at tricking enemies into doing things. But I couldn't see any other choice and so resigned myself to my fate, raising my arm. I had to make the demon think she had an opening.

"Oh nooo! I just happened to raise my arm and get it caught on a branch, and now I'm falling forward!" I narrated extra loudly.

Green and Blue called out to me, both of them sounding flummoxed. "Uh, Fia?"

I heard the sounds of fighting stop, so I lifted my face off the ground slightly to look. Green and Blue stood there bewildered after having made some distance from the Bird Cryer. I didn't have the courage to look at Kurtis, but I swear I felt a piercing gaze from his direction. From behind me, Zavilia let out an exasperated sigh.

*Figures.* I put my heart into my performance, but it was clear that none of the men fell for it. My acting was usually pretty good, though! Maybe I'd just tensed up too much this time because I desperately wanted to bait the demon, so my delivery fell flat. But even if the three men could see through my act, that didn't mean the demon could! A demon wouldn't be familiar with normal human behavior, so there was a good chance I succeeded in tricking her. Hence, I remained where I was, collapsed on the ground.

With me on the ground unable to cast magic and the three men giving the demon space, the Bird Cryer now had an opening—just as I planned. She quickly hunched over and tried to regrow wings from her back. The moment her back swelled, I leapt up and triumphantly declared, "Gotcha, Demon! Me falling over

was all an act!”

“What?!” Green and Blue’s eyes darted wide, as if in shock that the demon would fall for my act—*wh-which the demon totally, totally did, I’ll have you know!* Demons didn’t know the first thing about humans, so even a bluff that seemed utterly transparent to the brothers could easily deceive a demon.

I extended my hands out toward the demon and said, “Sink, o plentiful power slumbering within. Enfeeble: Darkness Attribute –30%!”

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Green and Blue seemed to be in sincere disbelief the moment I cast my magic.

“What? Darkness attribute can be weakened?!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! Fia, saints can’t even begin to approach such a power anymore!”

Hearing them, I gasped and averted my gaze. I had forgotten, but the excuse I was using for those two was that I could temporarily use the abilities of a saint... and what I’d just done was clearly above and beyond the limits of a normal saint. If I hadn’t done it, though, we’d never be able to defeat the demon, so... bah, whatever. Kurtis was the one who insisted on defeating the demon, so I’d leave the excuses to him.

Completely set on foisting off bothersome excuse-making to someone else, I turned back to the battle and looked straight at the demon. She just stood there, stock-still with shock.

*Oh, right.* All the demons I’ve used this magic on so far had similar reactions, so this must’ve just been unexpected for them. They saw humans as an inferior race—as prey, even—so it was probably unthinkable that a human could ever weaken their powers.

The darkness attribute was widely considered the strongest of them all—and impossible to weaken. Of course, the darkness attribute *was* weak to the light attribute, but the light attribute mainly specialized in healing and generally couldn’t directly weaken a demon...or so people believed. The Bird Cryer seemed to subscribe to this popular notion as well, which was why she was stunned beyond words now.

As I'd shown, I could indeed weaken the darkness attribute, but word of this never spread among demons. After all, I'd always sealed them away right after. I could understand why they so adamantly believed their darkness attribute was impossible to weaken, though. Simply put, the darkness attribute was far, far more resilient than others. The spell used to weaken it required a chant, and other attributes required considerably less mana to weaken. Even after casting it, I had to burn through a massive amount of mana just to maintain its effects. I had more mana reserves than the average person, but even I would run dry soon at this rate. Furthermore, this was my first time casting this spell without a spirit's help, so I had no idea how long I could maintain it, even with Zavilia giving me his mana.

I didn't let my worry show to the Bird Cryer, though, and smiled while extending a hand out as though asking the three men to do the honors. I was a princess in my past life, so I knew how to keep a good poker face. For some reason, however, Kurtis took one look at my face and seemed to turn serious, regripping his sword with both hands.

*H-huh? Captain Kurtis only uses both hands when he's aiming for a quick battle... That's weird. How could he possibly have known my mana wouldn't hold out for long?*

**"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr..."** Zavilia let out a quiet growl from behind me. He was connected to me, so he could probably feel my mana draining by the moment. He likely wanted to let out a loud roar to scare the demon but kept himself quiet for the sake of our fragile human ears. Such a considerate dragon! Earlier, he'd even let Kurtis take on the demon instead of doing it himself, going against his monster instincts of wanting to fight strong opponents. I bet there wasn't another dragon as sweet as him in this world.

Quiet though it was, Zavilia's growl had an effect. The Bird Cryer was on edge already, being disadvantaged now that her darkness attribute was weakened, but Zavilia making his presence known upped the pressure on her. *Aww, Zavilia. You're so good at threatening people!*

While I was busy thinking about Zavilia, Kurtis deftly stepped in and stabbed. This time, his attack pierced her body and did meaningful damage. He pulled his sword out, and a gush of black liquid spilled from her abdomen.

In disbelief, she put a hand over where she was stabbed. “You hurt me...? *Me?!?”*

Just by having her darkness attribute weakened, the demon was now a full degree weaker. Understanding this, Kurtis, Green, and Blue launched a relentless offensive. They hacked off bundle after bundle of the demon’s hair. In no time at all, they had her on the ropes.

The three were truly impressive to be able to corner a being that was far more long-lived and experienced than themselves. Full of admiration, I glanced at Kurtis, curious what he would do now that the fight was practically settled. We still had a critical lack of a box to seal the demon away in. Without it, the moment we killed the demon, all other demons would sense her annihilation and be aware that there was someone out there that could defeat them. For that very reason, we’d always sealed weakened demons three hundred years ago. The boxes that demons were sealed away in were rather rare, though, so only certain people could get their hands on them. They could only be made at the Cathedral too, and not in great numbers.

While I worried over the situation, Blue took his sword and stabbed it under one of the demon’s shoulder blades—right where one of her wings had been lopped off.

“Gah!” The Bird Cryer let out a pained groan and sunk to a knee.

With his sword still in the demon, Blue turned to Kurtis. “Now!”

With only one more heart to go, Kurtis sunk his sword under the demon’s other shoulder blade.

“All right!” Green yelled upon seeing the Bird Cryer wordlessly sink to the ground.

Kurtis didn’t celebrate yet, however, and extended a hand above the demon. In his hand was a box with intricate patterns carved into it.

“Huh?! You have a demon-sealing box?” I exclaimed, wide-eyed. I hadn’t seen one of them since three hundred years ago and had no idea Kurtis was keeping one. It creaked open, assuming its proper form. The power kept inside overflowed outward and warped the surrounding air. *Ah...and so the lonely box*

*takes in one of its own.*

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Kurtis calmly chanted a spell. “Box of binding, seal away your own!”

As if planned beforehand, Kurtis and Blue simultaneously drew their swords from the Bird Cryer. The small box in Kurtis’s hand expanded in response to the spell, parting open like a bud blossoming into a full-size flower and swallowing the demon whole. Still wrapped around the demon, it twisted and rotated as it became smaller and smaller, until finally returning to its original size. The lid then tried to close itself, but part of it seemed unwilling to shut.

“It’s not closing?!” Kurtis noticed the abnormality and frowned, a look of concern crossing his face.

It appeared that the sealed demon and the box were not a good match for one another. This happened sometimes, although only very rarely when the affinity was bad.

Kurtis seemed even more unsure what to do than me, but quickly recovered and readied his sword with a look of resolve. I realized he was preparing to cut open his own abdomen. “Kurtis, stop!” I cried.

Desperate to close the box, he was ready to offer up his own blood as a catalyst. But in truth, there was no point—not even all the blood in his large body would be enough.

“You’re not the right man for the job!” I said.

He stopped. At that, I ran up to him, put my wrist against his sword, and then slid my arm against it hard.

“Lady Fi!” He yelled in surprise, but it was already too late. A fresh cut opened on my arm.

I let the blood from my wound trickle down onto the box. In an instant, it snapped shut with a loud thunk.

“There’s no better catalyst than a saint’s blood.” Nonchalantly, I put my free hand over my wound and cast healing magic on myself. “Heal!” A brilliant radiance shined, and in no time at all, my injury vanished. I noticed Kurtis,



Green, and Blue were all watching me with worry, so I made a big show of how fine I was by controlling my expression and clapping my hands together.

“There! All done.”

I smiled, hoping that we could end it there, but...for some reason, no one returned my smile.

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“Lady Fi!” The first to speak was Kurtis, who clearly had a complaint to make about my actions.

With such a small party, we’d successfully sealed a demon. Such a feat was definitely worthy of celebration, and yet Kurtis was pale in the face, glaring at the arm I’d just healed.

*Oh no! I forgot Captain Kurtis hates me getting hurt more than anything. I had no choice but to cut my own arm, but I still feel like he’s about to scold me anyway. Maybe I can brute force my way through this?*

“We did it, Kurtis! We sealed the demon, just like you wanted! And far from stopping you, I even helped you out! So, y’know, maybe you *shouldn’t* scold me, yeah?”

They say the best defense is a good offense. Before he could get a word in, I went on the offensive and asserted I should be let off the hook. It seemed to work as he went wide-eyed with a hint of understanding, then closed his half-opened mouth. He quickly took a knee before me and lowered his head.

“Allow me to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your assistance, and to apologize as well. Despite declaring that I would defeat the demon without your aid, I ended up needing just that. I am deeply ashamed.”

Seeing him so apologetic, I got a little flustered. “Huh? O-oh, naw, there was no way you’d have been able to defeat a crest-bearing demon without a saint, y’know? Besides, I know you only said you’d do things yourself for my sake—because I’m scared of demons and all—so don’t worry about it.”

*Shoot. I forgot how hopelessly devoted Captain Kurtis is! My plan worked too well, and now he’s apologizing! Aww, it hurts to see him so remorseful...*

Kurtis nodded. “It is as you say. I declared I would defeat the demon without you because I could see you were pained. And yet, I still required your aid... I have no right to call myself your vassal.”

“M-my *what* now?!” I inadvertently exclaimed.

I was no longer a princess, so it was a bit wrong of him to say he was *my* vassal. *Jeez, Captain Kurtis! Be more careful! What if Green and Blue start getting suspicious of us?*

“P-pull yourself together, *Captain!* I’m nothing but a lowly recruit in her first year. You outrank me, by *a lot* a lot, remember?” I tried to remind him of our *current* circumstances by mentioning his rank, but he simply grimaced painfully at my words.

“Are you so incensed at me that you dare not speak my name? Oh...Lady Fi, I am your vassal, now and forevermore. Please, do not mistake that fact—even in jest.”

“Jest? N-no, I’m seri...” I was about to argue, but he grabbed my hands and hung his head low.

In a faint, weak murmur, he said, “Please, spare me those words.”

Whoa, hold on, now it felt like *I* was being made out as the bad guy! *Huh? Huh? Huh?!*

I was obviously a new recruit in the Knight Brigades and Kurtis was obviously a captain, so why would he insist on being my vassal? I was one-hundred-percent certain I was in the right here, but with him as haggard and pitiful-looking as he was, I couldn’t possibly insist any further that he was wrong...

*Wait, whoa, whoa, whoa. So I’m just supposed to give in and accept that he’s my vassal? That can’t possibly be right!*

I overheard Blue murmur, “You don’t think she’ll refuse, do you? Poor Kurtis. I’d cry if I were in his shoes myself.”

*Uh, Blue? Hello?*

Green nodded vigorously in agreement.

*You too, Green? What’s with you guys?!*

Everyone was acting so strange that it made me, the *only* sensible one, somehow appear insensible. I looked to my last bastion of hope, Zavilia, for help.

He shrugged. **“If you’re asking me, I think you should have stopped him dead in his tracks the moment he took a knee. It should be obvious by now that Kurtis takes everything to the extreme when it comes to you.”**

*True, true.* I shouldn’t have needed the reminder from Zavilia—this was a known thing. Still, I was doing pretty good for a while after he took a knee, right? Just when had the tides suddenly shifted against me...?

From the edge of my vision, I saw Green and Blue gawking at me with bafflement. *Aha, right. These two are just as unsensible as Captain Kurtis, so they think what he said made sense. I bet they’re on his side. Yikes! What am I going to do if they ask me why Captain Kurtis says he’s my vassal? I can’t just tell them I used to be a princess...*

*Wait, hold on. These two saw me use too much of my saint powers too!*

It was generally believed that the power of a saint could only heal injuries and diseases, but our power could achieve so much more. I wound up using magic that nobody but me could use even in my past life, so explaining my way out of this would be tough.

*No, wait... I think I got this.*

The two already believed I could use saint powers because of a curse, so maybe I’d get away with a little more if I played my cards right...that is, have Kurtis come up with an excuse, just as I’d planned!

I gave Kurtis a look, trying to signal him with my eyes, but he was busy prostrating on the ground with his face buried snugly in his hands.

*Or not. Captain Kurtis looks a tad too emotionally deflated to do any excuse-making. Which means it’s up to me to make something up. Hmm, I guess it shouldn’t be too hard given how naive the brothers are.*

Filled with wishful optimism, I made my voice sound as cheerful as possible.

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“Oh, you’re just so silly, Captain Kurtis! You’re so overwhelmed with emotion over beating a demon with just three people that you can’t help but prostrate on the bare ground, huh? Oh! Come to think of it, I read about this in a book before! Sometimes, after defeating crest-bearing demons, knights became so overwhelmed with joy that they’d sprawl out on the ground and start calling people ‘Your Highness’ and ‘Commander’ and stuff like that!”

“Huh...?” Blue’s eyes widened, and he turned to whisper to his brother. “Is she trying to suggest we should kneel before her too?”

“Oh, of course! Indeed, Fia’s godly deeds are without a doubt worth bending a knee for!”

In one fluid motion, they each dropped a knee to the ground.

“Hwuh?” I saw the serious look on their faces and felt a shiver run up my spine.

With their heads down and a hand over each of their hearts, they began to speak.

Blue began: “O almighty Goddess of Creation, we are filled with sincere gratitude to have been visited by Your divine incarnation once more.”

Green continued: “We are honored You would aid us by sealing away the wicked demon. Allow us to humbly express our gratitude in reverence of Your unmatched power.”

Finally recognizing what they were doing, I inadvertently exclaimed, “Oooh, right, right, right!”

Back when we parted after our last adventure, the three brothers did this strange thing where they pretended I was the Goddess of Creation. I didn’t really “get it,” so to speak, probably because I wasn’t familiar with Arteagian customs, but I played along back then. I mean, it’d be tasteless not to, you know?

And now Green and Blue were at it again with that weird custom. I tried to think what could possibly have sparked this when I finally saw the common point between the two incidents. *Ah...eureka!*

Perhaps it was their tradition to exalt a nearby woman as a standin for their Goddess as an expression of gratitude after a tough battle. Yeah, that had to be it. It lined up perfectly with both instances.

*I see. In that case, it would only be proper to play along.* I made myself look as refined as I could and began to speak formally. “Well done to you both. Though it was your first time fighting a crest-bearing demon, you both performed admirably.”

“We are honored to receive Your praise,” they replied.

I saw how spellbound they looked and smiled. It was heartwarming to see them so engrossed in their game of pretend despite being adults! *Wait, no, this is a totally normal part of their culture! I need to be respectful.*

“I’m sure the people of your empire are proud of you,” I continued.

The two of them blushed, seeming to take my words to heart. It was a strange sight to say the least, what with them being bulky, fully grown men.

I then remembered my main goal and tensed up. *Oh, right. I was trying to come up with a way to explain away the powers of mine they saw...*

With a stiff smile, I said, “Incidentally, I have something important to tell you two. All the saint powers and other strange powers you saw me use are only things I can use temporarily! Once the effect of my curse wears off, I won’t be able to use them anymore.”

After stopping to take a breath, I was about to explain further, but the two replied before I could. “Understood.”

“Huh? Wait, really? Just like that?” Wow, they really did trust me. Perhaps it was because we were adventuring buddies, or maybe their tradition had some rule where they couldn’t disagree with whatever the ‘Goddess’ said or something? Who knows. I was just relieved that they accepted my excuse. I quickly moved to bring the topic to a close before they could change their minds.

“All right, no take-backsies! And let’s end this Goddess stuff here.” I grabbed their hands and pulled them up to their feet. Seeing them tower over me again, I smiled, keenly feeling this was the way things should be for us—none of this

kneeling nonsense. “I’m so amazed you guys defeated a crest-bearing demon even though it was only your first time encountering one! You were both really brave, and your decision-making and fighting skills were all top class! It’s almost as if you two were, um...”

Blue gasped. “Yes, yes! Go on, Fia!”

“Finally!” Green exclaimed. “I know it was your wish, but it has pained me to keep this secret. Indeed, we are of the imperial fam—”

“Yeah, *imperial*! That’s the word I was looking for!” I cut in. “You two would make great Imperial Knights! You should think about joining Arteaga’s knight brigade.”

“Huh?”

“I...what?”

The two deflated at once, their excitement evaporating into thin air. I figured they were intimidated by the prospect of becoming knights, as it was quite the position, so I tried to give them an extra push. “I mean it! You two would make wonderful knights!”

But my words didn’t seem to cheer them up at all.

“Oh...” Blue replied. “What a very kind thing to say.”

“I’ll...try my best to become one, I suppose,” said Green.

*That’s odd. I think being a knight’s the best job around, but maybe these two don’t?* I tilted my head in wonder and heard Zavilia’s exasperated voice from behind me.

**“Ah, Fia! You truly create some impressive mental labyrinths for yourself, don’t you?? I thought you knew how devoted these two were to you, but it would seem I was wrong. The problem runs much deeper than I thought.”**

“Huh?” I spun around to look at Zavilia.

He swished his tail back and forth in the air. **“The real annoyance, however, is that the baseless conclusion these two have reached over your identity is almost entirely correct. What’s worse, they have many pawns at their beck and call who will likely only become further annoyances if allowed to meet**

**you...”**

*“Uh...” C’mon, Zavilia. It wouldn’t hurt you to explain a little more, would it?*

**“It’s hard to believe things could become so tiresome in the short time I’ve returned to Blackpeak Mountain. Perhaps you need constant watch after all.”**

I didn’t have a clue what he was on about, but I got the impression he was making fun of me and opened my mouth to complain. Before I could get a word out, however, a shadow flew over me. I heard large wings flapping and looked up to see a group of red, blue, and yellow dragons circling overhead.

“Huh?! What’s going on?!” I exclaimed.

**“Ah...they came.”** Zavilia let out a weary sigh. I gave him a questioning look. He playfully closed an eye. **“Box of bindings and monsters both love the same thing, you know... I had ordered them to stay put, yet not a single one obeyed. It was too overwhelmingly alluring you see...that sweet, sweet smell of saint’s blood.”**



## Chapter 41:

### Blackpeak Mountain Part 4

**F**INALLY UNDERSTANDING what Zavilia was getting at, I looked down at my arm with a start. I had cut myself to seal away the demon. My wound had healed, but a bit of dried blood remained stuck to me. I myself couldn't smell it, but apparently my blood had a sweet aroma and attracted monsters. Thinking back on it, I recalled monsters being attracted to my blood on the day I first met Zavilia during my coming-of-age ceremony, as well as when I visited the familiar stables. It made sense that the dragons flying overhead would be attracted to my blood as well.

I looked back up at the sky, and my eyes suddenly widened, a small shriek escaping me. "Eep!" Many more dragons had appeared in the short time I was looking away, almost enough to blot out the sky. Among the various colored dragons I saw one gray-brown one, who I recognized as Zoil.

"Look, Zoil's here too!" I told Zavilia quickly. "Zoil hates me, so there's no way he'd come because he smelled my blood! Sure, some of the dragons might've been lured in by me, but I'm sure there's some other reason! This whole thing isn't *entirely* my fault! Just a little bit!"

Dragons were proud beings who knew they were at the top of the food chain. Given how prideful they were, they'd never let a lowly human entice them... right?

"They probably gathered because they have some business with you, Zavilia. Yeah, that must be it!"

**"Is that so?"** he said half-heartedly, craning his neck up to the dragons above. **"Allow me to check."**

As though that were some signal, the dragons began to descend one by one, starting with Zoil. They landed on the earth with heavy, resounding thuds, flattening the trees and kicking up clouds of dust. Before I knew it, we were surrounded by dragons in all directions. Overwhelmed, I just stood there in a

daze. The dragons all turned to look at me and tilted their heads playfully, batting their wings.

*H-huh? That's weird...* Why were they looking at me instead of Zavilia? And why were they acting all cute-like? "Aww, everyone's just so adorable! But what exactly are they doing, Zavilia?"

**"Exactly what you think. They're trying to win your favor by fawning up to you."**

"H-huh? Why?"

**"As I've said, you're just that popular with monsters. Don't you recall that incident in Starfall Forest when the blue dragons were drawn to you? No dragon could resist the blood of a saint potent enough to even captivate a box of binding."**

"Huh? What's this about the blue dragons?"

He shrugged his shoulders. **"Hm. Well, it's fine if you didn't notice. Just know that your blood is incredible. Even I feel a little dizzy from it."**

"Wait, really?" I said, surprised. "You too? In my past life, only spirits were attracted to the blood of saints, so this is all fairly alien to me! Oh right, I remember now. The spirits helped out a little in that regard."

**"Right. Three hundred years is too short a span of time for monsters to change, so we were likely attracted to saint's blood back then as well. The spirits probably just used some magic to mask it."**

"You think so?" I tilted my head. The fact that monsters were drawn to my blood was hard to wrap my head around, though I was used to that with spirits. Why did boxes of binding react to the blood of saints, anyway? I never did find that out in my previous life, but maybe somebody figured something out after my death?

I glanced Kurtis's way. He just stared back. Odd. Couldn't he tell that I had a question for him? He was usually so attentive to my needs. Maybe he was avoiding answering...which meant he *definitely* knew something about what I wanted to ask! So ask I did!

“Kurtis, why is it that boxes of binding react to the blood of saints?”

I knew how he was. If I asked something, he would answer even if he didn't want to. The guy was just too sweet to resist.

He briefly frowned but quickly assumed his normal expression and flatly answered like I knew he would. “As you know, boxes of binding are made from the parts of previously sealed demons. It is a demon's nature to try and absorb their own. We make use of that trait to seal demons with these boxes.”

“Right, I know that much.” I knew all that from my past life, though I still didn't know why saint's blood was needed as a catalyst when boxes had trouble sealing.

Kurtis continued. “The demon parts used for the boxes are not alive and have no consciousness, but their peculiarities as demons remain. Research has given us reason to believe that the boxes of binding prioritize taking in saint's blood over their fellow demonkind. Thus, the current belief is that demons are drawn to the blood of saints.”

“Huh?” That was certainly news to me. “So...saint's blood isn't a catalyst, so much as it's what the boxes are actually trying to swallow?” That possibility hadn't even occurred to me, and yet his words made me feel like a memory from my past life was trying to surface. Before I could think about that, however, he continued, diverting my attention.

“It is possible the spirits lent their aid to prevent saint's blood from drawing in unwanted nuisances, as the Black Dragon says. That would explain how we've so greatly misunderstood things.”

“I see...” The face of the spirit that protected me all those years ago surfaced to my mind. He was a kind soul, so it would make sense for him to protect me in ways I didn't even notice. All of a sudden, I was filled with a desire to meet the spirit I'd contracted with in my past life.

“Kurtis, where did the spirits disappear to?” I asked. Spirits were far more long-lived than humans. It was unthinkable for them to have died out.

Kurtis averted his gaze to the ground. “I do not know. If even you—the one most beloved by the spirits—cannot sense their presence, then they must be

far, far away from where we are now.”

“I see...”

Much had changed over the past three hundred years. The countries and borders were completely different now, and the forest I first met the spirits in was now part of the Arteaga Empire.

“I’d sure like to go to the empire and visit that forest again...” I muttered to myself.

Blue and Green overheard and went wide-eyed.

“We’ll show you around wherever you want to go if you visit!”

“Yeah! We’ll make sure no place is off limits for you!”

I laughed—they were always so over-the-top about this stuff. “Sure, sure!”

Of course, I knew they didn’t seriously mean they’d show me around *wherever* wherever. They couldn’t let me into, say, the Imperial Castle or anything. But I didn’t need such stringent permission anyway, as the place I wanted to go to was just a plain old forest.

Suddenly remembering something, I asked Kurtis, “Oh yeah, why did you have a box of sealing on you anyway?”

He raised his gaze from the ground and gave me an earnest look. “In the past, I swore to myself that I would seal every demon I encountered. I’ve procured a number of boxes for that purpose and hidden them away in various locations. The box I used earlier was one I brought from Sutherland.”

How very like him, to be so prepared.

“Oh, I see,” I said, giving him a proud look. “Then perhaps the reason the box had trouble closing was due to its age.” It was impressive that he hid the box on his person so well. “Good job, acting like you didn’t have one so that demon was none the wiser! You even had vigilant ol’ Fia fooled, didn’t you?” I looked to Zavilia, expecting him to agree.

My dear, smart dragon instead replied with a question. **“I have a feeling our definition of ‘vigilant’ differs, but...more importantly, how are you holding up?”**

His question was simple, but it struck home. I could feel how caring he was from those few words alone. Behind me, Kurtis swallowed. He was probably greatly worried about me as well but couldn't bring himself to directly ask. In a voice loud enough for Kurtis to overhear, I answered, "Thanks for asking! Once I told myself the Bird Cryer was a completely different demon from the Demon Lord's right-hand man, I was fine."

The two of them stared at me for a moment as though searching my expression. Simultaneously, they allowed the tension to leave their bodies.

Zavilia smiled, relieved. **"I see. That's good to hear."**

As odd as it was, I felt relieved as well to see two of my favorite people set at ease.

Nonchalantly, Zavilia added, **"Now that I've seen how bad things have gotten, I've decided I'm really going to leave this mountain with you after all."**

"Wha-huh?"

Seeing my shock he laughed. **"Ha ha ha! What I said before the battle wasn't a joke. You really are my first priority. Let's return to the royal capital together."**

"Oh, Zav—"

"Higyaaaaah?!"

I was about to say something, but I was interrupted by Zoil giving a death throes-like shriek. He seemed deeply shocked and saddened by Zavilia's declaration. I understood where he was coming from, but Zavilia seemed to have no sympathy.

He just gave them an exasperated look. **"You didn't seriously expect me to stay, did you? Zoil, you are a superior breed. As such, I'm leaving you in charge in my absence."**

With a look of despair on his face, Zoil buried his head into the ground.

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Seeing Zoil dig his head deeper into the dirt, I worriedly asked Zavilia, "Are you sure you want to return to the royal capital with me? Didn't you come to

this mountain because you wanted to become a king? I really don't want to get in the way of your goals." I came to this mountain because I missed him, but just seeing him do well for himself was plenty enough for me. I didn't want him to feel forced to return just because I missed him a little.

**"You're not getting in the way of anything at all. I simply can't stand to be apart from you any longer. In fact, your visit was fortuitous: I was thinking of coming to you myself. We might as well return together now."**

I was happy to hear he missed me too. Maybe it would be all right if we returned together after all.

The instant my opinion did a complete 180, he continued with, **"Besides, I've already just about done all I can do here. I've formed a bond by living with these dragons, so they should obey my summons so long as they can hear my call."**

"That's incredible! But..." My voice trailed off as my eyes rose to Zavilia's single horn.

He noticed my gaze and, understanding what I was worried about, reached up and touched his horn with one of his front legs. **"Ah, don't worry about this. What I wanted wasn't to grow three horns but to gain the power to protect you."**

"I guess that *is* what you said..." I admitted hesitantly.

Nonchalantly, he continued, **"Don't worry, Fia. I want nothing more than to return with you, really. Besides, the fact that I still have one horn after ruling over all these dragons means that my belief I'd grow three horns as proof of becoming Dragon King was wrong. There must be one or more conditions that I've yet to fulfill. Either way, it's simply a matter of appearance, so it's not really worth caring about."** Saying that, he extended one of his wings. **"Let's go home together, Fia."**

I could hear in his voice that he'd made up his mind, that he wanted to be with me. Elated, I was about to reach out to him, but then I noticed the forlorn expressions of the dragons around us and froze. *Right. There's still that problem.*

Zavilia was the king of these dragons, and from what I saw when I was shown around yesterday, he was a good king. The dragons here would probably be heartbroken if I took their king from them.

I spun around to look at the crestfallen dragons around me and trepidatiously asked, “Uhh, Zavilia, I’m happy that you want to come with me, but won’t the dragons miss you?”

He sighed. **“I suppose, but it’s not like we can bring them all to the royal capital.”**

“Huh?” The image of a sky full of dragons led by a black dragon all flying toward the royal capital flashed through my mind. The blood quickly drained from my face. “O-o-of course we can’t! Everyone would think I was leading a dragon attack on the royal capital! What am I, the Demon Lord?!”

**“Having a black dragon for a familiar does seem rather Demon Lord-ish,”** he replied wryly.

I gave him a sharp look. “Oh, get real! My eyes and hair aren’t even black! I’m an upstanding knight! I could never be a demon lord!”

**“An upstanding knight, are you? Hmm...”** He seemed to find fault in my words as he swished his tail. **“I rather enjoyed watching your antics as a spectator, but if I stay with you, I’ll actually be wrapped up in your messes from now on, won’t I?”** He sighed dramatically.

“What’s that now?” I snapped back. “I’ll have you know I’m a full-fledged knight already, which means I can take care of myself. I’m even a *super* knight that can be a saint when need be!”

**“Yeah, see, that’s exactly the problem. A knight should be a knight and nothing more. Ask anybody and they’ll tell you the idea of a knight that’s also a saint, an incredibly rare position itself, is strange. And speaking of strange, aren’t all these dragons here to fawn over you? Perhaps you’re more on your way to becoming Dragon King than me, what with my one horn.”** He carefully examined the top of my head as though to check if I had horns growing.

I covered my head with my hands. “Wh-what? O-oh, Zavilia, don’t be silly! If I had horns coming out of my head, I’d be a demon, not the Dragon King!”

**“A demon, huh? Then perhaps what you’ve actually been afraid of is yourself this whole time... How profound.”** His face looked utterly serious, but obviously he was just pulling my leg.

“There’s nothing profound about it at all!” I insisted. “I’m no black-haired demon, just an ordinary red-haired knight!”

He nodded firmly. **“Right. And I’m sure even if you did grow horns and black wings, you’d still remain a saint through and through. Just like how demons are still my enemy even if their hair isn’t black or if they have no horns.”**

That was a very heartening thing for him to say, but he had one error I had to correct. He was such a smart boy, but it seemed spending so much time out in the mountains had caused him to miss a few pieces of common knowledge that even I, of all people, knew. “Er, demons *always* have black hair, black eyes, and horns, you know? Exactly like the Bird Cryer just now.”

Zavilia seemed to think for a moment. **“Yes...right.”** He then raised his head high and looked at all the gathered dragons. **“Well, I’ll be leaving the mountain now,”** he said cheerfully. The dragons all froze stiff. As though to reassure them, he smiled. **“Don’t worry, I’ll come visit every now and then. I don’t mind if you stay here or return to your own homes, so long as you can gather when I call for you. Keep some dragons within hearing range of me, have more dragons within hearing range of them, and so on. We’ll make a chain so everyone can be notified of my summons wherever they are. Zoil, you’re in charge of doling out everyone’s territories.”**

The saddened dragons seemed to cheer up after receiving their new orders, sunny expressions shining on their faces. I was filled with admiration for Zavilia. He was a true king, instilling so much spirit in so few words.

Said king turned around to look at me thoughtfully.

“Is something the matter, Zavilia?” I asked.

**“No, I was just thinking that it’s one hundred times more likely for you to be in danger than me. Perhaps I should motivate them with the thought of protecting you instead of myself,”** he said, looking completely serious.

“What?! But that’d be weird. These dragons hardly know me!”



**“You’re right, but there’s something that’s been weighing on my mind lately that I want to test out.”**

“Oh? What’s that?” I asked. What could possibly weigh on the mind of someone as knowledgeable as Zavilia? I looked up at him and saw he was deep in thought.

**“The pact of servitude humans seal with monsters is generally forced. Most monsters become familiars when they’re left within inches of their life in a battle with a human and have to choose between becoming their familiar or dying. I, however, am an exception from that norm.”**

“Huh? Oh, I guess so.”

**“Perhaps it was because you had just saved my life then, but I agreed to our pact of servitude because I wanted to receive the blessings of your power, as well as to protect you.”**

Come to think of it, he was knocking on death’s door when we first met.

**“As a result, we were in perfect sync with one another after our pact was made. Our life and mana were bound, and I could feel your thoughts and emotions.”**

I recalled hearing a similar thing before. “Oh yeah, Captain Quentin had said we were super in sync or something. Is our connection so strong because you’re a powerful monster?”

**“I think that’s partly correct, but I suspect that the feelings of the monster toward their would-be master also play a role in determining the strength of the connection.”**

“I see.”

So, if Zavilia hadn’t wanted to make a pact, our connection would’ve been flimsy.

**“Familiar pacts are for life. They’re not something to be made rashly. But it’s still worth testing if you can command these dragons anyway.”**

“Wait, what? How would I even go about doing that?”

**“First, you’d need to show them how amazing you are. Then we’ll see if**

they'll protect you without a pact simply in hopes of receiving your blessings. The stronger their feelings toward you are, the stronger their bond with you should be, with or without a pact. You were able to win over familiars who had already made a pact with someone else before, so my thinking is that you should be able to win over wild monsters as well."

"Huh. What an interesting idea."

Come to think of it, back when I joined the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade on their black dragon search in Starfall Forest, I commanded some of their familiars to fight. Afterward, those familiars stayed more obedient to me than their own masters. Perhaps Zavilia was trying to do something similar?

"So, I just gotta show them how amazing I am, you said?"

But how was I supposed to impress dragons, the most powerful of all monsters? I guess I had to try *something* if I wanted their protection.

*Wait, do I even want them to protect me?*

I had been strung along by his words, but now that I really thought about it, it was Zavilia that wanted the dragons to protect me. If anything, I was robbing them of their king, so I had an obligation to reassure them that I would take care of Zavilia.

I racked my brain, wondering just how I would go about doing that, but...there really wasn't a lot I could do for someone as great as Zavilia. Perhaps I could try to let the dragons know how much I cared for him instead?

I spun around to look at all the dragons, then bowed once. In a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, I said, "Hello, I'm Fia Ruud! I'll be taking your dear Zavilia with me. He's my precious friend, so I'll make sure to...well, I'll try my best to keep him somewhat safe!"

I wanted to say I would keep him *absolutely* safe, but I wasn't sure exactly how I'd go about doing that, so I made a promise I could realistically keep.

Zavilia saw me make my heartfelt speech with my hands balled tight and said, **"Really...such a cute saint you are."**

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After I declared I would try my best to keep Zavilia *somewhat* safe, a dragon raised their voice in what I assumed to be protest. I looked over, wondering what could be so wrong, to see the dragon in question pointing with a wing toward the Bird Cryer's cut-off wings.

"A-ah, that's..." They got me good. As smart as dragons were, they knew when something was up.

"That's...quite a black wing, isn't it?" It was the first excuse that came to mind, but I knew it was no use. The only creature in this world with black wings was the black dragon, and since Zavilia clearly had his wings firmly attached, these black wings had to come from some sort of shapeshifting creature. "O-okay, I'm sorry! Those wings actually belonged to a demon. We just so happened to run into one today, but don't worry! Starting from *now* I'll try my best to keep Zavilia safe!"

I quickly apologized, seeing there was no point in trying to pull the wool over their eyes. *Gah, what am I doing?! I admitted to encountering the first demon in three hundred years right after promising to keep Zavilia safe! There's no way these dragons will trust me now!* I slumped my head, defeated.

Amused, Zavilia said, **"Ha ha, what do you all think? My saint is pretty cute, isn't she? She's honest, sincere, and always does what she can to protect me. The reason I wanted to become a king in the first place was to protect her, so without her I probably would have never returned here to rule."** He took a moment to pause contemplatively. **"She is my master, so you all ought to treat her with respect. Her way of going about it wasn't what I expected, but...she showed how much she cares about me, even bowing her head, as backwards as it is for her to do so. Come to think of it...isn't it strange that you all who are subservient to me still dare stand in her presence?"** His tone abruptly changed with those last words, turning the atmosphere tense. Surprised, the dragons straightened their backs and froze stiff. He looked them over with a cold glare and continued in an icy voice. **"You lot need to get it in your heads that Fia is my master."** He shrunk to his usual mini size and hopped onto my shoulder, then turned his head away with a huff.

*Oh my. It looks like Mr. Dragon King is grumpy.* I watched him pout and wondered what I could do to cheer him up. To my surprise, however, the

dragons were far more affected by his grumpy temperament than I was. They flapped their wings and stomped their feet, moving about restlessly. They craned their necks down and purred apologetically, but he just turned to face the opposite direction, snubbing them.

*He must be in a really bad mood if he doesn't want to forgive them.* I began to feel bad for the dragons, seeing their heads almost touching the ground, their spirits totally deflated. I could tell they loved Zavilia as their king, but I'm sure it was hard for such a proud race to show respect to a human.

I patted Zavilia. "Thanks for caring about me, buddy. But I think your subjects are a little hurt by the fact you're angry at them for once."

Even after saying that though, his mood didn't improve.

Originally, the plan was for me to impress the dragons somehow and make them protect me without forming pacts. But I disagreed with the idea they should protect me. Instead, I'd wanted to reassure them that I would protect Zavilia. I failed, but Zavilia was instead mad at *them* for not accepting my poor attempt at reassurance. Still, I guess that was just proof of how much he cared about me.

"Zavilia, I appreciate you getting mad for my sake. But these dragons care about you just as much as I do, so you should make up with them. It'd leave a bad taste in your mouth if the last thing you did on this mountain was have an argument, right?"

**"Fine..."** He was clearly still reluctant, but he nonetheless faced the lined-up dragons and addressed them. That said, he was still tiny, so he had to look up at his subjects, the adorable little thing! **"In deference to my benevolent master, I will overlook your transgressions. But there will be no next time."**

Relief washed over the dragons' faces, and they began to display what I could only assume was gratitude toward me. I began to wonder if this might have actually been Zavilia's plan all along. There was probably nothing I could've done to impress them, so instead Zavilia pretended to get mad to make them respect me... I got to say, he was quite the tactician if he did plan all that! With a wry grin, I told all the dragons, "Thank you for being Zavilia's allies! Could I perhaps heal your injuries as thanks before I go?"

Many of the gathered dragons had missing scales and half-healed cuts. This wasn't particularly worrying, as being injured was something of a norm for monsters, but it bothered me regardless. Still, I couldn't just heal them without asking, what with how prideful dragons were, so I'd held off. But now that Zavilia had helped make them accept me, they'd be fine with it. Probably. Maybe.

I continued, trying to convince them to let me heal them. "I feel bad for taking Zavilia from you all, so I want to at least do something in return."

Without waiting for a reply, I raised my hand. "Light of healing, descend upon these loyal dragons—heal!" While I was at it, I added another spell. "Protective armor, manifest to safeguard these dragons—invigorate: Defense +20%!"

I cast my magic with the sincere hope the dragons would be safe and well, even in Zavilia's absence. I was deeply familiar with these spells and could cast them without using chants, but I went through with the whole package this time—carefully enunciating each word—because I wanted their effects to be as strong as possible.

A soft, dazzling light shone down on them as my spells took effect. As soon as the light touched their bodies, their missing scales regrew, their wounds healed, and thin film-like auras appeared around their bodies. In the blink of an eye, their bodies were as unscathed as freshly hatched dragons.

"...Grrrr?"

"...Grr?"

The dragons, uncomprehending, tilted their heads in confusion. I couldn't help but smile at the funny sight. Zavilia seemed to find it even more amusing, going so far as to laugh.

**"Ha ha ha. To think my farewell would include everyone being granted bodies as pristine as a newborn's and would get them long-lasting defensive buffs. Just incredible!"**

"...Grrrr!"

"...Grr!"

The dragons fussed a bit. Zavilia grinned at that.

**“Yeah, I agree. Things would have been so much quicker if she’d just done this from the beginning, but that’s just how she is,”** he said with a sigh. **“If anything, this magic is clearly overkill. I would’ve stopped her beforehand if I knew she would go this far—I don’t want you all fawning over her too much...”**

The dragons began to complain, so their discussion went back and forth for a bit. After a while, Zavilia looked back up at me, pleased. **“Fia, the dragons have agreed to protect you and have come around to the idea of me joining you on your trip back.”**

“That was quick.” It felt like everything was handled by Zavilia in the end.

From behind me, I heard Kurtis murmur to himself. “I hadn’t even thought it would be possible to make all these dragons serve Lady Fi without swearing pacts. The art of making familiars didn’t exist during the era of Her Holiness the Great Saint, so it’s entirely possible we’ve been misunderstanding the process this whole time. Perhaps a *saint* is needed...”

Kurtis was putting me on some weird pedestal and going off on a tangent. Y’know, business as usual.

And so, we said our goodbyes to the dragons and left Blackpeak Mountain together with Zavilia.

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We descended Blackpeak Mountain the same way we ascended it, with Kurtis and I riding Zavilia, and Green and Blue riding Zoil. Being able to fly was incredibly handy and a nice break from the usual. Still, it’d be a problem if we showed up at the stronghold on some dragons, so we had them let us off near the base of the mountain.

“Thanks, Zoil,” I said. “Take care of things here for Zavilia, all right?”

Zoil replied with a firm nod. I was glad we ultimately got along after all our difficulties. I gave him a big, thankful smile and waved goodbye.

As we didn’t know who might see us, we decided to make the rest of the

journey on foot. Zavilia turned small again and climbed onto my shoulder.

At that, Blue said hesitantly, “Black Dragon, perhaps you would like to ride on my shoulder?” He seemed worried my shoulder might get sore from carrying Zavilia.

To no surprise, Zavilia didn’t respond.

I replied in his stead. “I’m fine, Blue. Thanks for looking out for me, though.”

Just then, I felt as though I heard a voice faintly in the distance. I strained my eyes, wondering just who would be out here in the mountains, and through the trees I saw what seemed to be a knight’s uniform.

“Huh? What’s a knight doing all the way out here?” I wondered aloud. The knight gradually neared. I recognized her right away once I could make out her face. “Oria!” I exclaimed, running over.

Surprised, she met my gaze. “Fia! You’re safe!”

“Huh?” I leapt into her arms and received an unexpectedly tight squeeze. Had I done something to make her worry again?

“Dozens of dragons were spotted gathering halfway up the mountain,” she said, “so we quickly formed a search party for you! I’m so glad you’re all right.”

I looked behind her and saw Guy and a dozen or so other knights. I felt kinda bad that they’d made a search party for me, especially since the knights had their hands super full with other things at the moment.

Guy parted from the group and marched closer. In a loud, panicked voice, he said, “First things first, let’s hurry up and return to the stronghold! Forget the dozens of dragons Oria mentioned, the Black King himself is in this area! We just spotted him descending around here alongside a gray-brown dragon, but only the gray-brown dragon reascended! In other words, the Black King is still in the area!”

“O-oh, is that so?” I said, trying to sound like that was news to me. Perhaps I should have asked the dragons to let us off earlier...

My heart was racing a mile a minute, making me sweat conspicuously, but Kurtis, Green, and Blue all seemed as cool as cucumbers. They didn’t even so

much as glance toward Zavilia on my shoulder, a feat that must have taken an enormous amount of self-control. Sadly, none of them volunteered for the task of explaining away why Zavilia hadn't flown off with the other dragons, so the burden of making an excuse fell upon me.

"Uhh, actually..." I lowered my voice as though sharing a secret. "The black dragon recently gained a lotta weight."

"He...what?" Guy asked doubtfully.

Seeing as I had already committed to the lie, I went all in. With a look of utter seriousness, I explained, "Okay, so, we've been secretly observing the black dragon's nest these past few days and have seen him walking around everywhere as though he were on a diet trying to lose a few pounds—we've all been there. What you saw was probably him flying down so he could walk back up to his nest for a workout, yup."

"I...I had no idea the black dragon was one to diet!" he yelled, astonished.

I smiled, relieved he believed me. It was a good thing he was too trusting to doubt others.

"That means the Black King is heading for the peak, right? All right! Now there's no risk we'll encounter him!" He wore a carefree smile, earning a cold look from Oria and Kurtis. They seemed to think it was irresponsible of him as captain to believe me at face value. I mean, I guess they were right, but it wasn't *his* fault. My lie was simply too perfectly constructed!

"At any rate," said Guy, "I'm glad to see you all made it back in one piece! Now, let's head back to the stronghold."

We did as Guy said and started to head back. Kurtis, Green, Blue, and I took the lead, with Guy close behind as escort. Oria and the other knights trailed further behind. After some walking, Guy noticed Zavilia and stared at him.

"Hey, Fia, what's with that bird on your shoulder? You catch it on the mountain or something? It's so covered in filth that it's turned black! Won't your clothes get dirty if you let it ride on your shoulder?"



Guy came to his own conclusion about what Zavilia was, using his own brand of logic to explain away the fact that the only black-winged creature in the world was the black dragon.

Now...just how would Zavilia react to his words?

Gingerly, I glanced at Zavilia and found him locking a fierce glare on Guy. Fearing the worst, I quickly admonished Guy. "C-Captain Guy, I hate to be rude, but black is a wonderful color, not a dirty color at all! At the very least, I like it!"

"Is that right?" he replied, curiously tilting his head.

At his side, I could see Oria looking at Zavilia with gentle eyes. She'd seen Zavilia before, so she probably had a good idea who the black creature riding on my shoulder was. I then remembered the request she gave me. As smart as she was, she probably didn't need me to tell her all was well, but I still felt it was right to at least provide some explanation.

"Oria, you told me the knights were having problems with all the monsters coming down the mountain, but I don't think you'll need to worry about that anymore. From what I gather, it seems like the black dragon is preparing to leave to find a new place to live!"

Before she could reply, Guy cut in. "What?! That's impossible! Everyone knows dragons hardly ever move their nests. Why would the Black King leave the mountain now, of all times?!"

It was indeed common knowledge that dragons didn't like to move. I'm sure Oria would typically voice her agreement here, but given that she knew the truth of the matter, she instead put a hand to her chin as though in thought before outright refuting him. "Well, it's possible that ordinary dragons and the legendary black dragon have different ways of living. Perhaps the Black King found a nicer place to live like, say, the royal capital."

Guy leapt back out of sheer surprise. "Eek! And here I thought you were one of the sensible ones, Oria! Our beautiful royal capital would be rendered a fiery wasteland if the Black King appeared there! C'mon, even children know the Black King isn't actually the kingdom's sacred beast but the world's most powerful and vilest monster."

Oria glanced at Zavilia, noticing his fierce glare, and turned back to Guy with a warning look. “The only thing I see about to be rendered a fiery wasteland is you...”

Guy didn’t pick up on her clue, however, and instead slapped Kurtis on the back and chatted him up. “So, just what were you guys doing up there in the mountains, Kurtis? From what Fia said, it sounds like you guys observed the Black King from afar for a while, but that had to get boring, eh? You’re all uninjured, and your clothes are pristine; guess you didn’t encounter many monsters, eh? Lucky you.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it was all sunshine and rainbows...” Kurtis replied with a look of exasperation. Everyone’s injuries had been healed with magic, and we changed clothes, so we looked completely unscathed, but we’d gone through a fierce battle with a demon. Guy knew nothing about that, of course, and so he blithely babbled on.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Guy in a worried tone, misunderstanding Kurtis’s reply. “You guys must’ve really struggled with food supplies if you didn’t encounter many monsters. Well, we have lots of grub at the stronghold! Feel free to eat until you puke!” he said, slapping Kurtis’s back repeatedly.

Boy, Guy was dense...but he wasn’t a bad guy.

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After we returned to the stronghold, we spent the rest of the day taking it easy. I went around with Zavilia on my shoulder, sometimes watching the knights train, all while being chatted up by knights I knew—they were all overjoyed to see me come back safely.

As he’d promised, Guy took Kurtis and served him an absurd amount of meat. Green, Blue, and I got roped in as well somehow.

Guy was shocked when the four of us managed to eat every bite. “You’re kidding! That was enough to feed twenty people!”

He tearfully said something about how starved we must’ve been to eat so much, but no, we ate similar amounts every day on the mountain as well. Perhaps our sense of what was a normal amount for a meal had become a little

skewed after spending so much time around dragons.

Dinner time rolled by, and Kurtis, sitting close to me, suggested something. “Lady Fi, why don’t we stay in this stronghold for a while, seeing as we don’t know when you’ll next be able to meet your sister?”

“Huh? Can we do that?”

Counting the days it’d take for the return trip, we’d definitely go over the three weeks allotted for my vacation.

Even so, Kurtis nodded. “Of course. Your Captain Kurtis has already given his approval, so it won’t be a problem.”

Come to think of it, Cyril did say my time here would count as working...but could milling about *really* count as work?

“Are you *sure*?” I crossed my arms and tilted my head in thought. But in the end, I decided it’d probably be all right. “Y’know, I’m sure my brilliant captain gave orders knowing full well what I’d do, yeah. He totally *wanted* me to linger here for a bit. Besides, like you said, I don’t know when I’ll next be able to meet my sister, so I better make this chance count.”

I was the type to interpret rules loosely to begin with, so stretching things a bit was whatever.

And just like that, our mission to investigate the dragon activity on Blackpeak Mountain in the Black Dragon’s absence now included some time hanging around the stronghold. Of course, Cyril had mentioned the knights were having trouble dealing with the monsters forced out of Blackpeak Mountain, so it made perfect sense that I needed to observe how the knights were doing as part of my mission—or so I told myself.

By some coincidence, Green and Blue announced they could stay for the same duration as us. I felt bad for Red, who was left to manage the family business alone, but Green and Blue were undeniably handy people to have around, so I was sure they’d prove useful to the knights here one way or another. *Sorry, Red, but...hey, at least they’re helping our kingdom out!*

Some days later, on an early afternoon, I spent an incredibly relaxing tea time with Oria. It was so relaxing, in fact, that I began to feel guilty about the whole thing and broached the subject of maybe departing the stronghold the next day. It was then that we were informed a messenger from the Ruud territory had arrived.

“A messenger from back home? Oh my, who could it be?” Oria wondered.

The two of us welcomed the messenger and found that it was Rin, a female knight we both knew well. It was good to see her—it’d been a while since either of us had met with her.

The Ruud territory wasn’t far from the stronghold, but one had to cross over a number of mountains to get here. Wondering what could have been worth the difficult journey, Oria asked about it.

In response, Rin brought out a long and narrow wrapped bundle.

“What’s this?” Oria asked.

With a troubled frown, Rin answered, “Well...about a month ago, some knights in the service of an Arteagian noble visited. Apparently, the noble was looking for a fiancée, so we gave them a portrait of Lady Fia. In return, they gave us this item here, but given that it’s clearly of a very fine make, we thought it best that we show it to you directly.”

“W-w-wait, you gave them my portrait?! I’m getting married?!” I exclaimed, leaping out of my chair. Both Oria and Rin smiled softly at me.

“Calm down, Fia,” Oria said. “Portraits are given away all the time. But sometimes as many as dozens are given out without a single prospective suitor writing back, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“O-oh, okay...”

“Still, for someone to come all the way out from the empire in search of a bride is rare...” Oria narrowed her eyes in thought for a moment.

“Indeed,” Rin said. “In fact, this is the first time we’ve received anyone from the empire, I believe. According to the knight who met with the guests, the knight that appeared the highest status among them was a young, handsome

man with blue hair.”

“A handsome man with blue hair?!” I exclaimed. A certain person came to mind. Come to think of it, Blue did confess to visiting my family home not too long ago. He said he was wandering around the Mid-Rank Adventurer Forest near the Ruud territory when he stumbled upon it. At that time, one of his companions apparently exchanged his sword for somebody’s portrait. But Blue didn’t say a word about marriage, only that the portrait was said to be needed by his country’s diviners. Back when we first met, they mentioned a diviner had told them to hunt for a specific monster’s left foreleg...and now it all made sense. This talk of looking for a fiancée was just a cover Blue used! It was too difficult to explain that it was for divination.

Greatly disappointed I wasn’t getting hitched anytime soon, I said, “Ah...Oria, that knight is just Blue. He told me he wandered around that area and came across our place a while back.”

Oria replied with the strangest thing. “Oh my. Was he hoping to meet our father?”

*Huh? Why would Blue want to meet our father? I haven’t been causing Blue so much trouble that he’d want to complain to my parents, c’mon! Have some faith in me!* I shook my head.

She put her hand to her chin in thought. “Hmm...but he *did* leave a sword behind in exchange for the portrait, as is proper for a knight family.” She undid the wrapped bundle and pulled out a sword.

“Huh?” Time seemed to stop for me the moment I saw it. I froze up, eyes wide.

Oria didn’t seem to notice. “My, this *is* a fine sword!” she exclaimed, astonished. “There’s a big stone embedded in the handle... Is that a magic stone? It must’ve cost Blue a fortune to...” Her voice trailed off after she looked up from the sword and saw the large beads of tears falling from my eyes. She stood up with a start. “Fia...?”

Unsteadily, I walked over to her and wordlessly picked up the beautiful black sword. It weighed profoundly in my hands. To think the day would come when I would hold it again...

Tears continued to dribble from my eyes. Three hundred years ago, I had gifted this sword to Sirius. I hugged it now, feeling emotional.

Oria put a hand on my shoulder to comfort me. Then, noticing somebody passing by, she called out, “Blue! Perfect timing. This sword was just sent over from our territory, but might it be from you?”

“A sword...? Wha—Fia, what’s wrong?!”

I heard some hurried footsteps, then suddenly Blue was right next to me looking at my face. He saw the tears streaming down my cheeks and leapt back, startled.

“F-Fia, y-y-you’re crying! H-here, take my handkerchief—oh no, i-i-it won’t come out of my pocket! Why now, of all times!”

I heard the sound of cloth tearing.

My sister stepped in. “Calm down, Blue. You look even worse off than Fia. She began crying the moment she looked at this sword; am I right in thinking this was yours?”

“No, this sword isn’t mine but...that belonged to one of my companions. Um... this companion used to be a splendid Imperial Knight and told me they received this sword from the empire as a reward.”

“Why would they leave such an important thing with us?”

“U-uh...well, my companion is a bit eccentric, you see! He saw the reverse-trophy made to commemorate one thousand practice match losses over in the Ruud family home and was deeply moved. He already had to exchange a portrait for a sword because of what a diviner told him and figured the knight who made such a piece of art was most deserving of having a powerful sword, so they could one day become strong, or...something like that...?” His voice grew weaker as he continued, fading into a weak whisper toward the end.

With some sort of understanding, Oria nodded. “I see. So he admired Fia’s willingness to celebrate even her defeats and hoped she would one day grow stronger. I can accept that, but it’s still quite...bold to give away a sword with roots to the empire to a knight of the kingdom. Your friend is really something,” she said admiringly.

“No...this sword isn’t from the empire,” I said. “It’s a Náv sword.” I could say this without a doubt because I knew this sword belonged to Sirius, a proud knight of our kingdom. He would’ve never given this sword to another. Perhaps some time after his death, it had been gifted to the Arteaga Empire by somebody else, but who could say? All that mattered now was that his sword had returned to me. I hugged it tightly in my arms, looked up at my sister, and met her eyes. “Oria, I...I want to keep this sword.”

She looked over at Blue for confirmation. “This seems to be quite a valuable sword with a history of its own. Are you sure it’s okay for her to have it?”

“Of course! I’m sure even the sword itself would be happiest in Fia’s possession!” He bobbed his head up and down repeatedly.

She turned to me, smiling happily. “There you have it, Fia. Looks like that sword’s yours now.”

“Thank you...” I bowed deeply to them both, then hugged the sword tightly again. My mind thought of Sirius. *Sirius...thank you for treasuring this sword all these years. This sword has returned to me after three hundred years, still in pristine condition thanks to the care you’ve surely given it.*

“You sure are lucky to be able to have a sword you were smitten with at first sight, huh?” Oria said. She then hugged me until my tears stopped. I guess she’d come to her own conclusion about why I’d cried and hugged the sword. Indeed, it was beautiful enough to be captivating at first glance, and I had no words left in me to explain myself, so I didn’t bother to correct her.

That night, I slept with Sirius’s sword next to my pillow. I didn’t dream of him, but I did sleep well. I’d like to think I owed that to him.

I later told Kurtis about how Sirius’s sword had returned to me, as well as how my sleep had been good. He blinked a few times at my report, a little taken aback.

“I had thought you always slept soundly... Can you recall any nights you’ve had trouble sleeping as of late?” he asked.

“Huh. Now that you point it out, I guess I do sleep like a baby every night.”

I could always count on Kurtis to help me see the truth.

The next morning, I departed the Eleventh Knight Brigade's stronghold with Kurtis, Green, Blue, and Zavilia. Many of the knights I had grown close to during our long stay came to see us off.

With one hand tightly holding Sirius's sword, I waved goodbye to everyone. Oria and Guy saw me off with a smile.

My stay in this land had been a good one. Even if we'd encountered a demon, Zavilia was back with me; I managed to meet Oria; I got to travel with Kurtis, Green, and Blue; and I even reunited with Sirius's sword. It was worth the effort.

Zavilia climbed onto my shoulder and gazed off toward Blackpeak Mountain in the distance. I did the same, observing the cloudless sky behind it.

*Surely such clear skies are an omen of fun times awaiting in the Capital?*

With that one last happy thought, I left the stronghold behind.



## Side Story:

### Preparing a Gift for Captain Quentin

THE DAY AFTER we left the Eleventh Knight Brigade's stronghold behind, it was at long last time to part ways with Green and Blue—the royal capital was down to the south, and the Arteaga Empire was to the east.

“Thank you for traveling with us, Green, Blue. I don't know where we'd be without you two.” I looked at them both and smiled. “Tell Red I said hi for me! I hope all three of you can come the next time you guys get time off.”

I felt really bad for Red, who was left to manage the family business alone back at home while his brothers extended their vacation. He must've been totally beat now, doing the work of three people. Just then, I got an idea. I rustled around through my things, pulled out all dozen or so healing potions on me, and handed them over to Green. I'd be traveling with only Zavilia and Kurtis for the rest of the trip, so I'd be able to use my healing powers freely and didn't need the healing potions anymore.

“What are these, Fia?” Green looked at the vials of green liquid curiously, almost as though he'd never seen a healing potion before.

“They're healing potions,” I explained. “These are able to heal any kind of injury completely. Give some to Red for me; I'm sure he's exhausted.”

“I'm sorry, *any* kind of injury, *completely*?” he repeated warily.

A bit quickly, I corrected myself, “Well, maybe not *any* injury. If you were comatose, lost half your blood, or something else on a similar level, then you'd be healed, but it can't regrow lost limbs or anything like that.”

“Uh...” He looked back and forth between me and the vials with a look of disbelief on his face.

Ah, *now* I could see why he was confused! “Oh right, ‘normal’ healing potions are transparent, aren't they? I get you're a little suspicious of these green healing potions, but I guarantee their effects—don't worry. In fact, they're even

better than the usual ones I make because I could use a bunch of those rare herbs from Blackpeak Mountain.”

“Wait, Fia, *you* made these?”

“Yep. I had a lotta free time at the stronghold, so it was no skin off my back at all.” I made a grand show of it not being anything to worry about to try and make him accept my gift, even taking a big ol’ stretch.

To my surprise, Green didn’t smile like I expected but instead sagged his shoulders and sighed. “I see... I now understand giving you free time leads to simply outrageous things.” With a serious expression, he asked, “Are you really okay with giving me such valuable healing potions?”

“Of course! If anything, I feel bad I can’t do more for Red! He must be exhausted by now.” I was sincerely worried the healing potions wouldn’t be enough to compensate Red for his troubles.

Without saying a word, Green deeply bowed his head. Behind him, Blue did the same.

Huh? Had they only just now realized that they’d been forcing Red to work alone while they went off and played? It didn’t make sense to me why they would bow their heads unless they suddenly felt apologetic or something. Green and Blue may have been a great boon to me and the knights at the stronghold, but it still wasn’t fair that Red was left all on his lonesome. I could only hope the healing potions would be enough to make up for it. I didn’t want him to hold a grudge or anything.

Green spoke, sounding apologetic. “Fia, allow me to thank you once again for letting me join you on your journey. I may not have been of any help to you whatsoever, but I believe I’ve come to understand what I’m lacking and what I need to do from here on out.”

“Whoa, when’d you get so modest?! Of course you were helpful! Like I said earlier, I don’t know where we’d even be without you both! We would’ve totally lost against the Bird Cryer, for starters! Most importantly, spending time with you two was a lot of fun!”

He blushed. “Wh-when will you learn you can’t just praise someone out of the

blue like that?! And why would you say spending time with us was fun?! That's so embarrassing to hear directly!"

"Bashful to the end, I see!" I said happily. Inside, however, I felt a bit sad knowing this would be the last time we'd do this silly exchange for a long, long while. Green was a wonderful man. I had no doubt at all that he would grow accustomed to compliments by the time we met again.

Green shook his head to clear his mind, his cheeks still rosy. He then put his hands on my shoulders. "Be well, Fia! And don't you worry about that Cathedral business—you can leave it all to me."

*That's so like you to say that,* I thought. Entering the Cathedral would probably be impossible for him, and yet he promised he'd manage it anyway—he was just that kind of guy. A man among men.

I squeezed the hands he had on my shoulders. "Thank you, Green! But don't push yourself if it's impossible."

"Eek!"

All I did was thank him, but for some reason he blushed red as a tomato and leapt back. Not understanding why he reacted the way he did, I looked to Blue for answers. He looked at Green with sympathy, then noticed my questioning gaze and flashed a refreshing smile as though to say, "Don't worry about it."

"Fia," said Blue, "it truly has been a miracle to not only happen upon you in the royal capital but to spend so much time with you afterward. The two of us need to head back to our country now, but I will return to you one day."

"I'm happy we could meet too! It was fun traveling with you. Let's do it again sometime!" I began to wave goodbye but then remembered there was something I wanted to give him. "Oh, right! Can you give this to that companion of yours?" I pulled a short sword wrapped in cloth out. "Your companion gave me a sword that's very dear to me. It'd be nice if I could thank him directly sometime."

The short sword I handed Blue was enhanced to its limit by my enchantment magic, a sign of how grateful I was to his Imperial Knight companion. As it was covered in cloth, he couldn't tell what it was, but he accepted it anyway. "I'll

make sure it gets to him.”

With my hands now empty, I remembered there was actually one *more* thing I wanted to give. “Oh! And give this to your sister for me.”

From my pocket, I took out a hair accessory I had just made that day and handed it to Blue. He looked at it and began to murmur in disbelief, doing a double take. “Huh? No way...” Eyes wide, he stared transfixed at the hair accessory, trembling slightly. “F-Fia, could this blue possibly be...and this black stone...”

What I handed him was a cute hair accessory made out of light-blue scales centered around a black stone.

“You guessed it, Blue! That blue stuff is made from blue dragon scales. Nice and sparkly, isn’t it? That black stone in the middle is a magic stone. It gives great color contrast to the blue, don’t you think?”

When I was having a look around the nests of the dragons, I noticed a lot of these black stones were littered around their eating area. I inspected them and, lo and behold, they were magic stones. I took the opportunity to pilfer one decently sized one. Monsters ate other monsters for food, but I guess they couldn’t eat magic stones, so they just discarded them or something.

“W-wait, Fia, this magic stone...” Blue trembled as he stared at the magic stone. I then remembered he was pretty good at analyzing magic. In other words, he could see the effect I applied to the magic stone.

“Yup! Good on you for noticing! Just once, this magic stone can repel any curse.”

“Wh-wha—it has *that* strong of an effect on it?!”

Why was he so shocked? He was the one who’d noticed it, after all. “What’re you so surprised for? I thought you already figured that much out.”

“I mean, of course I could see it was enhanced. As someone who can use magic myself, there’s no way I couldn’t notice an enhancement as strong as this. But there’s no way I’d have been able to figure out its effects...and it can repel *any* curse, you say? I’ve never even heard of such an effect before.”

“Huh? O-oh, uh, well, that’s b-because it’s a Blackpeak Mountain special! Yeah, y’know, a bunch of factors lined up and I just so happened to put a really good effect on it.” I tried to play off my powers as weaker than they actually were, even though we were kinda a bit past that point by now. I then thought of Blue’s sister, who was made to sleep for so many years, and frowned. “I hope wearing this can put your sister at ease. The thought of being cursed again must terrify her, what with her being cursed to sleep from birth. Hopefully this’ll act as some sort of lucky charm and make her feel safe.”

“Fia...” He bit his lip and grimaced, gripping the hair accessory tightly as he tried to keep himself from becoming emotional. I could tell from that sight alone just how much he cared for his sister. He hung his head low, grabbed my hands, and spoke in a wavering voice. “Thank you for showing such thought toward my sister, Fia. I’m sure she’ll treasure your gift for all of time to come. Thank you, truly.”

“You’re very welcome!” I said with a smile.

The three of us once again promised to meet again, and then we parted ways.

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With Green and Blue gone, it was just me, Zavilia, and Kurtis left. I was feeling a bit glum to see our travel party reduced to half its size when suddenly Zavilia spoke up from my shoulder.

**“Good grief. It seems another new legend is about to spread through the empire.”**

“Huh?” Confused, I looked up at him and saw exasperation written all over his face.

**“I thought you had learned to show more restraint after your excursion in Sutherland, but it seems I was wrong. You gave away advanced healing potions that could heal practically anything just to help someone recover from exhaustion. And don’t even get me started on that magic stone that can negate any status ailment... I can’t believe you genuinely gifted that intending it to be a mere lucky charm.”**

“Was that really that weird? B-but I figured since they were all consumables

and one-time effects, they'd make okay gifts..." I said, flustered.

**"Hmph. You have no concept of what a sensible gift is. I'm sure you'd even give away a one-of-a-kind item that shouldn't even exist in this world without a second thought if you had the chance. I suppose it's not a problem if the receiver is happy and it doesn't cause you problems down the road, but still..."**

"Oh c'mon, Zavilia! Even I know some gifts are too much!"

**"I...certainly hope so. Anyway, want to fly the rest of the way on my back? It'll be much faster than traversing these meandering roads."**

I stiffened at his offer. I knew he meant nothing of it, but it was almost as though he could tell what I was planning sometimes. Certainly, flying would be the fastest way to get back to the royal capital, but then I wouldn't be able to make a stop along the way like I planned.

"Uh, well..." I hemmed and hawed, unsure how to answer. As I did so, Zavilia glanced up at my hair accessory—not the light-blue and white ribbon I usually wore but the ribbon I made for this trip using griffon feathers. As soon as he saw it, he grimaced.

**"I suppose those griffon feathers don't look terrible on you, seeing as their gold color matches your eyes, but I think black would be a far better color to pair with your red hair. Why don't you make a hair accessory out of my scales sometime?"**

"Huh? O-oh, sure."

Surprise, surprise; he was jealous I'd used the feathers of another monster for something. For his sake, I knew I'd better swap back to my usual ribbon as soon as possible, which meant I needed to stop by the Giza Ravine like I'd originally planned. The question was how to casually suggest that without giving anything away.

"Uhh, you know what? We went straight north from the royal capital to Blackpeak Mountain, so it might be nice to explore westward along the mountains a bit and see what's up over in the Ruud territory. There's a whole lot of different trees and plants to see there, so it's worth taking some horses

and riding around.” I made my suggestion nonchalantly, as though I had no ulterior motives at all.

Zavilia stared at me without so much as a single blink. **“Uh-huh...in other words, you want to stop by the Giza Ravine, located between Blackpeak Mountain and the Ruud territory, explicitly on horse so I don’t fly over and scare everything away, correct?”**

“Gah?!” That was my ever-smart Zavilia for you. He read me like an open book. “Zavilia, um...” I reached for some excuse or other, not wanting him to misunderstand and think I was interested in other monsters.

Unexpectedly, however, he agreed to my suggestion. **“If you want to go, we can go. That place has always been a place where griffons nest. They’ve been gathering en masse in those parts these past few months. I’m sure you’ll find that special one you’re looking for there.”**

“Bwah?!”

Okay, seriously, just how smart was he? Forget an open book, I might as well be a pane of glass with how well he saw through me. I was indeed looking for a very special griffon like he said.

Seeing as he knew everything already, I surrendered unconditionally. “Wow, you really know me. Yeah...I know it’s a bit out of the way, but I want to look for a griffon since we’re already out here.”

I was about to explain further when Kurtis cut in. “You want to look for a special griffon? May I ask why?”

I remembered then that Kurtis still wasn’t up to speed and was about to explain, but Zavilia beat me to it. **“She wants to give it to that weird knight as yet another one of her very ‘sensible’ gifts.”**

Kurtis frowned, confused. “But doesn’t Quentin already have a griffon as a familiar?”

“Uhh, he does, but I saw it looking up at the sky all lonely-like when I visited the familiar stables this one time. Griffons normally live in packs, so I was thinking it’d be nice to bring another so it wouldn’t have to be alone all the time.”

Realization flashed in Kurtis's eyes before I could explain further. "Surely not, but I'll ask just in case—you wouldn't happen to be searching for a *mate* for Quentin's familiar, would you?! If I recall correctly, griffons only have one other in the whole world they'll take as a mate... Could that be why you wore that hair accessory for the entirety of our trip?"

Wow. That was Kurtis for you. He fished out the right answer mid-explanation.

"Ding-ding! Correct! They say griffons can tell who their mate is at a single glance, right? Then some feathers from their mate might also work as well! That's why I've been wearing these feathers this whole time, just in case I ever came across that one particular griffon."

Kurtis buried his face in his hands, hunching over in disbelief. "You mean this whole time I've been committing myself to making sure you can traverse Blackpeak Mountain safely you've been hard at work finding a griffon mate?"

"W-well, I wouldn't say I've been *hard at work* or anything like that. I just promised I'd bring Captain Quentin back a gift and was like, 'Oh, y'know, I'm sure he'd be really happy if he got a mate for his familiar,' and figured that'd do..." Even I wasn't really convinced by my weak excuse.

Kurtis shook his head like it was the worst idea in the world. "Forget happy, I'm certain he'll start *dancing madly with joy* if you did that. He may not look like it, but he's quite the skilled sword dancer. He'll likely insist on presenting you a special dance that he's saved for such an occasion to show his gratitude."

"Ew, no. I don't wanna see that..." I said a little strongly. Kurtis replied with a shrug.

After two days of traveling, we reached the Giza Ravine. The two were eager to indulge me, so they voiced no objections.

The Giza Ravine itself was a narrow ravine with steep cliffs on both sides that ran for miles. On the rocky surface of said cliffs were caves griffons nested in. From a distance—we didn't want to spook them—we observed a ton of griffons soaring through the sky.



“Wow, there’s so many more than I thought there’d be,” I marveled. “You mentioned they were gathering here, Zavilia. Why is that?”

**“The griffons that lived on Blackpeak Mountain probably fled and moved here because I gathered dragons from all over. There is certainly a considerable number of griffons present, but it makes sense when you consider that this is probably all the griffons in the northern side of the kingdom.”**

“I see, that makes sense! Then I have you to thank for gathering them all into one spot!”

I was looking for one specific griffon, so having so many gathered here together improved my odds significantly. The question now was how I should go about finding this griffon mate...

As I thought it over, Zavilia spoke up with an absolutely horrible plan. **“Why don’t I try roaring at a pack of griffons to start us off? We can observe the cowardly creatures fluttering away and take the wimpiest one back. They’d be unlikely to have the guts to object to being made a mate.”**

“Huh? But don’t griffons instinctively know if another griffon is their mate or not? I’d feel bad if we brought one all the way back and showed them to Quentin’s familiar only for things to fall through.”

Zavilia must have really not considered that as he just kept his mouth tightly shut, forgoing a reply. I saw the sudden silence as my time to shine by coming up with something, but Kurtis spoke up before me with yet another absolutely horrible plan.

“As it made a pact with Quentin, there’s a good chance his familiar has a preference for qualities he possesses. Perhaps we should look for a griffon with similar colors; maybe dark, jet-black feathers?”

“No way, that definitely won’t work. Captain Quentin mentioned his griffon really, really resisted becoming his familiar, so I don’t think he’s their type or anything. What’ll we do if we bring back a griffon and it’s just not the mate?”

After I refuted his idea, Kurtis fell silent as well. I saw them gaze off into the distance with disinterest on their faces and realized something: These two

didn't care one single bit whether or not we found a mate for Quentin's familiar. If we brought back the wrong griffon, they'd probably just say, "Whoops," and be done with it.

As though to reaffirm my suspicions, Kurtis absently mumbled, "I'm sure Quentin will be thrilled no matter what griffon we bring back. But if we so happen to bring back his familiar's mate, he'd certainly be so overjoyed that he'd never leave Lady Fi's side again. Moderation is best, yes. All things in moderation."

Wait a minute... It wasn't that they didn't care, it was that they *didn't* want us to find the mate. In that case, it was up to me to make us succeed!

I proceeded to rack my brain for a bit until, finally, my epiphany came. "I got it!"

**"...Oh. Really, now."**

"...Wonderful."

I paid them no mind and told Zavilia, "We need to get all the griffons to see this hair accessory! And to do that, you just need to grab me and fly straight through the middle of the gorge! Brilliant, right?"

**"That's an interesting idea, but there's a chance the griffons will scatter the moment I draw near."**

"Not necessarily! If you make it clear you're not after them, by smiling or flying slowly or something, I'm sure it'll be fine!" I insisted things would work with a smile, though I knew my plan would be doomed without his help.

He grimaced and gave me a doubtful look. **"I'm sure that would only make them more fearful. Imagine your predator slowly nearing you with a smile. You'd for sure think they were plotting something, wouldn't you?"**

"W-well...maybe? I suppose..."

*He found a hole in my plan...darn. There has to be something I can say to convince him!*

To my surprise, however, he hopped off my shoulder and flew down to the ground.

**“Well, whatever. I’ll play along if you want to give it a shot. I can only see this ending terribly, but who knows? You just might surprise me. What was it you wanted me to do again? Grab you and fly over there?”**

“You’ll do it?! Thank you, Zavilia!” Eager to get started before he had a change of heart, I drew near and presented my arms straight out to him.

**“Huh? You want me to hold you by your arms? Why don’t you fly on my back like usual?”**

“No, no, no. I don’t want them to think I’m here to catch them. It’s better if I show them I can’t use my arms!”

**“I...want to say something, but I get the feeling your dumb luck will somehow pull through in the end regardless. That’s how it usually goes. You come up with the silliest of ideas and somehow come out successful every time. If this slapdash plan of yours actually works, then your dumb luck must truly be a force of nature.”**

I frowned, feeling like I was being made fun of, but I swallowed back the desire to argue. *I see how it is. My ideas are simply too cutting edge for you, just like how society didn’t respect the great founder of magic or the many weaponsmiths who went on to become legends. All great geniuses are misunderstood at first.*

Zavilia took a deep sigh, having read my thoughts. **“You sure are quite the positive thinker, Fia,”** he said sarcastically. **“You’re something else. I mean it.”**

*Heh heh heh. Say what you will! When you’re a mature adult like me, you don’t sweat the small stuff!*

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Zavilia grabbed my arms with his forelegs and rose up into the air. After just a few graceful flutters of his wings, we started moving toward the pack of flying griffons gathered over the cliffs.

A griffon spotted us and let out a high-pitched cry. “Pigyaaaaaaa!”

“Whoa, we’ve already been spotted?!” We were still some hundred meters out. Griffons must have really good eyes or something.

**“Not quite, Fia. That lookout is reacting to what’s going on down in the ravine... Take a look. There’s a group of basilisks.”**

“Huh?!”

Basilisks were lizard-type monsters about three meters in size. I looked down, surprised to hear a group of them had appeared, but couldn’t make out anything but the river at this distance.

“You’re sure about the basilisks?”

**“I am. About thirty by my quick count. They’re probably here to steal eggs. You see those caves on the side of the cliff face, right? Those are the griffons’ nests, where their eggs are kept. Typically griffons are the stronger monster, but they’ll be at a disadvantage fighting in the narrow confines of their nests. Some might even get killed.”**

“Oh dear.”

Basilisks had special hair on the bottom of their feet that allowed them to vertically climb walls, so it’d be no challenge at all for them to reach the griffon nests.

Still dangling midair, I began to rack my brain, trying to figure out what I could do—or rather, *if* I should do anything at all. Monsters posed a threat to humans, so letting them kill one another off wasn’t necessarily bad, but...

“But it’d be a problem if the mate of Captain Quentin’s familiar got eaten!”

**“There’s no guarantee the mate is even among them,”** Zavilia calmly pointed out.

That was true, but the possibility wasn’t zero. The best move was to let as few griffons die as possible.

I mulled over things for a bit, wondering what action I could take, when griffons started flying out of their nests as though fleeing.

**“Griffons have a clear hierarchical structure. When danger nears, the ones on the lower end of the totem pole help the ones on the higher end, but never the other way around.”**

“Wait, they just leave the lower-status griffons to die?”

**“Correct. What’s more, the lower the status of the griffon, the further down their nest will be on the cliff face, leaving the ones with the lowest status to be the first targets...and oh, it appears that the griffons have finally spotted us.”**

“Hwuh?”

I raised my gaze from the ravine to the sky and saw about thirty-or-something griffons looking our way in shock. All at once, they began to cry out like mad.

“Pikiiiiiiii!”

“Piiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Ack! Calm down, everyone! This black dragon is friendly, I promise! Anyway, just look at these golden feathers here. Anyone feel any sparks coming on from looking at them?” I tried my best, but the griffons all turned around and fled as fast as they could, fear plain on their faces. “Seriously?! They didn’t even look at the feathers. That didn’t go like I planned at all.”

**“You know...I didn’t want to say anything about it, but I think the way you’re positioned with your arms straight horizontally out is a problem. You look like a crucified criminal, or maybe my next snack. Yes, the griffons certainly assumed I’m looking for a place where I can take my time gobbling you up. They all scattered hoping I’d be too busy eating you to chase them.”**

“What?!”

*No way, really?!* I scanned the area. In every direction, the griffons were flying away from us.

“Y-you’re kidding...”

**“Want me to fly around and cut them off? They’re a cowardly bunch, so if I just threaten one a little, I’m sure we can make one agree to be the mate of Quentin’s familiar.”**

“What? No! Like I said, I’m pretty sure that’s not the right way to go about this...”

That being said, I didn’t really have any other plans lined up. I was at my wits’ end when the color of brilliant flame entered my vision together with a sharp,

piercing cry.

“Huh? Wh-what’s going on?!”

A plume of fire seemed to emerge from one of the caves along the cliff face. On closer inspection, however, it wasn’t a fire at all but a beautiful griffon.

“Wow...a scarlet griffon!”

The sight of it was captivating. Each of its feathers were long and glistened bright scarlet. It was a full size larger than the others, and its beak and claws were sharp. It stood for a moment, its magnificent figure easily mistakable for a plume of flame, before taking flight.

“How beautiful...”







As I gazed in awe, it made a sharp glance my way. I was a bit startled, but it quickly turned away with disinterest and plunged downward into the ravine. It beelined toward a basilisk climbing the wall and pierced its throat without stopping in an elegant attack that only took an instant. The basilisk fell dead into the riverbed below, and the scarlet griffon flew upward again. In one bewitching, flowing motion, it descended once more and pierced another basilisk the same way, continuing on and on.

In no time at all, the basilisks were all killed, and by one single griffon.

Even after everything was over, I continued to stare at the scarlet griffon in a daze. It wasn't until Zavilia said something that I broke out of my trance.

**“Hey, Fia, I know you want to bring back that scarlet griffon, but it really doesn't look like the type to submit even if I threaten it. If we bring it back, it'll probably just boss around Quentin's familiar instead of being its mate.”**

“W-well, we don't know that for certain! Who knows? Maybe things will work out.”

The scarlet griffon flew upward again, this time heading straight for us.

“Whoa?!” I grinned happily, ecstatic that it approached us.

The griffon stared at my hair accessory.

“Wait...are you by any chance interested in these feathers?! Well, I'll have you know that these feathers came from a very beautiful gold-colored griffon! I don't mind introducing you to it if you'd like.”

The griffon looked up at Zavilia, who was still holding me, and seemed to think for a bit. Eventually, it looked back down at my hair accessory. I thought I might need to give it one more push. To my surprise, though, the griffon nodded and descended so it flew right under Zavilia.

“W-we did it! We found the mate!” I shouted.

**“Remember,”** said Zavilia calmly, **“we won't know if it's really the mate until**

**we bring it back to Quentin's familiar. And if you ask me, this griffon wasn't so interested in those golden feathers but the fact that you seemed able to talk on equal grounds with me."**

"Huh?"

**"I told you earlier: The higher up a griffon's nest is on the cliff, the higher in their hierarchy it is. This one came out of the top nest, so it's an elite among its kind."**

I vigorously nodded along to his words, smiling widely. "Uh-huh, I hear you loud and clear. In other words, it's smart enough to understand we're bringing it back! All right, let's get out of here. These griffons have had enough trouble for one day; we'd best get out of their hair."

And so, we traveled back to the royal capital with the (potential) mate of Quentin's familiar tagging along.

**Side Story:**  
**The Knight's Vow**  
**First Knight Brigade Captain Cyril**

**I**N THE PROUD Kingdom of Náv, the existence of a saint is honored above all others. This was arranged behind the scenes by the royal family, which includes my father.

My father was the younger brother of the prior king, and my mother was the second-ranked saint of her time. As their child, it was taken for granted that I would revere the saints...and yet I've always only ever seen the contradictions in them. Saints were the foundation of our nation, the most sacred of all beings. So why was it that they all looked down on others so? This, I could simply not wrap my head around.

The more time I spent with saints on the battlefield, the further my opinion of them strayed from the benevolent image the kingdom spent years crafting. My days passed in confused anguish, only for a new recruit in my brigade to make everything suddenly so clear.

When asked what she thought of the saints, Fia laughed and claimed our image of them was wrong. *"How do you feel about the saints? Do you want to worship them like gods too? Heh heh, no...of course not. Saints aren't a bunch of fickle, distant gods. No, the saints are the shields of the knights."*

The ideal image she painted was many times more beautiful than the one the kingdom had spent all these years crafting. I found myself bewildered and enthralled by her words, but a calmer part of me told myself that no such saint could possibly exist in reality. And so, I searched for a sensible answer to explain why she said what she did. I concluded Fia could only speak of such an ideal because she herself was a knight, not a saint. Her own hopes had mixed into her words. She would never have said such a thing had she been a saint herself...or so I had thought.

*"But if I were a saint, my opinion wouldn't change."*

She spoke those words with such certainty that I believed it must be so. Her words calmed my heart. She had nothing to base her claim on, and yet I believed her. I, who always grounded my decisions on facts, needed nothing at all to just believe.

Fia's thoughts and ideas were often outlandish and offbeat, but she always surpassed my expectations. I thought this was simply a coincidental result of her pure-hearted desire to pursue what she considered proper and beautiful... but my thinking changed after our visit to Sutherland.

Sutherland was the territory I ruled, but I only visited it once a year. You understand, this was because it was in that very place that I began to see contradictions in the saints.

My mother was a saint—the most powerful in the country, in fact—but she was nothing like the ideal image of saints I held. Despite possessing the miraculous power to heal many, she used her gift sparingly. The people of Sutherland loathed her for this, which, paired with an unfortunate accident, led to her untimely death.

I still believed saints to be more sacred than all else then, yet when I heard news of her death, I thought nothing much of it at all. Unquestionable reverence toward the saints had been instilled in me since youth, but a part of me could simply not move past the fact that my mother would only heal a select few.

My father, on the other hand, was enraged to hear of my mother's death. *"All of you shall repent with your lives—every single one of your kind!"* He was by her side, seeing what she was more than I ever did, and yet he never became disillusioned with her, continuing to deeply revere her only for her power to heal.

Being unable to respect saints as my father had, losing my parents in quick succession, and ending up in a strained relationship with my own subjects left me with a vortex of contradictory emotions. But those emotions were all wiped away when Fia came to Sutherland.

The reason I wanted Fia to come along in the first place was so she could judge me. She had a habit of seeking out what was proper and beautiful, so I wanted her to observe my actions and tell me upfront if I handled things poorly. I'd thought that was the most I could entrust her with, as I believed the rift between me and the people of Sutherland would not be repaired for decades at the very least, and so it hadn't even occurred to me to ask for her help there. Yet she achieved what could only be called a miracle.

The people of Sutherland, all devout worshippers of the Great Saint, believed Fia to be the Great Saint's reincarnation. They welcomed her with open arms, the knights by association, and the Sutherland Family as well. Just like that, we had reconciled with the people of Sutherland. I had never thought such a thing would be possible in my time. It left me dazed.

It was around that time that Fia questioned me.

*"How's my acting been so far? Has it matched your image of the Great Saint?"*

What a silly question that was. It was a given that she had far exceeded whatever image I could possibly have had of the Great Saint. In that moment, I was speechless, my chest bursting with emotion. I was overwhelmed by feelings of awe, gratitude...and reverence. *This reverence must be what the knights all feel for the saints*, I thought. *Finally, I too can feel it for the first time.*

She smiled, unaware of the greatness of her actions. *"Good for you, Captain. Your kindness got through to everyone."*

Fia seemed to believe that the bond between me and the people of Sutherland had been mended by *my own* character.

The feeling in my chest overflowed. Immediately, I took a knee before her.

"Perhaps this is an easy feat to you, and perhaps you still do not understand your own value. But I know full well the significance of it all. I will not forget this favor. Fia, one day I will repay you in full. I swear it as a knight." The words in my heart sprung forth naturally. Before I knew it, I had performed the knight's vow to her.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Commander Saviz's eyes widen. *Yes, I know. I am surprised as well. Even I hadn't thought the one I would swear my*

*knight's vow to would be a saint...*

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“But...even so, no matter how many times I remember that moment, I still see no world in which I didn’t swear my knight’s vow to her then and there.” I murmured to myself late one night, reminiscing alone in my office.

My thoughts were in disarray, and so I put my pen down and called it quits for the night—no point in trying to work at a time like this. I had wanted to clear the urgent work that had piled up during my stay in Sutherland, but I just couldn’t focus. Perhaps it was the fact that Fia would soon travel a long way that had me so distracted.

“I had best leave things here so I can see her off tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, Fia planned to leave for the Gazzar Borderlands with Kurtis. Knowing her, she was probably as excited as a schoolgirl embarking on a trip and would leave early in the morning. The thought of being able to see her off in such high spirits put me in a pleasant mood, so I decided I would wake up earlier than usual for it.

I left my office and walked the path back to my room to retire. Along the way, however, I heard a door rattling. Thinking it strange, I walked over to the source of the sound and found the knight that had been monopolizing my thoughts up until recently, Fia Ruud, trying to open the door to the cafeteria. One had to wonder what she was doing, especially so late that it was already the next day.

“What are you doing?”

“Fweh?!” She spun around, surprised, and then cheerfully said, “Captain Cyril! Thank goodness! I can’t seem to budge this cafeteria door for some reason. Can you help me open it?”

“The cafeteria has closed for the day, so the door is locked. Was there something you wanted?”

“Yes, water. My throat’s a bit dry.” She grinned widely, and I realized then that she was drunk. I couldn’t attend because I had business, but Kurtis took Fia out tonight to celebrate the end of her training. I could only presume that she had gotten drunk then. The fact that Kurtis wasn’t here surely meant that she

had already been escorted back to her dormitory once. She could have just gotten water from her dormitory instead of walking all the way to the cafeteria, but it would appear she was too drunk to realize that.

“If you don’t mind waiting for a moment, I can bring you some water from my office.”

“Really? Thank you very much! I’ll wait for you however long it takes,” she happily replied.

I was a bit hesitant to leave her in the dark, alone and drunk, but I was even more hesitant to make her walk. I resolved to at least make her sit on a nearby bench. As late as it was, it was unlikely anyone would be lurking within the castle walls at this time. Still, I hurried back to her. I returned to find her sitting in the exact same position, staring up at the sky in a daze.

“Find something interesting?” I asked as I sat down next to her.

She replied without taking her gaze off the sky. “No, I can’t see a thing. I was hoping to spot the brightest star, but no luck.”

“Ah, Sirius. Unfortunately, tonight is cloudy, so I doubt we’ll be seeing many stars.”

I handed her a glass of water, which she took gratefully. With two hands on the glass, she drank it all in one go. After seeing the vigor with which she drank, I began to regret grabbing the stylish but small glass at the front of my cupboard instead of something with more volume.

“Would you like another?” I asked. “Or should I walk you back to the knight dormitories, seeing as you have an early morning tomorrow?”

“Huh? Tomorrow? Early morning? Did some kind of mission come in?” she asked, confused. She was well and truly sloshed. Now that I was closer, I could see how red her face was.

“You’ll be heading to the Gazzar Borderlands tomorrow, remember? It’s where Blackpeak Mountain is located.” Mentioning the Gazzar Borderlands didn’t seem to ring any bells, so I mentioned the black dragon’s mountain as well.

She smiled broadly. “Ohh, right! I’m going to go see Zavilia! Eheh heh heh, I’m gonna bring him lots and lots of presents too!” She began listing off presents with her fingers. I listened, wondering if the black dragon—one of the Three Great Beasts—would really like childish things such as flowers and candy. After finishing, she continued to happily talk about the black dragon before abruptly stopping and covering her mouth, suddenly remembering what she was saying was secret. “Sh-shoot! This is supposed to be a secret from you. If it got out that I have the black dragon as a familiar and allowed it to return to Blackpeak Mountain, I’ll get scolded for letting a dangerous monster roam free!” With full seriousness, she asked, “Anyway, pretend like you didn’t hear a thing if you could, please.”

I gazed up at the heavens and murmured, “To think Quentin would announce he accepted a bribe, Zackary would ask me to overlook corruption, and you would ask me to pretend I didn’t hear top secret information all in the same day...” I side-eyed Fia. “I’m sure you’re aware the black dragon is the guardian beast of the Náv Kingdom?”

“Of course.” She nodded.

“Then you must understand that your status in this country would rise exponentially if it were known that the black dragon obeyed you.”

“Um...if I made Zavilia do things for the kingdom, then sure, I guess I would become a big shot. But friends don’t make friends do things.”

“What if I told you that you could rise to a position equal to a high-ranking saint?”

“Those who know me wouldn’t change their opinion of me just because my familiar was a black dragon, and I care more about my friends than the opinions of strangers.”

A very Fia-like answer indeed. No matter how many times I probed her, she put her own status second to her values. I’ve seen my fair share of greedy people, and so such humbleness is wonderful to see. For that reason, I didn’t push any further, although demanding her dragon serve the kingdom might’ve been the right thing to do as both duke and captain. Instead, I changed the topic to the coming day. “I’m sure you’ll be fine in Kurtis’s hands, but there are



many dangerous monsters on Blackpeak Mountain. Please don't climb it until after you've met up with the Eleventh Knight Brigade over there."

She nodded her head repeatedly to show she understood. "Got it! But I feel like things will be okay regardless with Green and Blue. I don't know..."

"I haven't heard of those two before. Who might they be?"

"Who...? Good question. They're from the Arteaga Empire...oh, but that's a secret. Uhh, well...they're capable adventurers, I think. And they're coming along to Blackpeak Mountain with us."

Fia was dropping secret after secret in her drunken state. Green and Blue, from the Arteaga Empire? The brothers of the emperor came to mind...but such high-status figures could not so easily visit a foreign nation, so it was likely just a coincidence. Such names were rather common anyway.

"Is that right? It's quite like you to travel with someone you don't know well. If Kurtis gave his approval, then they should be all right, I suppose. Regardless, Blackpeak Mountain is dangerous. Do be careful."



“Of course. I won’t do *anything* dangerous!” she promised cheerfully. I couldn’t quite put my faith in that promise, however. Even if she didn’t purposefully seek it out, trouble seemed to have a way of finding her. I would definitely have to once more urge Kurtis to be careful when I saw him the next morning.

I took Fia’s hand and looked her straight in the eyes. “Fia, I have sworn a knight’s vow to you. I will never forget what you’ve done for me and will make certain I repay you in full. So please...come back safe so I can fulfill my vow.”

She stared at me blankly, then broke into a smile. “Eheh heh heh, understood, Captain! You want a gift from Blackpeak Mountain, right? Leave it to me!”

Alas, she was too drunk for my sincerity to reach her...not that she was likely to remember tonight anyway.

The next morning, I woke up earlier than usual to stand by the castle gate and see Fia off. To my surprise, Desmond, Quentin, and Zackary came as well, causing passersby to misunderstand and think His Majesty the King was preparing to depart, as few have ever seen so many captains gathered together before. Of course, as I had sworn a knight’s vow to her, Fia was just as important to me now as His Majesty.

As the one I held so dear left in high spirits, I prayed in my heart for her safe return.

## Side Story:

### Sirius Resists Serafina's Temptations

(Three Hundred Years Ago)

**“W**ELL, WOULD YOU look at that!” I exclaimed with surprise after peeking at the schedule on Sirius’s desk. “They must have messed it up. He’s got around three days’ worth of stuff logged for one day.”

I had some business with Sirius, so I went to his office, but no one was inside. Thinking he must have stepped out, I went inside and saw a paper on his desk, then took it in hand and exclaimed. For some strange reason, he had an unfeasible amount of work logged for a single day.

From behind me, Canopus tactfully said, “Lady Serafina, I do not think it is appropriate for you to look at Captain Sirius’s schedule without permission. And no, they did not ‘mess it up.’ This is one day’s worth of work for him.”

There was a lot he said that I wanted to object to, so I went in order. “Canopus, you’re right about it being rude to look at other people’s things without permission, but Sirius is the captain of my

Royal Guard, so I have every right to check his schedule. Plus, he’s fine with me entering his room as I please, so he’s probably fine with me looking at his stuff as well.”

I glanced at a side table in a corner of the room. Sirius tacitly allowed me to enter his office freely. As proof of this, there was always a fancy box on the table with a variety of lovely, sweet treats.

“He doesn’t like sweets at all, which means those are for my benefit,” I said.

He’d never explicitly said such, so I could only presume, but I was probably right. After all, I didn’t know anyone else who liked sweets *and* barged into his office whenever they felt like it.

“Anyway,” I continued, “this schedule can’t possibly all happen in one day. I mean, just look at it! You can’t meet over fifty people in that amount of time!

And they're all important! Look, see? There's a duke from the empire and the archbishop of the Cathedral. There's no way he could seriously allot only five minutes for these VIPs. That's crazy. And he has to guard me in his spare moments between each meeting on top of that? Impossible."

"If I may make one correction," Canopus replied, "I believe the reverse is true: The plan is for Captain Sirius to meet with these people in his spare moments from guarding you."

"Bwah?! You mean meeting a duke from the Arteaga Empire is being treated as an afterthought?! If word got out, they'd be furious!" I exclaimed.

Just then, the door opened without a knock. I spun around, surprised, and saw a handsome, gray-haired, silver-eyed knight in an impeccable captain's uniform.

"I could hear your voice from outside the room, Serafina. I thought my door was thicker, but I guess not." Sirius strolled into the room, coming to a stop right before me. He plucked his schedule chart out of my hands and placed it back on his desk. "My schedule isn't all that interesting to look at."

"Are you really working this much every day?" I asked. "Isn't that a bit reckless? You'll burn out hard, even with your stamina."

"Hmph. I've been at this for years and haven't fallen ill once. You, on the other hand, had a fever just last month. If anyone's taking on more work than they can handle, it's you."

He didn't directly say it, or even hint at it, but it still hit me right then: All this time, he'd been secretly shouldering some of my work. He was probably taking anything that didn't have to be done by myself and cramming it into his schedule instead.

It all made sense now. That was why he took his schedule out of my hands despite not minding me entering his room, and why Canopus asked me not to look at it.

*So they're in cahoots!* I thought, feeling like the only one on the outside. Miffed, I glared at Sirius. "Don't think this matter is settled," I said and stormed out.

After discovering the shocking truth that Sirius had been shouldering my work, I began thinking of a way to try and *make* him rest. But how? He'd said it himself: His stamina was incredible and would probably allow him to work as much as he wanted. Even if he did get a little tired, he probably wouldn't even notice. What's more, his schedule didn't leave any time for rest in the first place.

I frowned, furrowing my brows and sighing deeply. Sirius wasn't the type to bother with sickly-sweet pleasantries, nor did he ever share his inner thoughts with others, so he was often considered to be a man as cold as ice. But in truth, I knew him to be a kind worrywart who doted on me. That's why he always helped me without saying a word. But it was precisely *because* he never said a word that I sometimes didn't know he was helping me in the first place! Still, I couldn't let things stay this one-sided forever. I needed to think up a way to make him rest.

"The problem is that my schedule goes through the Royal Guard before coming to me," I muttered to myself, "so they'll adjust things before I can do anything..."

Without a moment's delay, Canopus said, "But of course. The schedules the High Council provides for you tend to be far too rigorous to be realistically undertaken. Our job is to make it more feasible."

"In other words, there are things on my schedule that don't necessarily have to be done by me, and these things are being done by Sirius instead? But couldn't someone else shoulder the work too?"

My goal was to reduce Sirius's workload, but I certainly couldn't volunteer to take on more work myself. He'd never accept that.

I was sure Canopus would readily agree to my suggestion, but to my surprise, his eyes went wide, as though he'd never even considered the idea. He paused for a moment. Then—

"It is as you say. I'm afraid the idea of filling Captain Sirius's shoes has never occurred to anyone thus far."

“I see where you’re coming from, but there’s no need to have the work done perfectly like he does. Since he’s doing what was originally meant for me, you can just find someone who does it about as well as I would, you know?”

“I’m afraid there aren’t many bold enough to fill your shoes either, Lady Serafina.”

That was an exemplary polite reply from him, but I was pretty sure my shoes would be far easier to fill than Sirius’s.

“Well, all right.” Being compared to someone so much greater than myself was annoying, so I popped a sweet into my mouth.

The next morning, I sat across from a few captains in a gazebo located in the garden. The gazebo was designed to match the aesthetics of the garden, furnished with a small table and half a dozen chairs. Typically, one would have teatime here while admiring the scenery.

With me were the four captains I’d met at the captains’ meeting the other day. Of course, I’d been disguised then, so for *them* this was our first meeting. As the Great Saint, I had to make sure I really landed that first impression.

I smiled gracefully. “Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to come here. It is a pleasure to meet all of you. I am Serafina.”

None of them returned the smile, however. Far from it: They just stared back at me all serious-like. I tilted my head curiously, wondering if I had messed something up, when the blond-haired captain sitting closest to me bolted to his feet, back straight.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Serafina! I am Hadar Bononi, Second Knight Brigade Captain in charge of defending the royal castle!”

I remembered Hadar as the first to come over and talk at the captains’ meeting. He must’ve been a very sociable captain, no doubt. Before I could even reply to him though, the purple-haired captain next to Hadar stood up with similar vigor.

“I am Tsih Brando, captain of the Third Mage Knight Brigade! I’ve been a fan

of yours since birth!”

After Tsih spoke, he was elbowed by the captain with long, red hair as they stood up... No, I must be mistaken. Tsih just cleared his throat once and didn't kick up any fuss. Nah, so my eyes had just been playing tricks on me.

Maybe I'd also heard someone quietly mutter, “Tsih, I'll kill you if you try to pull ahead of us,” but surely I misheard...

I blinked a few times to gather myself while the red-haired captain began to energetically speak.

“I'm Alnair Calandra, captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade in charge of royal capital security. The air remains as delicious as ever, Lady Serafina!”

Lastly, a very tall, muscular captain with dark-green hair stood. “I am Elnath Cafaro, Sixth Knight Brigade Captain in charge of monster extermination in the royal capital's vicinity! I came wearing a brand-new uniform!”

They all spoke clearly and seemed like a cheerful bunch. The question was, how would I go about making my request to them? When I thought over who might be able to shoulder some of Sirius's work, they were the first to come to mind. They were all captains stationed in the royal capital, so they had to be fairly capable. But being captains also meant they were probably busy. I'd feel a little bit guilty asking them to increase their already heavy workload...

As I racked my brain, Alnair took his cup in both hands and chatted me up, all starry-eyed. “Lady Serafina, the air is delicious today, but this coffee is delicious as well! It's less bitter than usual, and its color is a vibrant red just like your hair! It would seem even the color of coffee changes in your presence!”

“I...don't know about that,” I replied.

If I wasn't mistaken, this stuff was rose hip tea, not coffee. Rose hip tea was an herbal tea made from the fruits of the rose plant, which gave it a rosy-red color. It had a distinct sweet fragrance and fruity flavor, making it completely unlike coffee in any way, but a busy captain like Alnair must not know the difference.

*Wow, he works so hard that he doesn't even know the difference between coffee and tea,* I thought admiringly. Rather impressed, I said, “You must be



quite the hard worker, Captain Alnair.”

He almost fell out of his chair from sheer shock. “Huh?! O-of course! But starting tomorrow, I’ll work ten times harder than before!”

“Huh?”

I thought that was just reckless, but Tsih next to him raised his voice in competition.

“Well, I’ll work twenty times harder than before!”

Hadar and Elnath raised their voices as well.

“I’ll work thirty times harder!”

“Fifty times!”

“B-but if you work that hard,” I stammered, “you’ll run yourselves ragged...”

The four replied in unison. “That’s okay! We’re knights!”

Yeesh. So according to them, “knights” were immortal, untiring superbeings. What a revelation.

Competing against one another, the four raised their voices and said, “Lady Serafina, please, ask of us any business you might have!”

I didn’t want to see these guys burn out either, but if they were being so insistent, then I figured it wouldn’t hurt to at least bring up the Sirius situation. “Well, all right. I suppose there *is* something I could use your help with.”

“Lady Serafina said she needs our help! We’ll treasure those words all the way to the grave!” they exclaimed.

“T-to the grave?” I stammered, flummoxed. “Er, this isn’t confidential or anything, so there’s no need for *that*... I was just thinking that Sirius has been working a bit too hard. I recently found out that he’s been shouldering a lot of my work, and I’m worried he’s going to crash at this rate. Is there anything we could do for him, maybe?”

The moment they heard my words, the four captains’ faces went blank for a moment before they started clearing their throats. They looked at one another as though to say, “You tell her,” “No, you tell her.” Eventually, they all decided

Hadar would be the one to speak up, so he braced himself and did just that.

“To be perfectly frank, Captain Sirius is a monster. Hence, he should not be judged using your delicate self as a metric, Lady Serafina.”

“Huh?” I said, bewildered.

From beside me, Tsih nodded in perfect agreement and added to Hadar’s words. “Captain Sirius does not err, and he does not tire! He is also capable of completely recuperating his health with just three hours of sleep, allowing him to work indefinitely!”

“No way. Nobody is that—” I was about to deny such a thing when Alnair nodded and cut in.

“Keep this between us, but Captain Sirius is *scary* protective of you, Lady Serafina. If a knight he fights alongside with makes a mistake in battle, he simply covers for their mistake and lets that be the end of it. But if Your Holiness is in attendance for that battle, he calls them out that same day and makes them repeat the situation correctly *a hundred times over*. The same day, Your Holiness! Meaning they’re *still* exhausted! He might as well be telling them to die! And according to my statistics, every last one of these knights who’ve undergone this ‘special training’ have been reported to cry in bed that night as they undergo the training again in their nightmares. His influence extends even to the dreamworld!”

“Uhh...” I was bewildered. As I struggled to find my words, Elnath brought things to a close with a stern expression.

“Therefore, Captain Sirius believes himself to be the only one suitable to take on your duties, and as he has monster-like stamina, he has continued to do so without feeling burdened in the slightest. If another were to volunteer their aid and blunder, they would be so fiercely scolded that they would regret ever being born.”

“Uh-huh...” I didn’t really grasp what they were all getting at, but I could tell they were misunderstanding Sirius a bit. Sure, he was basically all-capable, but that was because he was a hard worker. It didn’t feel right for these captains to not know that. “The Sirius I know is someone who works harder and is kinder than any other.”

But the four just smiled back wryly, each replying...

“Yes, indeed. I’m sure he is very kind to you, Lady Serafina.”

“I am well aware Captain Sirius is a hard worker, but what results from his hard work is *beyond normal*. If one unit of hard work earns a normal person one unit of mastery, then Captain Sirius is a man who derives around 1200 units of mastery out of one unit of hard work.”

“And we’re expected to try and keep up with that man, even though it’s clearly impossible.”

“What we’re trying to say is that Captain Sirius is a hard-working monster whose unconditional kindness is extended only to you, Lady Serafina.”

*Yeah, I’m not getting through to these guys at all.* I racked my brain some more to try and find an explanation they’d understand when I heard the voice of the very man we were talking about.

“I’m flattered you all understand me well enough to spout such things one after another. I wonder, just how should I express my gratitude?”

I looked up and saw Sirius, arms crossed and standing right behind the captains across from me.

“Sirius!” I couldn’t help but exclaim upon seeing him. What a happy coincidence it was that he happened across us!

The captains in front of me all began to pale, however. Hadar pulled himself together first and quickly stood up, teacup in his right hand and saucer in his left.

“I just remembered!” Hadar shouted. “I have to go repair the western gate as soon as possible! I shall take my leave here, Lady Serafina!” His hands trembled, making him spill tea on himself, but he showed no sign he minded. Without waiting for a reply, he bolted off, teacup and saucer still in hand.

“Huh?” I blinked a few times, unsure of what had just happened.

The remaining three captains picked up their teacups and saucers as well and stood up, one after another.

“I forgot to erase the magic circle I drew in the courtyard! It’ll be a big

problem if I don't go take care of that now!"

"A tip-off of a suspicious drug going around the royal capital has come in! I need to go investigate it now!"

"I received a report saying two blue dragons have appeared in a nearby forest! I'll be leaving to go exterminate them now!"

I was still left dazed when the three captains took off like the wind.

"Uhh..." Before I realized it, I was the only one left sitting at the table. Still wondering what just happened, I looked up at Sirius. "I invited the captains to tea, but it seems everyone was busy and had to leave. Would you care to join me in their stead?"

"I don't see why not," he replied curtly, sitting beside me. The maids brought out a new teacup for Sirius. He watched them pour tea with a wry smile. "Those four don't know how to appreciate herbal tea one bit, but they ran off with their cups anyway just because you recommended it to them."

"Huh?"

"Nothing, I'm just thinking out loud. Now, then, I believe you were talking about me?" He brought his teacup to his lips and raised a brow inquiringly.

"O-oh, er, y-yes. I was, uh...thinking maybe you'd like to take it easy and drink some tea every now and then."

That wasn't exactly what we were discussing, but it wasn't *too* far off. I glanced up at his face to see if he bought my fib and saw him smiling slightly.

"I see."

That day, Sirius broke tradition and took his time to chat over tea with me. Curious, I asked what made him feel like taking it easy for once. He replied, "I figured you needed a break, but you'd never take one on your own."

*Now that's rich, coming from you.* I raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? How about practicing what you preach, Mr. All Work and No Play? I don't see how you're qualified at all to tell me I need to take a break when you work so hard all the time that I feel like I'm not doing *anything*."

He frowned upon hearing my true thoughts. “Our levels of stamina are different. It’s only natural that you would need to take care of yourself more.”

“I wonder about that. How do you know you’re not just overestimating your stamina? Maybe you’re actually all worn out and just don’t realize it,” I said, but he made a face that showed he definitely didn’t think that was the case. Well, now I *had* to challenge him! “Why don’t we try and find out how tired you really are, then?”

“If that’s what it takes to satisfy you,” he replied.

I noisily bolted up from my chair.

Together, we walked to his bedroom in the royal castle. He was the only son of the king’s late younger brother, so he had a right to the throne and, by extension, a room in the royal castle.

He seemed amused by our little game and curious about what I’d have him do. I asked him to take off his outerwear, which was heavily decorated. He obeyed, revealing his shirt. I then ordered him to lay down on his bed.

“Serafina, it’s not even evening yet.” He did as I asked, climbing into bed, but gave a pointed glare toward the window and the sunbeams streaming through it. I slapped a blanket over him anyway.

“Listen up! You’ve been working yourself too hard. But by the time you realize just how fatigued you actually are, your health will have caught up to you! Just pretend you’re being tricked by me or something and close your eyes. Your tired body will realize its state on its own and do the rest for you.”

“You can be quite high-handed from time to time. And your imagination is rather rich. The notion that I’m tired at all is just a hypothesis of yours, isn’t it?”

“You’re not going to get any sleep done complaining like that, Sirius! Now, close those eyes! Chop chop!”

When I saw his schedule yesterday, I was able to see he only had office work for the entirety of the afternoon. Since it was just paperwork, there was a decent chance it could be put off for at least a day. At the very least, someone

else should be able to do it. Everyone was always relying on him, but if he gave out to fatigue, then the work would just end up in their hands in the end anyway, so what was the difference if they did his work for him now?

I looked down at him, absolutely determined to not budge an inch. “If your health gives out because you’ve been pushing yourself, I’ll abandon all my Great Saint duties to nurse you back to full health—no matter how much trouble that causes everyone! That’s something you should want to avoid at all costs as captain of my royal guard, right? Then you better do as I say and rest up.”

He heard me out quietly but laughed when I finished, like I’d said something funny. “Having you do nothing but stay by my side...doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Huh?” Now I was flustered. I certainly hadn’t expected that. “S-Sirius, are you okay? That’s where you’re supposed to say, ‘I can’t have any of that now, I better do what Serafina says and sleep.’ Don’t tell me...are you so exhausted that you can’t think straight?”

Worried, I touched my hand to his forehead to check for fever and pulled the blanket up to his neck. His laughter subsided, and he pulled my arm.

“Huh?” Just like that, I fell onto the bed beside him. “S-Sirius?”

“I want *you* to take a breather just as much as you want me to. This works out for you, doesn’t it? What better place to make sure I rest then from up close?” He grinned mischievously.

*Goodness, I thought, exasperated. I suppose even grown men remain children at heart.*

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid to sleep alone at your age! Or, um...was my offer...too tempting...for you...to resist...?” I wanted to try and say something witty, but the softness of the bed made me realize just how tired I was.

So I, uh. Well, I fell asleep mid-sentence.

“Serafina? Hey, you know I was joking about you watching me from up close, right? Or... You’re kidding me. You fell asleep that fast? On *my* bed?”

I heard an incredulous voice descend down from above me, but I was already floating peacefully away from consciousness. Feeling something warm next to

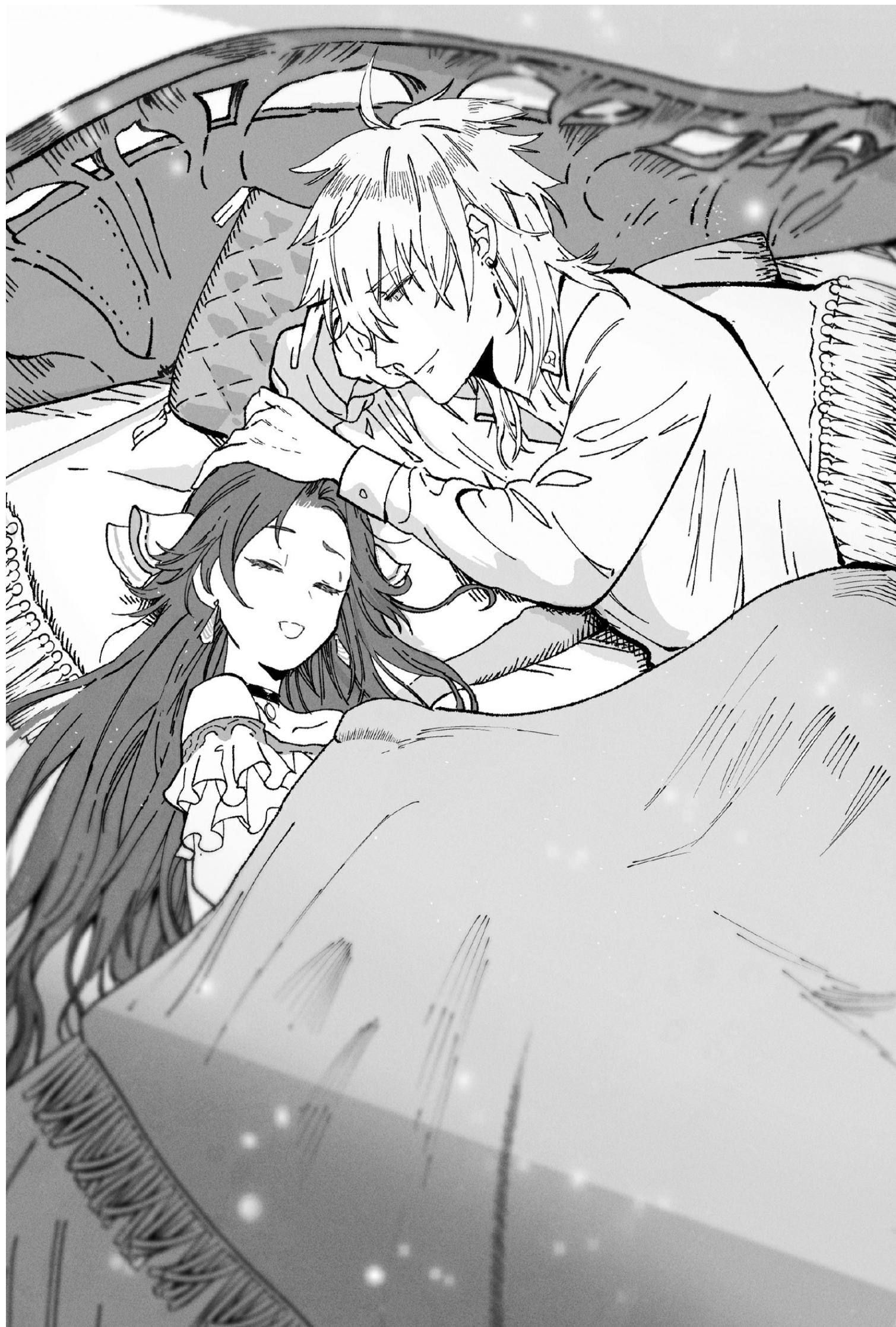
me, I hugged and rubbed my cheek against it. But it wasn't soft like I thought it'd be, so I grumbled, "Why are you so hard..."

"Um, I'm sorry? Sheesh..." the blanket complained. Its voice sounded a lot like my most trusted knight, so I laughed in my dream.

"...rius...I want you by my side forever."







The stiff blanket heaved a heavy sigh. In a defeated voice, it said, “I want to hear you say those words while awake, Serafina.” The talking blanket gently patted my head, helping me drift off into even deeper sleep.

I slept soundly through the night, waking up the next morning. As I turned my head around in bed I met eyes with Sirius, who was in a shirt on his sofa.

“Morning, Serafina. I take it you found my bed comfortable?”

“Uhh...” Oops. I’d monopolized his whole bed last night.

Sirius, who clearly slept on the sofa, propped himself up and gave me a side glance. “I wonder, are you awake enough to have a little chat right now?”

His tone was no different from usual, but after so many years of knowing each other, I knew when I was in for it. *This is going to be another one of his “endless” scoldings...*

I glanced outside. The sky was bright, so it must’ve been early morning...which meant there was ample time for his “little chat” to stretch on. Sensing the danger, I silently gauged the distance between us, then got up and bolted for the door—but he easily caught me with his arm.

“S-Sirius...”

Before I knew it, I was back on the bed with my arms and legs pinned down by him like a butterfly on display in a specimen box. I didn’t feel crushed or anything though, so he was probably making an effort to be gentle.

He looked directly down at me without a word, the sheer intensity in his gaze sending a shiver up my spine. The way he stared at me from so close drove home just how tight his guard was. He wasn’t the proud captain of my Royal Guard for show; nothing could slip past him. Understanding there was nothing I could do, I gave in.

*Ah... I guess I have no choice but to take the scolding,* I thought, relaxing my body. Seeing this, he gave a deep sigh for some reason. Wondering what was wrong, I looked up at him, confused.

His eyes narrowed in thought. “I can’t believe the first thing you worry about

in a situation like this is being scolded at length. That alone is worthy of a scolding.”

“What?! I have to sit through *two* scoldings now?!”

My outburst seemed to dig me into an even deeper hole as his rarely shown, beautiful smile made an appearance. “Let’s talk, Serafina.” I recognized those words—this wasn’t going to be quick.

He pulled me up by the arm and sat me on the sofa. I was made to sit through his endless scolding until the maid came in with breakfast.

Incidentally, the topic of his “talk” involved two things: being more self-aware as a lady and how that played into being more careful where I slept, and the potential dangers that could befall a lady on the bed.

After I was well and thoroughly scolded, we ate breakfast. While eating though, he stopped and looked at me like he had something to say. Thinking he might resume where he’d left off, I jumped to defend myself. “Sirius, you don’t need to be *that* worried for me. As a woman of age, I am well aware of the dangers a lady faces.”

“Is that right?” he countered, clearly unconvinced.

Offended, I continued. “Trust me a little, will you? The only reason I didn’t push you off earlier is because I don’t consider you a danger.”

“As in...you don’t believe I’d do anything untoward to a lady?”

“No, no,” I sighed. “I’m saying I trust you enough to be fine with whatever you might do.”

He froze stone-still at my words. His knife and fork remained in his hands, floating over his plate, but he didn’t so much as twitch.

“Uh, hello? Oh no, did I accidentally cast petrification magic or something?” I joked deadpan, putting a hand to my cheek in a ditzy manner. Even at that though, he didn’t move so much as a finger. “Er...Sirius?” I started to worry and drew closer to his face, only for him to abruptly turn away.

“Serafina...I beg of you, think of my heart a little.”

“Huh? Uh...all right.” I didn’t have a clue what he meant, but he seemed totally out of it, so I just agreed without joking around any further.

He covered his face with both hands and took a deep, deep sigh. Very softly, he said, “No, I take it back. Just remain as you have been.”

“Did...something good happen or something? You seem oddly happy.”

He slid his fingers out of the way to reveal only his eyes, a gentle light flickering in them as he gazed at me. “You’ve always been like this, so unconditionally accepting of me. You know...I heard some interesting words as you drifted off into sleep last night. If I seem in a good mood right now, that is surely why.”

I suppose that made sense. I didn’t recall saying anything of note this morning, so whatever had him so happy must’ve been from last night.  
*Whatever it was...good job, Sleepy Me!*

Seeing him left so happy just from some sleep talk warmed my heart a little. It was rather cute of him! In the end, it seemed like he got some good sleep out of this as well, so I could confidently jot my “Tempt Sirius into Bed” plan down as a resounding success. As for whether or not I would use the plan again—that was a secret for me and the heavens alone.

## Side Story: Fia, Captain for a Day

**“I** WAS HOPING you could be captain for a day.”

I hurried to Cyril’s office after being summoned by him, only for him to say the darndest thing, smiling radiantly the whole time.

“What? Me? Captain?” I blinked a few times. Naturally, I was flummoxed.

At this point, I was wise enough to already be on max alert. I knew from experience that whenever he said something confusing with a smile on his face, he was nine times out of ten trying to get me wrapped up in something troublesome.

“Yes,” he continued, his smile never fading, “just for a day. We have a yearly event where we have a new recruit experience the duties of a captain for a day to instill awareness and betterment throughout the brigade. Whatever new recruit is chosen for the entrance ceremony exhibition match is again chosen for this.”

“Wh-what?! That exhibition match was trouble enough, but now I have to be captain for a day?! That’s just unfair!”

I complained. Having to fight against the commander of the Knight Brigades, Saviz, for the exhibition match was more than enough for a hazing, if you ask me. At the time, I did what I was told like a good recruit, but fighting him was genuinely terrifying. Even after using magic to buff myself, Saviz was still many times stronger than me. “Commander Saviz was more terrifying than a black dragon! You shouldn’t force an opponent like that on a new recruit! You were there yourself; you should remember what it was like for me!”

“I was there, yes, but as I recall, you were quite proactive in attacking the Commander. Also, the black dragon isn’t something you fear, so what you mean by ‘more terrifying than a black dragon’ is unclear.” He refuted my words easily, bringing his handsome face closer to me. Then, as though sharing a secret, he

whispered. “Don’t go spreading this around, but we actually have trouble every year deciding what brigade to assign the captain-for-a-day to. All the brigades are terribly busy and don’t want to take on extra work, you see. But *this* year alone has been different—every brigade asked to be assigned you.”

I saw his smile and narrowed my eyes in suspicion. “*Every* brigade, huh? Even Captain Desmond’s?” I just couldn’t see Desmond, the captain of the Second Knight Brigade in charge of protecting the royal castle, requesting me.

“Ah...” Cyril trailed off for a moment, caught in his white lie. “Come to think of it, I think Desmond was the only one who *didn’t* request you.”

“Of course. Let me guess, he said something along the lines of ‘Don’t you *dare* assign me Fia Ruud. She causes me enough work already! I’d have to be a fool to let her make me even busier!’ Am I right?”

“That’s...quite the imagination you have. He did in fact say something along those lines. But truly, every other captain did ask for you. That’s why, for the first time ever, we have decided to have you attend a different brigade in the morning than in the afternoon.”

“Wait, what?”

“After a strict and fair lottery system, it’s been decided that you will be working as Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade captain in the morning and Sixth Knight Brigade captain in the afternoon.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

That meant I’d be working with Quentin and Zackary, respectively. I could only foresee disaster with either of them.

“As things will be busy for you after your First Knight Brigade recruit training finishes, we’ve decided to hold this event sooner than later, specifically three days from now. A captain’s uniform will be prepared for you, so look forward to that.”

After a rather one-sided conversation where he dumped all that info, he gave me a refreshing smile and chased me out of the room.

In the blink of an eye, three days passed and the day came.

I dressed myself in an all-white captain's uniform. They went so far as to even prepare a dark-green sash for me, which I donned with care. I checked myself out in the mirror.

*Wow, I look weird. Wait, maybe this is some kind of prank? Yeah, that'd make sense. I can't see why else they'd allow a new recruit to wear a captain's uniform.*

I looked myself over again, but the feeling I was wearing borrowed clothes just wouldn't go away. At this point, though, what could I do? I sighed heavily, then opened the door to my room like a prisoner heading to my execution.

"Miss Fia, I have come to receive you!"

The instant I opened the door, a knight appeared saying my name.

"Huh? Captain Quentin? What're you doing here?"

Emotionally, he grabbed my hands. "The captain's uniform of my brigade looks wonderful on you! I dare say you should wear it for the rest of eternity! I'll convince Cyril to let you remain captain of my brigade forever, so please, feel free to keep wearing that uniform!"

Part of me was sure he was joking, but this *was* Quentin we were talking about. Hence, I wisely ignored what he said outright and just politely smiled. "I'll be in your care for half a day then, Captain Quentin. What will you have me do?"

"A most brilliant question! I have spent the last three days doing nothing but pondering that very question."

*What a weird thing to say. Don't you have work to do as a captain?*

"After much consideration," he continued, "I have prepared a suitable schedule for you. Firstly, allow us to return to the captain's office."

Relieved to hear something relatively normal coming from him, I followed Quentin to his office. Upon stepping foot in it, however, I was appalled. "Eek?! Wh-what happened to this room?!" The interior had changed completely since I last visited. Many of Zavilia's scales were displayed on one wall, and a side table

showcased Zavilia's horn. The office desk was crowded tight with wooden statuettes of monsters. "I-I remember the room being normal when I last came. Why does it look like a children's toy box now?!"

"The monster puppet you created inspired me," said Quentin gleefully, "so I took to making monster crafts of my own. As for the room itself, I simply wished to decorate with the items of your wondrous Black Dragon King. Being able to be constantly surrounded by monster-related items is such a wonderful feeling, and I owe it all to you, Miss Fia."

*Oh dear...* It seemed as though I had opened some sort of floodgate for him, allowing him to do weird things with his room. As he was a captain, few could reprimand him for being so outrageous. Perhaps the duty fell on me to amend his ways...

He smiled delightfully at me and led me to a chair. "Please, have a seat, *Captain Fia*." He then whispered as though saying something important. "I removed my sash, meaning I am presently nothing more than your very own personal vice-captain."

I looked him over again and realized he was, indeed, wearing the white captain's uniform without the sash—that is, dressed like a vice-captain. I felt a terrible sense of foreboding but gingerly sat down in the chair regardless. As soon as I did, he began to laud me.

"Wonderful, Captain Fia! The form with which you take your seat is truly befitting that of captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade! Never have I seen a chair suit someone so well!"

I could swear he was mocking me. When I checked myself out in the mirror earlier, there wasn't a single thing about me that looked captain-like. Plus, the chair didn't fit me in the slightest—my feet didn't even reach the ground.

Still, as a regular knight, it'd be wrong to talk back to a captain. So, I said nothing and tacitly accepted his praise. I totally didn't stay silent because I thought it'd be a pain to try and get through to Quentin, no. Perish the thought.

I spent a horrendous morning with Quentin. No matter how minor what I said



or did was, he heaped praise onto me for it. Even worse was that the other knights in the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade followed suit and heaped on the praise as well. Quite the opposite treatment from my last visit, I suppose.

I was getting more than slightly uncomfortable over how they praised every banal little thing I did, though. “Um, I completely understand that I’m just an outsider to you all, so if I do something that breaks your brigade’s rules, feel free to point it out for me, okay?”

The knights just got flustered, though, and shook their heads. One said, “Please, don’t say such a thing! We are proud to have you as our captain! Back when we were looking for the Black King in Starfall Forest, we all saw how our own familiars ignored us, their masters, to obey your orders! We think there must be something special about you that allows you to command any familiar!”

“Wait, what?”

“The thing is, we still haven’t figured out what this special thing might be. So please, allow us to observe you from your side for the entirety of the day so we might figure it out!”

I received similar requests throughout the morning, and before I knew it, a whole crowd of knights were following me around.

Oh, and for what it’s worth, the “special thing” that allowed me to order around other people’s familiar was the fact that I was a saint...not that I could tell anyone that. None of the people following me around were likely to become saints at this point in their life either, so there really wasn’t much good observing me up close would do for them. Oh well.

In the end, I gave in and plastered a smile on my face, praying I could at least get through the trials and tribulations of the morning without anything *too* terrible happening.

As an aside, the worst of the morning’s trials and tribulations was when we went to the familiar stables as planned on Quentin’s schedule. The moment the

familiars laid eyes on me, they began kicking up a fuss, nuzzling up against me while making soft, wheedling purrs.

“O-oh my,” I said. “They must be mistaking me for Captain Quentin because of the white uniform. Heh heh! Captain Quentin sure is loved, isn’t he?”

Not a single person agreed with me, however. Far from it: Everyone looked at me with disbelief in their eyes and began saying outrageous things.

“Whoa, the familiars really are fawning up to Captain Fia like everyone said they would...”

“Aaagh! My beloved familiar, who swore to love only me, is shaking their paw with Captain Fia! *Whyyyyyy?!?*”

“There’s no way these familiars would mistake Captain Fia for Captain Quentin! Just look at her—she’s half his height!”

From behind them, Quentin emotionally clenched his fists. “I would expect no less from you, Miss Fia!” he cried. “You truly are fit to be captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade!”

The eyes of the knights went wide with realization. They stared at me in a state of shock. “This explains everything...Captain Fia truly is a legendary monster tamer!”

“I am *not!*” I exclaimed. I proceeded to scold them all for running their mouths as they pleased. This, perhaps, was the most meaningful thing I achieved as their captain for the day.

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I was already exhausted as though I’d worked a full day, but the sun had only just hit its peak. My troubles were far from over—I still had to work under Zackary for the afternoon. I sighed, slumped my shoulders, and trudged to Zackary’s office.

“Yo, Captain Fia! Looking forward to having you, but don’t go too hard on me now!” The moment I cracked the door open, Zackary’s spirited voice welcomed me. He gave a cheerful laugh and took off his sash, then handed it to me.

Each brigade used a different color sash. The one I wore in the morning was a

brand-new one made for me, but I had to borrow the second one, which was more economically sound, I suppose. I took the dark-brown sash Zackary offered and wore it diagonally across myself...but it went all the way down to my knees.

“Yikes!” said Zackary bluntly. He was always rather frank, but after being showered to death by compliments over with the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade, his bluntness felt all the more brutal.

As I couldn’t suddenly sprout up a couple of feet to make the sash fit, I decided to pretend nothing was wrong and moved things along, beginning by asking what duties I had.

He grinned and plopped his big hand on top of my head. “Just go spend some time with my knights. I’m sure they’d like that too.”

“Huh?”

“I can tell you’ve been busy lately. Despite already having your plate full with your First Knight Brigade recruit training, you’ve been dispatched to the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade, as well as sent to Cyril’s domain. You really deserve a break, but I bet you haven’t been able to take a proper one with all that training they force on you. So why not take that break with us, away from Cyril’s prying eyes?”

“C-Captain Zackary!” I was moved. So this was the real reason he asked for me? *Captain Zackary...what a chivalrous man you are!* I swore to forever be on Team Zackary and made my way to their training grounds as he suggested.

Thirty minutes later, I was sunbathing on a bench in the corner of the training grounds zoning out and watching the knights kick up dust as they practiced.

“Ahh, feeling the sun’s sizzling rays sure makes me feel alive again! A knight like me isn’t meant to be locked up inside day in and day out learning stuff like poetry and the continental common language. Nay, a knight like me is meant to be out working in the sun! This peace is what all true warriors strive for!”

I had doubts whether what I was doing could be considered “working,” but Zackary said he’d treat it as work, so work it was.

“This is what being a knight is all about!” I continued to watch the knights earnestly cross blades as I happily bathed in warm sunlight. Eventually, however... “Aw, so close! If your step-in was just a moment faster, you’d have had them! Ahh...you’re a bit lacking in strength because of your size. Just a little more push and you would’ve got them!” Perhaps because my own fighting skills as a knight were low, I found myself sympathizing with the weaker knights out there practicing. Before I realized it, I was cheering for a smaller knight called Domenico who had racked up a number of losses. He hadn’t managed a single victory yet, but he kept challenging knights bigger than him one after another regardless. I couldn’t help but cheer the guy on.

Back when I was young, I would always lose to my brothers. It used to be my dream to one day win against one of them. *Yup, yup. Domenico is just like me when I was younger.*

(Note: Fia buffed herself with magic to beat her brothers during the admission exam, so the victory doesn’t *really* count.)

“Oh, I know! Why don’t I let Domenico experience victory once?” At that epiphany, I clapped my hands together. “I’m sure experiencing victory once will help him reproduce it! But it doesn’t seem like he’ll be able to win as is. Maybe I can make a potion to buff him? A temporary one with weak effects should be all right.”

I recalled a similar experience from my past life. Three hundred years ago, I tried to teach other saints a new way of making healing potions, but no matter how many times I showed them, they just couldn’t understand. I wondered if my teaching methods were to blame, so I simplified them and kept at it. Eventually, a few people grasped what I was teaching and went on to repeat my potion-making process without any problems. Basically, if you experience a success, it becomes easier for you to repeat that success! There wasn’t much in common between potion-making and sword fighting, but this same rule should still apply.

I got up from the bench, scanned the area, and began to look for ingredients I would need for my potion. For some reason beyond me, the royal castle grounds had useful plants here and there that I could use. After gathering the necessary ingredients from the weeds around the training grounds, I went to

the basic kitchen that the Sixth Knight Brigade had.

“Meh heh heh! Everyone thinks potions and such have to be liquid just because healing potions are. Nobody realizes herbs can be kneaded into food!”

I praised my own brilliance as I kneaded herbs and mana into the dough of the cookies I was making. The trick was to not use too much mana. I only wanted Domenico to think, “Hey, have I gotten just a tad bit faster and stronger?” and nothing more. I didn’t grind the herbs down finely or anything like that, so the shape of the leaves could be seen on the surface of the cookies. A nice, charming touch, if I say so myself.

“Now, the question is how do I get *just* Domenico to eat these?” If *everyone* ate these cookies, then *everyone* would get stronger, and Domenico still wouldn’t win.

“I know! I’ll make some fakes!” I decided to make some normal cookies as well for all the other knights.

“All done!” After the cookies were finished baking, I excitedly popped open the oven and pulled them out. Sadly, it seemed the heat wasn’t evenly spread as the cookies in the middle were burnt. All the burnt cookies just so happened to also be the ones that gave buff effects, but let’s not worry about that now.

“Y’know what? This actually works in my favor as now I can tell which cookies are the buff-granting ones at a glance.”

I piled all the cookies onto a tray and returned to the training grounds.

“Heya, what’cha got there, Captain Fia?” A keen-eyed knight called out to me as I returned to the training grounds, cookies in hand.

“Cookies. I made some for everyone. Please have a few if you’d like.” I smiled, making myself look as friendly as possible as I passed out the treats. The very moment Domenico neared, I reached for the buff-granting cookies I kept on the side of the tray. “Here, Domenico!”

“Huh? Aren’t these burnt? Why am I the only one being given burnt cookies?!”

Is the captain-for-a-day trying to haze me?!” He pretended to grimace, jokingly groaning.

“Of course not!” I insisted. “These are special cookies I set aside for you. I made them while wishing you’d be able to win a spar.”

Hearing that, the other knights began to jeer.

“Oh, those are *special* cookies all right. I see some leaves mixed in them!”

“Wow, there really are leaves in them! And the cookies are even a little green! I guess it’s a small mercy you can’t really tell because they’re burnt.”

As the other knights teased, Domenico took one of the buff-granting cookies and stared at it in his hand.

*D-does he not like it? Maybe he thinks I’m bullying him because it’s the only one that’s burnt and has leaves in it?* But to my surprise, he smiled at me.

“Thank you, Captain Fia! My mother out in the countryside just sent me a letter telling me to not just eat meat all day and get some veggies in! This’ll do just fine for today’s veggies!” He ate the whole burnt cookie in one bite, a weird, loud crunching sound coming from it as he chewed. After finishing it, he said it tasted great. What a guy.

Happy, I smiled at him. “You know how they make wreaths out of leaves for victorious knights? Well, I put leaves in that cookie as a good luck charm, wishing you victory.”

“Hear that, Domenico? She’s looking after you well, eh?”

“Her way of going about it is a bit odd, but you can’t let Captain Fia down after she’s gone so far for you! Show her you can win at least one sparring session!”

The other knights slapped Domenico on the back and gave him some friendly encouragement. I watched, a little heart-warmed to see how well everyone got along. I’m sure Domenico felt ready to give it his best effort again.

Nobody expected such a drastic change from Domenico. He was practically a different person; it was almost as though someone had used magic on him.

(Note: Someone had indeed used magic on him.)

His movements were a full degree faster than before, and his strength had sharply risen.

“Ack! What in the world is going on?!” The knights grimaced as Domenico unleashed powerful blow after powerful blow.

“I...I did it! I won! I won!” He smiled with joy, then turned to look at me. “Captain Fia, your leaf cookie is amazing! Thank you!”

I broadly smiled back, happy to see it was worth going through the trouble of making cookies. “You’re very welcome, Domenico! And congratulations on your victories.”

The other knights heard Domenico’s words and seemed to come to a realization. They then rushed over to me all at once.

“Captain Fia, give me some of those leaf cookies!”

“Me too! Give me one of those burnt cookies with bizarre leaves inside it!”

“O-oh, um, sure,” I said. I figured it would be okay to hand out the rest as Domenico had already experienced his victory. In no time at all, the many leftover leaf cookies were cleared out without a trace.

I suppose it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that the other knights who didn’t get leaf cookies saw the now stronger knights and came to me in droves, saying, “Captain Fia! Give us burnt cookies as well!”

I was left all flustered with an empty tray in hand, surrounded by knights. It wasn’t until Zackary eventually showed up that I was saved.

And so, my long, long day as captain came to an end. Dead tired, I slipped into bed, filled with sympathy for the captains who had to do this kind of work every day. *I’m so lucky to be an ordinary knight!* I chanted that to myself over and over in my head until I fell asleep.

Some days later, Cyril stopped me when I passed by him in the corridor. “Fia, the knights of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade have been trying to imitate you ever since you were captain for a day. Were you aware of this?”

“Huh? U-um, no, that’s news to me!” I replied, surprised.

He frowned and let out a troubled sigh. “It’s not worth getting into what exactly about you they are imitating, but they apparently think doing so will help make them become a ‘legendary monster tamer.’ Do you know why that might be?”

I looked down at my feet and quietly answered, “N-no...”

“Is that so? Incidentally, eating food with leaves mixed in appears to be the new trend in the Sixth Knight Brigade. I found this quite surprising given their carnivorous nature. Apparently, someone called the ‘Tubby Savior’ came up with the idea as a form of help for the weak...? Would you happen to know what any of that means?”

“Uh...not one clue.”

Despite my insistence that I knew nothing, Cyril kept a suspicious glare sharply locked on to me.

*Grr, it’s not fair! I put up with being captain for a day, did a completely fine job, and now I’m getting interrogated like this?! I didn’t even want to be captain for a day in the first place!* I stared at my feet for a little while longer, but eventually I reached a boiling point and shot my gaze up. “Look,” I snapped, “as captain for only one day, I was never anything more than an outsider to them! I don’t know anything about their weird customs or whatever! The only place I belong is the First Knight Brigade!”

He went bug-eyed for a moment, then smiled. “I’m glad to hear you think that. Indeed, the peculiar customs of the other brigades have nothing to do with us.”

I smiled. *Wow, I actually managed to trick him for once!*

“Forget I said anything,” he said. “It’s an unwritten rule that brigades don’t look into other brigades’ affairs in the first place.”

I nodded, more than happy to oblige.

Seeing the broad smile on my face, he made a beautiful smile of his own in return. “You truly are adorable. They say simpleminded children are all the



more endearing, but I'm afraid you might be so endearing that the other brigades will want you for themselves. I think it's best we refrain from dispatching you to the other brigades for the time being."

"Wha—hey! Did you just call me simpleminded?!"

"I would never. I was merely praising you."

I shared a normal conversation with Cyril, being both praised and teased in moderation, and felt keenly once again that the First Knight Brigade really was where I belonged.

## Side Story:

### The Rose of the Great Saint

ONE THING I've come to understand after joining the brigades is how much all the knights admire Saviz. Usually, everyone has a gripe or two about their boss, but when it comes to Saviz, I've only ever heard positive things.

"Did you see the commander yesterday?! The way his mantle fluttered in the wind as he rode his horse was so cool!"

"I know, right?!"

"Totally, totally!"

Like right now, for instance. Even something as mundane as riding a horse made the knights gush with glee.

"Forget that! Did you see him sparring with Captain Cyril earlier? I got goosebumps just seeing his sword technique!"

"Let me stop you all right there. If we're going to talk about anything, it's got to be his six-pack. It's practically a work of art! Just how much did he have to train to get so ripped?"

The knights, all fairly muscular themselves, continued to talk with stars in their eyes about how much they loved Saviz. Yeah, it was pretty cringe to watch. But I suppose I kind of get it. It's easy to adore a man with so much charisma.

As the knights continued to talk within earshot, Clarissa, the captain of the Fifth Knight Brigade, asked me a question. "Do you look up to the commander too, Fia?"

"Me? Well, no matter how much I train, I'll never physically be like him, so it's hard to say I look up to him, *per se*. But he's chivalrous, caring, considerate... He's an ideal boss."

"Is that so? I'm pretty sure you're the only one lucky enough to see him as

‘caring’ and ‘considerate,’ you know.”

“Hm?”

Seeing me tilt my head in confusion, she giggled. “Commander Saviz has always been charismatic and perfect in every way, but he used to be more unapproachable than he is now. I’d say the only one who could even remotely get through his walls in the past was Cyril. Nowadays however, even I can stop and chat with him.”

“So...you’ve become more experienced as a captain and are now close enough in ability to the commander to approach him? Is that what you mean?” I asked.

She giggled. “Never in a million years would I think of myself as close in ability to the commander. No, I’m saying the unapproachable feel he used to give off has eased. I think that’s thanks to you, Fia. You’re exuberant, you can be baselessly confident and optimistic, and you are a bold idealist when it comes to saints. The commander might not realize himself, but he probably likes people like you.”

I initially had a hard time parsing whether she was praising me or disparaging me with her description, but she *must’ve* been praising me if those traits were supposed to be what Saviz liked. “Thank you very much for those kind words, but I kind of doubt he likes me as much as you think. The two of us are nothing alike. He’s all strict and serious while I’m easygoing and anything *but* serious. Don’t people like people similar to themselves?”

“Not necessarily. People often find themselves with individuals similar to them because of their position and circumstances, but the real kind of people they admire might be different.”

“Oh, I see.” I nodded along.

“It’s thanks to you that the commander has finally started trusting others. While his heart hasn’t swung wide open just yet, there’s a gap big enough for us to enter. Personally, I’d like to see him take initiative and open up his heart to us further, but...maybe that’s asking for too much?” She shrugged her shoulders, not looking too worried.

I was about to reply when a knight appeared telling me Saviz himself was calling for me.

“Well, speak of the devil!” Clarissa remarked, surprised.

“A special mission, sir?” I grimaced slightly as I repeated Saviz’s words.

I had a bad feeling about this. It was weird enough that an ordinary knight like me was called up to his office. He probably had some annoying task that nobody else wanted to do and chose me, a knight without any real work as they were in training, to foist things off onto. That said, it wasn’t like I could complain...not when the commander of the whole Knight Brigades was giving the assignment. No matter what he ordered me to do, the only thing I could do was begrudgingly accept.

Saviz, ignorant of my thoughts, sat his pen down and gave me a deeply somber look. “Yes. I need you to go buy some flowers.”

“Huh? Flowers?” The image of Saviz and flowers was such a mismatch that I couldn’t help repeating his words for confirmation.

He grinned wryly as though he understood my surprise. “That’s right. To offer to the King.”

“His Majesty the King?!” I repeated back his words yet again, this time out of surprise.

*He’s asking me to buy something that’ll be presented to the kingdom’s most important person, but I haven’t even met him before. Is that okay?*

“U-um, s-so, fl-flowers, yes?” I stammered out. His explanation severely lacking in detail. I implored him with my eyes to at least explain *what* kind of flowers I should get.

He put a finger to his lips and let his gaze wander in thought. He seemed to be considering just how much he should tell me. Eventually, he said, “The King routinely offers flowers to a grave. He generally prepares the flowers himself, but this time he asked that they be prepared for him.”

“I see.”

“The grave in question...belongs to a saint. That’s why I thought you, someone who respects saints dearly, would be an ideal choice to pick out flowers for her.”

My eyes went wide. I knew the royal family treasured saints, but it was a surprise nonetheless to hear the King himself regularly offered flowers to the grave of a saint.

“I am not at all familiar with flowers,” Saviz continued, “so your selection is sure to, at the very least, be better than mine. There’s no need to overthink things; whatever flowers catch your interest will do.”

“Understood.”

He told me to bring the flowers in one month’s time. I then left the room, tightly gripping a high-value coin I received from him.

Not ten minutes later, I was walking around the royal castle garden, the shock I felt from earlier still not completely worn off. The idea that saints were so revered that the King himself regularly offered flowers to a saint’s grave was just that hard to wrap my head around. This was probably something everybody else considered common knowledge, but that only made Saviz going out of his way to mention it all the more meaningful. Being commander, he had no duty to go to such detail for a grunt like me. It was up to me to match his kindness by picking out the best possible flowers to offer to a saint,

Looking for a quiet place I could loiter around and think, I went to the eastern side of the royal castle vicinity where a green-colored natural spring was. I looked into the green waters of the spring and thought for several moments. *Hmm, just what kind of flower symbolizes a saint?* I saw my reflection and tilted my head. Back in my past life as second princess and Great Saint, the rose was my symbol. I even made sure to always wear a red one on my wrist when I went to battle. In my past life, I also planted an adela tree on my visit to Sutherland, and adela trees grew red flowers. In other words, red flowers were a common symbol to represent saints three hundred years ago. But that was only because red was believed to be the best color for a saint, as saints were considered to be more gifted the more their hair color resembled blood. Would a red flower

be appropriate still?

“It’d help to know what color hair the saint the grave belonged to had, but it didn’t look like Commander Saviz was keen to go into much detail. Actually, giving saints a red flower is considered a sign of respect, so I should be okay with a red flower regardless.”

The moment I came to that conclusion, an epiphany struck me.

“I know! I’ll give them some of my roses!”

My rose, the Rose of the Great Saint, was a bit special. I was the only one who could make them three hundred years ago. Hence, being able to receive one was considered an honor greater than any other for a saint.

“But...are any of my roses still left?”

The petals of my rose were a bit unique because I grew the flower while pouring magic into it. The process was rather simple. I took this one specific breed of rose and poured magic into it every day until the buds bloomed.

“Even if there are some left, they’d look like any other rose by now. I have to find that one specific breed if I want to make more of my roses again.”

I stood up and headed for the southern side of the royal castle vicinity.

“There might still be some of the same variety around where I used to grow these roses. They should be in bloom year-round. I hope it’s not too hard to find them.”

I arrived at the spot only to find the place was now home to some brigade’s men’s dormitory.

“Bah! So it’s come to this, huh?!”

*Fine. Fine!* I thought. Even I had to admit that a place where hardworking knights could rest for the day was more vital than some rose garden.

Just to be sure, I did a lap around the men’s dormitory, but I didn’t spot anything resembling a rose. I slumped my shoulders and walked along for a while when Zackary passed by and called out to me.

“Hey, Fia. Lookin’ for something?”

“Captain Zackary!” I said. “Yes, I’m looking for some roses.”

“Roses? What’s that? Can’t say I’ve heard of those before.”

*You’re kidding me*, I thought, recoiling a little. I suppose men as manly as Zackary didn’t know what roses, the most popular of all flowers, were. “Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s not food, so I doubt it’ll ever be a word you need to learn.”

From behind Zackary, Gideon—the vice-captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade—spoke up gingerly. “Um, you might be able to find some roses to the northeast of the royal castle, Miss Fia.”

“Huh?” I was shocked, plain and simple, that a man even more rugged-looking than Zackary knew what roses were. Then again, I’d heard some time ago that Gideon had named his familiar “Rose.” Maybe he was secretly a flower fan?

I thanked Gideon and made my way to the place he described.

To prevent crossbreeding, the Rose of the Great Saint was the only rose allowed to be planted around the royal castle three hundred years ago. I doubted that rule was still in effect to this day, but I held high hopes and searched anyway. Eventually, I came across some flowering roses with light-green petals—just the variety of rose I was looking for.

“I-I really found some!” My eyes shot wide. I examined it over and over from every angle imaginable, making sure I wasn’t just seeing things—but no, this was the one! Feeling a surge of glee, I shouted “Yahoo!” three times in a row.

Looking carefully, there wasn’t just one rose but a whole row of them! There were no weeds nearby, so someone had to be maintaining the place. Whoever that was would probably be shocked to find their roses had suddenly changed color, so I instead found some roses that hadn’t budded yet and poured my magic into them.

From that day forward, visiting the northeast side of the royal castle vicinity to pour magic into the roses became part of my daily routine.

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One month after receiving my mission from Saviz, I triumphantly made my way back to his office. My spirits were high as the first batch of red roses had just bloomed. I had plucked them all and ended up with a bundle of around a dozen that I carried with me. My visit to Saviz's office seemed to be well timed as I was allowed straight in with no wait.

"From the look on your face, I take it you were able to find some flowers to your liking?" He gave me an inquiring look from across his desk.

I grinned and held out the flowers I'd brought. "Yes, sir. I brought some red roses."

"That's...impossible." The moment he laid eyes on the roses, he made a face and stood up from his chair. He walked around his desk and stooped low to examine the flowers, seeing how the petals gleamed. He then stood up and frowned gravely. "Fia, just where did you find these flowers? They bear a striking resemblance to what I know of the Rose of the Great Saint."

"Whoa!" I exclaimed.

*That's because they are Roses of the Great Saint*, I almost wanted to say. It was incredible that he was so spot-on; just how knowledgeable was he? Regardless, admitting they were Roses of the Great Saint would end badly for me, so I decided to act like I found them as is.

"Uhh, well, I looked around a few flower stores, but I couldn't find any flowers I was happy with. So, I thought maybe I'd take a different approach and look within the castle walls. While I was looking, I found these red roses in the corner of a garden and just knew they'd be perfect."

At that moment, I realized I had done something terrible. I wanted to yelp out of shock but quickly covered my mouth with both hands to stop myself, wide-eyed.

Saviz noticed something was off with me and urged me to talk. "What's wrong? Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"C-Commander, what do I do?! I took flowers from the royal castle area without asking permission!"

"Hm? Ah...there's nothing wrong with that. Nobody will fault you simply for



picking flowers.”

“Really? Th-thank goodness. I thought I was going to get scolded again...” I breathed a sigh of relief, then heard a weary sigh come from across the desk.

“So you just *happened* to find these flowers by chance? It’s a wonder how nobody else has found them before you with how distinctive they are.”

He had a point. The petals of these roses were visibly different from normal roses. They looked almost like cut gems, glistening with radiance. *Heh heh, but they don’t just look good! They’re useful as well.* If one drank tea made from these petals, they’d gain a variety of positive effects.

“The way these shimmer in the light does bring to mind the Rose of the Great Saint mentioned in the forbidden tome,” Saviz muttered to himself, “but that flower was supposed to have died out three hundred years ago. Why has it reappeared...?”

He stared at me thoughtfully, making me tense up. Keeping up my best poker face, I said, “I’m sure it’s a coincidence! Surely these roses only *resemble* the Rose of the Great Saint.”

“You don’t seem to understand the significance of this.” He hunched down and got on one knee.

“Wha—Commander?!”

“I am humbled to receive these precious flowers from you.” With a serious expression, he accepted the roses from me.

*Oh, I see, I thought. He’s paying respect to the flowers. Even though they’re just ordinary old plants, it becomes a big deal because they have “Great Saint” in their name. Phew, that surprised me.*

He stood up and placed his big hand on my head. “You always seem to somehow do the unthinkable. Perhaps I should take greater care when asking things of you from now on,” he said, seemingly more to himself.

“Huh?”

“The King and I will deliberate on what to do with these flowers. Well done, Fia. You’ve performed admirably.”

Happy to be praised, a smile came naturally. “Thank you very much for your kind words!” I then remembered the money I’d received. “Oh right, let me return this coin to you, Commander. In the end, I didn’t need it.”

I pulled the sparkly coin out of my pocket and held it out to him, but he balled my hand back into a fist, resting his hand over mine. “I can’t possibly take that from you. It would’ve been far easier for you to buy flowers, yet you took the effort to search and found something wonderful because of it. Hmm...how about you take that and use it to go enjoy a meal with some friends instead?”





“Huh? Is that really okay?”

“I’ll allow it. Besides, that comes from the coffers of the King. Going through the effort of returning it to him would be rather odd. Oh, and I know I just said I’d take greater care when asking things of you, but...please, don’t go pulling some unthinkable feat again as you dine out.” He gave me a playful, teasing smile. In other words, he was the same as ever.

I promised to be on my best behavior, then left his office.

On my way back from Saviz’s office, I bumped into Clarissa in the corridor.

“Fancy meeting you here, Fia. On business?”

“Yes, I just gave Commander Saviz some roses.”

“You gave the commander what now?” At that, she’d come to a complete halt. Understandable, given how much of a mismatch Saviz and flowers were. Anyone would find it strange, really.

“Uhh, some of the details might be top secret, so I’ll have to omit them, but I was basically asked to buy some flowers by the commander. I finished delivering them just now.” After saying all that, I realized how light on details I was. Yeah, there was no way this’d make sense to her at all...

But perhaps I should’ve expected more from a captain—Clarissa nodded with complete understanding. “I see. The commander wouldn’t need flowers for himself, which means the task was pushed onto him by another. The only one in the kingdom capable of ordering him around is His Majesty the King himself, who would need the flowers for offering to a saint’s grave.”

“W-wow, you nailed it!” I said, wide-eyed. I didn’t think it was possible for her to construct such a full picture from the pieces I’d provided.

Her pretty eyes widened with surprise. “Wait, really? I mean, that was the only possible conclusion I saw, but I got it?”

“Yes.”

She gave me a long, hard look. “Hmm...you really are special to the

commander, aren't you? You might not see what you did as anything more than preparing flowers, but that was a request from His Majesty the King himself. The commander I've known until now would never entrust such a task to another, and yet he did just that—not to Cyril or Desmond, but to *you*. He sees something special in you, Fia."

"S-surely you're exaggerating a bit?"

"Not at all. What you did really is such a big deal. And to think we were talking not too long ago about how it'd be nice if he opened up his heart some more! What a surprise this is—a pleasant one, of course. This is good for both the commander and the Brigades." She smiled. "You're the breath of fresh air we needed, Fia. The commander is finally beginning to change, all thanks to you."

I had to disagree. I'd never once thought of Saviz as closed off. Him growing more comfortable with ordering me around was just a natural result of him becoming more familiar with me as my boss. I shook my head. "I personally don't think I'm getting any special treatment or anything from him. The commander is friendly toward all his subordinates and trusts us all enough to give us tasks."

"Again, I'm pretty sure you're the only one lucky enough to see him that way," she murmured.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"No, it's...nothing. I was just thinking about how nice it is that we can work under someone like Commander Saviz."

"Oh, yeah. We're real lucky, huh?" I was in complete agreement with Clarissa. Saviz really was an ideal boss!

Incidentally, the high-value coin I received from Saviz was used up in only one night of dining out with Desmond, Zackary, and Gideon.

"You're kidding me. That money could buy enough food for twenty people," I said in blank amazement at the sheer appetite knights had. But perhaps this was to be expected.

In my heart, I swore to never again invite those three to dinner.

As for how I'd catch the King's attention and get tangled up in all kinds of stuff...we'll get there soon enough.

## Side Story: A Gift from Fia

Quentin, Captain of the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade

**F**ROM THE CRACK OF DAWN, my familiar had been oddly restless. They were typically as calm as could be, aloof even, but today they couldn't stop nervously eyeing the sky. I wondered if the weather was going to take a turn, but the clouds didn't seem particularly heavy. I concluded my familiar must just be having an off day, finished my day's work, and began preparing to leave for the day. That was when I heard a spirited set of footsteps making their way down the corridor.

"Miss Fia?!" I exclaimed, thinking I recognized those footsteps. I swung my door open, dearly hoping it was her—and it was. The knight I had been wanting to meet more than anyone stood just beyond the doorway, looking up at me.

"It's been too long, Captain Quentin!" she said. "Were you heading out just now?"

"Miss Fia! I am delighted to see you've returned from Blackpeak Mountain safe and sound!" I swiftly approached her and took her hands in mine. I quickly looked her up and down, confirming she was both in sound health and without injury. Kurtis must have protected her well. I looked back at her face and saw she was smiling broadly.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Captain Quentin. Has everything been all right in the royal capital?"

"Of course not! How could it be? The familiars in the stables have been lifeless since you left, and I've been so terribly lonely."

"Huh? You've been *lonely*?" She blinked a few times in confusion, so I elaborated.

"Of course! We constantly make new discoveries about familiars when you are around, so every moment without you feels like an eternity! I so deeply



missed your presence!”

“Oh, so that’s what you meant,” she said, understanding. Her eyes then began to shine with an impish gleam. “Since you were already on your way out, why don’t we walk together a bit? It’d be a good chance for me to give you your gift from Blackpeak Mountain.”

“Gift?!” Oh, but of course! Fia had promised me a special gift. “Miss Fia, I have spent this past month striving to be nothing short of excellent in order to accept your gift with pride! I haven’t complained once! Not when Cyril asked me to guard some nobles, not when Desmond asked me to send some familiars to keep lookout over the castle from above, and not when Clarissa asked me to buy some freshly baked bread for her from a popular store! Even knowing it was beyond the requirements of my job, I did it all!”

“Th-that’s, uh... I hope Captain Clarissa really enjoyed her bread...?” Fia replied, seeming to choose her words carefully. She recollected herself and smiled. “Hee hee! Maybe the reason the Knight Brigades can function so smoothly is thanks to all your hard work behind the scenes. All that effort I put into my gift was worth it!”

Together, we walked down the corridor and eventually left the building. As soon as we stepped out, something resembling a black bird began to fly toward Fia. If Desmond were here, he’d think it was a bird scorched black and comment on how it saved him time arriving half-cooked, but I was not so daft—I recognized the monster.

“Th-the Black Dragon King!” I bolted upright, my posture perfect, and took in the black dragon’s beautiful form. All living creatures sought to create offspring and improve their species with every generation, but the black dragon had no need for a mate. He was already perfection.

I stared in blank amazement at his magnificence as he drifted near and onto Fia’s shoulder. As he had made himself smaller, I could capture his entire figure at a single glance. He typically disguised himself as another monster while at this size, so this was the first time I was seeing his true scaled-down form. At his normal size, he was too big to take in at once. How lucky I was to see all of his sublime figure without missing a thing! Truly, what a wonderful gift!

“M-Miss Fia, I cannot thank you enough for bringing the Black Dragon King back with you! This is a more wonderful gift than I could have possibly imagined! I am deeply moved to be able to see his scaled-down form in the flesh without his usual Blue Dove disguise!”

To my surprise, Fia corrected me on that. “Er, I just brought Zavilia back as a friend. He isn’t your gift or anything.”

“Huh?”

“Your gift is something else.” As though it were a prearranged signal, she raised a hand high.

*But just seeing the Black Dragon King is enough of a gift for me*, I thought, when suddenly I spotted something red from the corner of my eye. Sunset was just setting in, painting a side of the sky red, but a particular part of that red sky was defined and approached fast. By the time I realized what it was, the thing—a griffon with plumage the color of scarlet flames—had already landed before me.

*It’s beautiful! Just so...beautiful!* I felt what vocabulary I had disappear, only the word beautiful coming to mind. Awed and confused, I looked to Fia.

She happily spread her hands in the air. “Ta-dah! We brought a griffon along as your gift! This one might be your familiar’s mate!”

“Whuh?” I said, struck dumb. Fia smiled with no ill will at all. She clearly had no idea this was far, far beyond what one would typically call a gift. I gave up trying to think and instead put a hand over my pounding heart. “Miss Fia, may I ask what this griffon is for?”

“I was thinking maybe we could introduce it to your familiar and see if they want to pair up.”

“Oh. Yes, yes, I see.” Having given up on thinking, I just went along with what she suggested. Together, we made for the familiar stables.

I was already certain that the scarlet griffon would not take my familiar as a mate. As the difference was minute to her, Fia likely hadn’t noticed the scarlet griffon was actually a mutated variant that was far stronger than an ordinary griffon. A normal griffon was an A-rank monster, but this mutated griffon was

undoubtedly S-rank. I can see the difference from its very aura. But even putting that issue aside, there was still *that* to consider...

The moment we introduced it to my familiar, the scarlet griffon looked away with disinterest.

“H-huh?” Fia said, flustered. “W-wait, but I thought you liked my hair accessory? Wasn’t that because the feathers came from your mate? Please, take another look at this beautiful, golden griffon! Don’t you feel your heart race at all?!”

I looked at the accessory in her hair, made from three of my familiar’s feathers, and formed a guess as to how her misunderstanding had formed. Fia must have thought the scarlet griffon was interested in the hair accessory, but in actuality the griffon was interested in her similarly scarlet-red hair and the incredible aura around her.

“It seems this scarlet griffon wasn’t my familiar’s mate after all,” I said. “This scarlet griffon is a female, by the way. You can tell from the white plumage at the end of their tails. Incidentally, my griffon is female as well.”

“Wait, what?!” Her eyes went wide with disbelief. “Th-they’re both female?! No way...” She fell to her knees, covering her face with both hands. To the black dragon on her shoulder, she asked, “Z-Zavilia, what do I do?”

With great care, the black dragon replied, **“I see two options available: Go through the effort of bringing this griffon back to the Giza Ravine, or have it looked after here. Oh, and just so you know, making it your familiar isn’t on the table.”**

“R-right. But I don’t think Captain Cyril would approve of giving me more vacation time to take this griffon back, and we can’t just let it go back alone because it’ll be dangerous to have it go through so many other monsters’ territories...” Fia murmured more to convince herself, then looked at me like she wanted something.

The moment I saw her expression, I sensed that something incredibly troubling was coming. “W-wait, Miss Fia! I get the feeling what you’re about to

say is going to change my life. Let's all just calm down first and—"

Ignoring my words completely, she said, "Captain Quentin, would you be willing to make this monster your familiar?"

*"Excuse me?!"*

I couldn't wrap my head around her request. The only way to make a monster your familiar was to show your strength and prove you were worthy to be its master. This scarlet griffon was immeasurably stronger than me; it would never accept me as its master.

"I'm honored, Miss Fia, but this griffon would never consent to being my familiar."

"Well, we don't know that for certain until we ask," she said. "Before that, though, I want to know how you and your familiar feel about the matter. Would you be okay with this scarlet griffon as your familiar?"

"O-of course! If such a miracle occurred, I'd be overjoyed! Griffons are creatures that live in packs, so I'm sure my familiar would be similarly delighted."

For confirmation, Fia looked at my familiar and received a shrill cry of agreement. She then turned to face the scarlet griffon and said in an apologetic tone, "I'm sorry for bringing you all the way out here without even thinking to check if you were male or female in the first place. Captain Quentin's familiar wasn't your mate in the end, but it can still be your friend, right? Why not try living here for the time being? But if you want to return to the Giza Ravine instead, I don't mind accompanying you. I'll have to figure out how to get some time off, but...I'll manage it!"

*No, no, allow me the honor of escorting it back!* I thought greedily.

The scarlet griffon smiled, then opened its mouth for the first time. **"Oh my. I figured the master of the Black Dragon would be a rather high-handed sort, but you're surprisingly considerate."**

"Whuh? Th-the griffon just talked?!" Fia's eyes shot wide.

The black dragon shook his head with exasperation toward his master. **"Of**

course. It'd be stranger if an S-rank mutated griffon couldn't talk. And in case you didn't realize, Zoil could talk as well. He just tries not to out of stubbornness."

"Wait, Zoil?! Really?!" Fia exclaimed, then sunk into silence out of shock.

The scarlet griffon smiled. **"Ha ha! What a lively place this is. I get the impression I can take my mind off things here. I actually already have a mate, but they passed away recently. To be honest, I was thinking of moving my nest to get away from all the sad memories I have of them in the Giza Ravine. It would help, too, to have a safer place to live. Yes, this timing lines up well. I'll take you up on your offer and live here for the time being."**

"What?!" I exclaimed. Only I seemed particularly surprised, however.

Fia instead wore a broad smile. "That's wonderful! It'd be good if you had a guardian to look after you while you're here, though. Captain Quentin is the master of that golden griffon, so maybe you'd like to make a familiar pact with him too?"

*Yeah, right.* There was no way the scarlet griffon would want to be my familiar. The gap between us was just too big. "Miss Fia, I don't think—"

**"That would be acceptable,"** the scarlet griffon interrupted, turning to look at me. **"You there, what was your name?"**

From its attitude, it was clear it considered itself above me, but that was only reasonable given the difference in strength between us. I could see its aura, and it was many times greater than my own. If we were to form a pact, would it not be with *me* as the familiar and *it* as the master? Truth be told, I...would not be against that.

With my mind racing a mile a minute, I gave my name. "Quentin Agutter."

The scarlet griffon spread its beautiful wings and declared, **"I, Gizara, lord of the Giza Ravine, offer my blood, my body, and my soul in eternal servitude to my master, Quentin Agutter."**

"Huh? Wait, just like that?!" I exclaimed.

Light began to envelop us both as an indescribable sensation overwhelmed

me. Then, with a whoosh, the light scattered. Only a bright-red glow remained wrapped around my arm. I stared at it unblinkingly and saw it shrink bit by bit, until eventually it became one with me, coiled around my wrist as a scarlet line only one millimeter in breadth—a *perfect* proof of pact.

“Uh...” I continued to stare at my wrist, speechless. I blinked a few times, wondering if I might be dreaming, but the thin and unbroken line representing a pact of absolute obedience remained.

My mind still at a halt, I looked up and saw the scarlet griffon giving me a gentle look. The Giza Ravine was supposed to be the world’s most-populated griffon habitat, and I’m pretty sure this scarlet griffon just said it was that area’s lord. In other words, had I somehow made a pact of absolute obedience with the lord of the griffons...?

“Yeah, right,” I muttered. “This can’t be happening. I’m just a humble, insignificant captain! Argh! This is too much for me!” I sat down on the ground and let myself fall onto my back.

“C-Captain Quentin?!” Fia called out to me with concern, but I didn’t have the energy to reply.

All I could see was a beautiful sky dyed red with the sunset. If I were to die at this very moment, I would still probably be the happiest man in the world. “Just how blessed am I to have the lord of the griffons as my familiar?” I muttered. And with that, I lost consciousness.

When I awoke, the first thing I saw was a sky full of stars. I craned my neck around to try and figure out where I was, then realized something was covering me to keep me warm. I looked straight up and saw a beautiful scarlet griffon looking back down.

“The griffon lord!” All at once, I remembered everything and bolted to my feet.

The scarlet griffon, Gizara, looked at me head-on and laughed. **“There we are! You’re finally awake. Your stamina was drained from making the familiar pact. You were asleep for so long, I was beginning to think perhaps you had passed**

out.”

*I did pass out though*, I thought. I had been so shocked that it wouldn't have been strange for my soul to have left my body. I stroked the proof of pact on my wrist as I took in my surroundings, realizing from the darkness that it was already late at night. Beside Gizara was a golden griffon closely cuddled up to her—my long-time familiar, Dandelion. I was surprised to see the two were already getting along, but then again, griffons were pack animals, so maybe it shouldn't come as a surprise at all.

“Gizara, are you certain you're okay with making a pact with me? Don't you need to return to the Giza Ravine as lord of the griffons?” I asked, fighting back tears. I wanted her as my familiar so badly it hurt, but my own desires weren't what mattered here.

**“It's fine,”** she replied nonchalantly. **“I left someone who can act as my standin behind. In time, they'll even grow skilled enough to become a true lord who can replace me. Besides, as I said earlier, I've been looking for a safe new place to live. A place I can lay my eggs.”**

“E-eggs?!” I exclaimed, not expecting the conversation to take such a turn.

**“Yes, the eggs I made with my mate. There's too much going on in the Giza Ravine for me to lay my eggs there, so I've been looking for a safer place.”**

“I-I see...eggs...huh...” My mind was a mess, struggling to keep up with these rapid developments. Only one thing was clear to me. “So, one day there will be more splendid monsters like you joining us? Sounds wonderful! I promise you I'll make this place as safe as can be and protect you and your children!”

Gizara smiled as though surprised by my words. **“You will protect me? Ha ha. You're an interesting man, Quentin. My mate was far weaker than me, yet he promised the same exact thing... Very well, then. You can protect me and my children.”**

And that was how I became the master of a familiar more beautiful and stronger than I could myself believe.

## Side Story:

### Fia and Charlotte Go Fruit-Picking with Royalty

**O**N A DAY BLESSED with clear weather, Charlotte and I went herb-picking within castle walls. We were mainly looking for herbs to add to the green-colored spring we had made. After a look around said spring, I found a few types of herbs growing among the various weeds and harvested a particularly useful kind.

“Fia, why are you picking weeds?” asked Charlotte, confused.

“What? Oh, these aren’t weeds. They’re herbs.”

“Huh?” Her eyes went wide.

I held out an herb with yellow-tipped leaves. “Here, take a look. There’s only one plant with half-yellow and half-green leaves like this. This is raina, good for hearing restoration.”

She took the herb and gave it a long, hard look, then returned it to me with a frown. “I’m sorry. I’m pretty sure I memorized all the medicinal plants in my field guide, but I don’t recognize these colors or the name ‘raina.’”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed. Now I was the one to go wide-eyed. I was surprised by two things: One was the fact that raina, a really well-known herb three hundred years ago, wasn’t listed in her field guide; and the other was the fact that Charlotte had memorized an entire field guide.

“W-wait, no, it’s really not anything impressive!” she said with embarrassment after seeing my surprise. “There’s only eighty-two kinds of plants listed, so I was able to remember them just by reading the field guide over and over.”

“That’s still impressive for a child! It must’ve taken a lot of work to memorize a bunch of stuff you haven’t actually seen before.” I gently patted her head. She smiled with a blush. Yeah, she was surely ready for the next step if she could memorize that much. “What you read must’ve only covered the basics if it only



had eighty-something medicinal plants listed. You can definitely read up on raina in a more comprehensive book.”

“Um, Fia,” said Charlotte hesitantly, sounding confused, “aren’t there only eighty-two types of medicinal plants? I know there are some differences in details depending on the book and whether or not it has been annotated by a high-ranking saint, but all the books I’ve seen have only ever had eighty-two types of medicinal plants listed. That’s all there are.”

“Whuh?!” That shouldn’t be the case at all. In my past life, there were...well, I’ve never actually counted, but way more than eighty-two types of medicinal plants. There were, like, three hundred or four hundred or something! “Wait, but then how do you guys make hearing restoration potions?”

“Hearing restoration potions...? I’m sorry, I’ve never heard of those...”

“What?!”

Unbelievable. I knew the power of the saints had declined over the past three hundred years, but I had no idea that knowledge of medicinal herbs had declined as well! But I suppose it kind of made sense. As the number and power of saints declined, so too did their ability to heal specific ailments. Only the most commonly used abilities—wound healing and poison cleansing—remained, while more specialized aspects of healing magic faded away. Comparatively few people needed hearing restoration potions, so they stopped being made and the associated herb fell out of use. Eventually, people stopped categorizing it as an herb entirely.

*Oh no! To think the knowledge of all those herbs so many saints have spent years researching have been forgotten! A wave of sadness washed over me. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. No, wait. If they’ve been forgotten, it’s up to me to pass down the correct knowledge to the next generation of saints!*

“All right! Listen up, Charlotte. Today we’re going to try making a new type of potion!”

We couldn’t make hearing restoration potions, though, as we lacked an ingredient called greenglobe fruit. The royal castle didn’t have any of the trees that produced this fruit around. I pondered what we could make instead when I saw Desmond walk our way with a frown.

“Yo, Fia. Plucking weeds? Must be nice to muck about all day.” He waved hello and took a look at the herbs in my hand.

“Hello, Captain Desmond. It’s been a while. Are you heading somewhere?” I asked.

“I am, in fact. That captain of yours has forced some annoying work onto me,” he said with a grimace.

“O-oh, sorry to hear it. What kind of work?”

“Just bodyguarding some foreign royal who suddenly visited to go plant-picking in Náv. Which is kinda similar to the weed-plucking you’re doing, huh? Is that the trend these days? Anyway, bodyguarding a VIP is generally work for the First Knight Brigade, but apparently they don’t have a free hand, so the job got dumped onto me.”

“Again, sorry to hear it. Are they from somewhere nearby? Maybe the Holy Kingdom of Dhital?”

“Kinda. They’re from the Skerno Kingdom, the country directly to the east.”

“Oh, I see.”

I assumed Desmond was talking about medicinal plant-gathering when he said “plant-picking” and figured that meant the foreign royalty were from Dhital, since many saints lived there, but I guess I was wrong.

“Incidentally, what forest will you be bringing them to?” I asked.

“Starfall Forest. It’s the closest one around, after all. There should be enough variety there to find what they want.”

“Is that right...?” I said, a bit put off. Forests did, obviously, have a lot of plant life. But whoever was visiting was coming all the way from another country for this, so the odds that Starfall Forest just so happened to have the specific plant they wanted seemed pretty low. It was rather haphazard of Desmond to not consider that...but this worked perfectly for my own needs.

“Could we come along?” I asked. “I was just thinking of going plant-picking in Starfall Forest with this saint here, so it’d be nice if we could tag along. I’m sure it also wouldn’t hurt you to have a saint around to identify herbs.”

“Wow, Fia. An *actual* good idea from you! Yeah, feel free to come along. It’d be nice. I mean, I don’t know the first thing about plants.”

*Yeah, I could tell.*

“I’m surprised to see you know a saint, though. They don’t often talk to those outside their own circle,” he said. He then greeted Charlotte politely, which was surprising given his usual rudeness. I guess he could act with proper decorum when needed.

*That’s a captain of the kingdom for you!* I thought, impressed by this new side of Desmond.

Afterward, we met up with the visitors from the Skerno Kingdom and traveled along the path to the forest.

The visiting royal was the first princess, a twelve-year-old girl with yellow hair named Gerda Skerno. Charlotte and I rode with her in a fancy carriage emblazoned with the Skerno Kingdom’s coat of arms. I acted as Charlotte’s escort—as a saint, she needed one.

Gerda sat sandwiched between two maids. After meeting my gaze once, she timidly looked away toward Charlotte. “Lady Charlotte...it is an honor to have a saint from the Náv Kingdom join me. I have a fruit I simply must find and would dearly appreciate your help.”

Charlotte repeatedly snuck glances my way. She knew I was a saint, so she probably felt bad treating me like some plain Jane. *But it’s all A-OK, Charlotte! I’m fine being nothing more than your escort.* I put those thoughts behind a smile aimed her way, but she simply frowned as though troubled.

Charlotte turned to the princess. “Would you be willing to tell us what this fruit you’re looking for is called so we might help you find it?”

“I am looking for something called ‘greenglobe fruit,’” the princess answered.

*That’s what we’re looking for too!*

Charlotte didn’t seem to recognize the name, however. It was probably not included in her field guide. She thought for a bit, then seemed to remember our

conversation from earlier. “That’s a fruit with medicinal properties, isn’t it? One that’s been forgotten about and is no longer described in any modern field guides.”

“Yes, indeed! How very knowledgeable; I should expect no less from a saint. I read about the greenglobe fruit from a field guide written two hundred years ago that I found in my family’s royal treasury. It said that it could be found in the Náv Kingdom and the Arteaga Empire, but it’s such an old book that the - illustration has worn out, so I haven’t been able to identify it so far.” After telling her all that she knew, Gerda looked at Charlotte hopefully.

But Charlotte couldn’t offer anything else. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything more than the fact that it’s a fruit that’s been forgotten to time.”

“Oh. I see...” Gerda hung her head, visibly deflating.

In my mind, I tried to cheer her up. *Don’t worry. By sheer coincidence, the forest we’re going to has that fruit! Actually, I wanted to go there for that fruit myself, so we can pick some together. I’ve got a hunch that even the potion we want to make is the same...*

My inner voice couldn’t reach the princess, of course. She sat with her hands grasping her knees tightly and her face twisted into a worried expression.

“Feel free to look around all you’d like, Your Highness. Our knights will accompany you closely, so do not worry about your safety.” With his hand over his chest, Desmond tactfully addressed Gerda as she descended from her carriage. We had reached the forest.

Together with Charlotte, the two girls began to proceed deeper into the forest, examining trees as they went. A handful of knights followed closely. I tagged along as well, taking care not to fall behind.

Gerda seemed to be looking for a tree with green fruit, working off the name “greenglobe fruit.” This was quite the stroke of brilliance considering that the greenglobe fruit did, in fact, happen to be a green fruit.

Charlotte shot me a worried glance. Indeed, it was probably about time I gave the princess a hint so she wouldn’t get too anxious. In an exaggerated manner, I

clapped my hands like I had just remembered something. Loudly, I exclaimed, “Ohhh! Come to think of it, a knight buddy of mine once gave me some yummy green fruit from around here! Yeah, it was really good fruit, so I made sure they told me where they found the tree it came from.”

Desmond immediately drew closer so he could tower over me with his height. “There you go again, saying random nonsense out of the blue. Enough!” He bent down to whisper in my ear, saying, “I don’t know what you heard in the carriage, but Her Highness is looking for a fruit *nobody* has ever heard of. The illustration in the field guide she showed us is too worn out to grasp its shape, and none of the saints nor doctors we’ve checked with have heard of it. With such meager information, it’ll be straight-up impossible to find it. We’re just going to let Her Highness look around until she’s had enough. If *you* say something weird, *all* of us knights will get blamed when she turns up empty-handed.”

*Oh my*, I thought. Being a captain, Desmond had to be careful as he was burdened by a great deal of responsibility. Unfortunately for him, I was but a regular knight not so burdened by responsibility. *Sorry, but I’m just going to do what I want!*

“Um...” Hearing a faint voice, I turned around to see Gerda. “If you’d be so willing, could you lead me to the location of that tree? I have no other leads to work with currently. I won’t blame anyone if things don’t work out, so please...”

Desmond frowned for a brief moment, but quickly made the knight salute. “Of course, Your Highness. Allow us to lead the way.”

After we walked for about an hour, the tangle of tall trees opened up to a clearing. Here, we found only a few scattered short-and medium-height trees around.

“The wind sure comes through nicely here,” Desmond said, narrowing his eyes agreeably. I felt a bit of admiration for his strength. We had encountered a number of monsters along the way here so far, even some C-rank ones, but Desmond handled them all almost entirely by himself. He wasn’t called the Tiger of Náv and compared to Cyril for nothing!

Still...I did feel like something was off while he was fighting. I stared at him and wondered if perhaps he were deaf in his left ear? I didn't get that impression before, so maybe something had happened to him recently. Worried for him, I continued to stare.

He noticed my gaze. "What're you squirming for? Gotta pee?"

"Wh-what?! No!" I quickly said. My chance to ask, if I ever had one, had passed. It would be too awkward now. With nothing further said, our exchange ended.

Gotta say...Desmond's greatest weakness is his serious lack of delicacy.

Meanwhile, Princess Gerda's face lit up the moment we entered the clearing. Looking around, she said, "My, the vegetation in this area is different!" Excitedly, she took her time examining each and every one of the trees. After a while, she exclaimed, "Miss Fia, I found some green fruit! It's the same size as recorded in the field guide... This must be it!"

And it was. However, if it took her this much effort just to find one ingredient, I had to worry whether she could finish the potion she wanted to make at all. The process of making status ailment recovery potions was a bit complicated. In fact, three hundred years ago, I was initially the only one that could make them. It took some considerable effort to teach other saints how to make the same potions. Even then, I only ever managed to teach the easier ones, although that thankfully included hearing restoration potions. My teaching style was apparently hard to grasp for many saints, so I asked the few that did grasp my techniques to leave easy-to-understand records behind for future generations. I had no idea how much of that knowledge got passed down in the end.

Charlotte glanced my way, seeming similarly worried about whether Gerda could really finish her potion. I gave her a reassuring nod and spoke to Gerda. "As Your Highness says, I do believe this is the fruit you are after. It is probably better to make your potion while the ingredients are still fresh, so would you like to hurry back to your country or perhaps quickly make it here in Náv?"

"Oh...um..." Her face clouded. From the look of things, she didn't actually know how to make the potion. She probably saw the effects listed in her field

guide and rushed to gather the ingredients, intending to trial and error her way through potion-making later. But this wasn't exactly the kind of thing you could luck your way through...

As I racked my brain for a solution, Charlotte hesitantly spoke up.

"U-um, maybe I could try making it for you?"

Gerda's eyes went wide. "Really?! I'm trying to make a hearing restoration potion, a long-lost status ailment recovery potion. Can you really help me with it?"

"I can't make any promises, but I can try. B-but, um, I'll need a knight I trust to help me though. Someone reassuring to have around, like Fia."

I glanced Desmond's way, expecting him to find fault in what Charlotte said. Sure enough, he was listening and seemed in disbelief. In a low voice only I could make out, he muttered, "Fia? Reassuring? You gotta be kidding me. Greatest troublemaker on the planet!"

*You know, maybe Captain Desmond doesn't deserve to have his left ear healed.* I was planning on helping him out after noticing his deaf left ear, but now I was reconsidering.

Charlotte and I began to prepare for potion-making at once. Princess Gerda watched from the sidelines, her hands clasped together before her in prayer. I figured I might as well make some potion for Desmond while we were at it, so I mixed in some extra ingredients, split the result into two vials, and handed them to Charlotte. As she held them, I put my hands over hers.

This potion only took a second for me to make as it wasn't too difficult, but I do recall it taking longer for other saints. Thinking it'd look suspicious if it were done too quickly, I adjusted the rate my magic flowed out. *Hmm...five minutes ought to do it.*

Right at that moment, a shadow passed over me. I looked up, wondering what was overhead, and saw a Dream Bird flying.

"Now? *Really?*" I groaned.

A Dream Bird was an annoying monster that made illusions. Not too long ago,

we'd encountered one while looking for Zavilia in the forest.

*It showed up right when we're potion-making... What should I do?* From the corner of my eye, I saw Desmond begin running with his hand on his sword's handle. I spun around to watch him. *Wait, what?*

He anticipated the Dream Bird's trajectory and leapt, drawing his blade and swinging it down.

"Whaaat?!" I exclaimed.

With only a single, sharp swing from his sword, he had slain the monster.

I stared at him, jaw dropped, making him frown.

"What? Killing a single bird is nothing to gawk at. Just how weak did you think I was? Whatever, just get on with it already."

So he said, but even Zackary, the captain of the Sixth Knight Brigade, had trouble with a Dream Bird last time! It's a B-rank monster, for crying out loud!

Despite my shock, Desmond nonchalantly returned his sword to its scabbard and took a few steps back.

*W-well, I guess that's just the Tiger of Náv for you.*

Having fought one myself, I knew the fact that Desmond killed a Dream Bird in only one attack was nothing short of incredible. But out of consideration for the princess and Charlotte, both timid children, he was playing down how dangerous the monster had been.

Still full of admiration, I said, "Wow, I had *absolutely no idea* you were such an amazing captain!"

He grimaced. "Do you treat all captains so rudely, Fia? I don't know if Cyril's into that sort of beratement, but it is *absolutely* not my thing."

"Oh, I didn't mean to be rude," I said, bowing my head. "As an apology, allow me to tell Captain Cyril what you just said."

A bit panicked, he replied, "Wh-what, Fia?! I was obviously joking, c'mon! I'm an openhearted captain who can take whatever you say in stride! Man, all you First Knight Brigade knights are just as uptight—I mean, uh...straitlaced! You're



all as straitlaced as your captain! Would it kill you to joke a little?"

I watched as he frantically piled on words and thought to myself that he really was a fine captain, even if he was kind of rude.

After I took my hands off Charlotte's, she looked at me with soft, uncertain eyes.

"A-all done...?" she said without confidence, half asking me. She certainly didn't *seem* like a saint who had just made a potion.

Though it was kind of sidelined as an objective, my initial goal was to pass on my hearing recovery potion-making process to her. It didn't seem like she grasped it yet, so I'd have to teach her some other time.

I put my hands on my cheeks and exclaimed, "Charlotte, that's amazing! You've perfectly made two hearing restoration potions! You must be a genius to do so well on your first try!"

Desmond frowned for some reason. "Fia, quit subjecting us to your terrible acting! Everyone might be kind enough to look the other way when you're like this, but nobody ever *actually* falls for it, y'know?" He sighed. "The potion-making failed, right? Then just say so. We can't give the Skerno royal family failed potions, so hand 'em over to me and I'll dispose of them. Don't worry about it Lady Charlotte; chances were low from the start."

I looked up at Desmond and beckoned him to crouch down.

Being the kind man that he was, he actually did it. "What?"

I moved around to his left side, covered my mouth with my hands, and whispered, "Captain Desmond, could you please treat me to dinner for a week?"

He visibly stiffened, then quickly distanced himself, seeming wary of me.

I put on a cherubic smile. "Well?"

He hesitated for a moment. After reading my expression however, he seemed to deem whatever I said to be safe and slowly nodded. "Sure...?"

I triumphantly exclaimed, “Mu ha ha ha ha ha! You fell for it! I just asked if you’d be okay with buying me dinner for a week straight, and you said yes! All these knights here are my witnesses!”

The other knights seemed a bit taken aback and far less enthusiastic than me. One half-heartedly said, “Er...I suppose he did agree?”

Desmond matched my energy, however. “What?!” he hollered. “That’s playing dirty! Don’t you feel terrible making such a selfish request with a purehearted smile?!”

“Yeah, well, you reap what you sow for pretending like your hearing was fine despite your left ear being deaf! You wouldn’t have fallen for it if you weren’t putting on airs!”

The instant I said that, everyone froze.

“What?! But how did you know?!” Desmond exclaimed.

“Wait, it’s true? You can’t hear out of one ear, Captain?!” a knight exclaimed.

Desmond grimaced like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He seemed to accept defeat. “Ugh...come to think of it, you even noticed the commander’s old injury, didn’t you, Fia? All right, it’s true. My left ear has been getting a bit hard to hear out of for a while, but I’ve been too busy to really do anything about it. Before I knew it, I had gone deaf in it. When I finally got it checked out by a doctor, they told me it was stress. Apparently, if you don’t take care of hearing problems quickly, they’ll become permanent after a month or two.”

“C-Captain...” The knights swayed a bit, seeming unsteady on their feet.

“I’m fine,” he said nonchalantly. “I still have another ear to work with.”

So he said, but he likely knew full well how big of a problem losing hearing in an ear was. With just one ear, it was harder to judge the direction and distance of sounds—a fatal drawback for a knight. Furthermore, if the cause was stress, then he had every right to complain to the knights under him, and yet he made a point not to. Even if he grumbled about this and that, he never pushed blame onto people when things got serious. Such a man was deserving of respect.

I handed one of the potions to him. “Here, why don’t you test for yourself if this potion is fake or not? The only ingredients used were harmless herbs and fruit, so nothing bad can come from drinking it.”

“Fine...but if it doesn’t work, we’re not letting the Skerno Kingdom bring back the other.” In a quieter voice I couldn’t quite make out, he muttered, “Man, why have I always been made the test subject since the whole Black King thing?!” He downed the contents of the vial in one go. “There. Nothing’s changed.”

“Well, of course not,” I said. “Its effects aren’t instant like healing potions. Should we leave the forest for now, seeing as our business here is done?”

Following my suggestion, we left the forest.

The moment we returned, Desmond rode up to me without even bothering to get off his horse first.

“F-Fia, my left ear can hear!” he exclaimed.

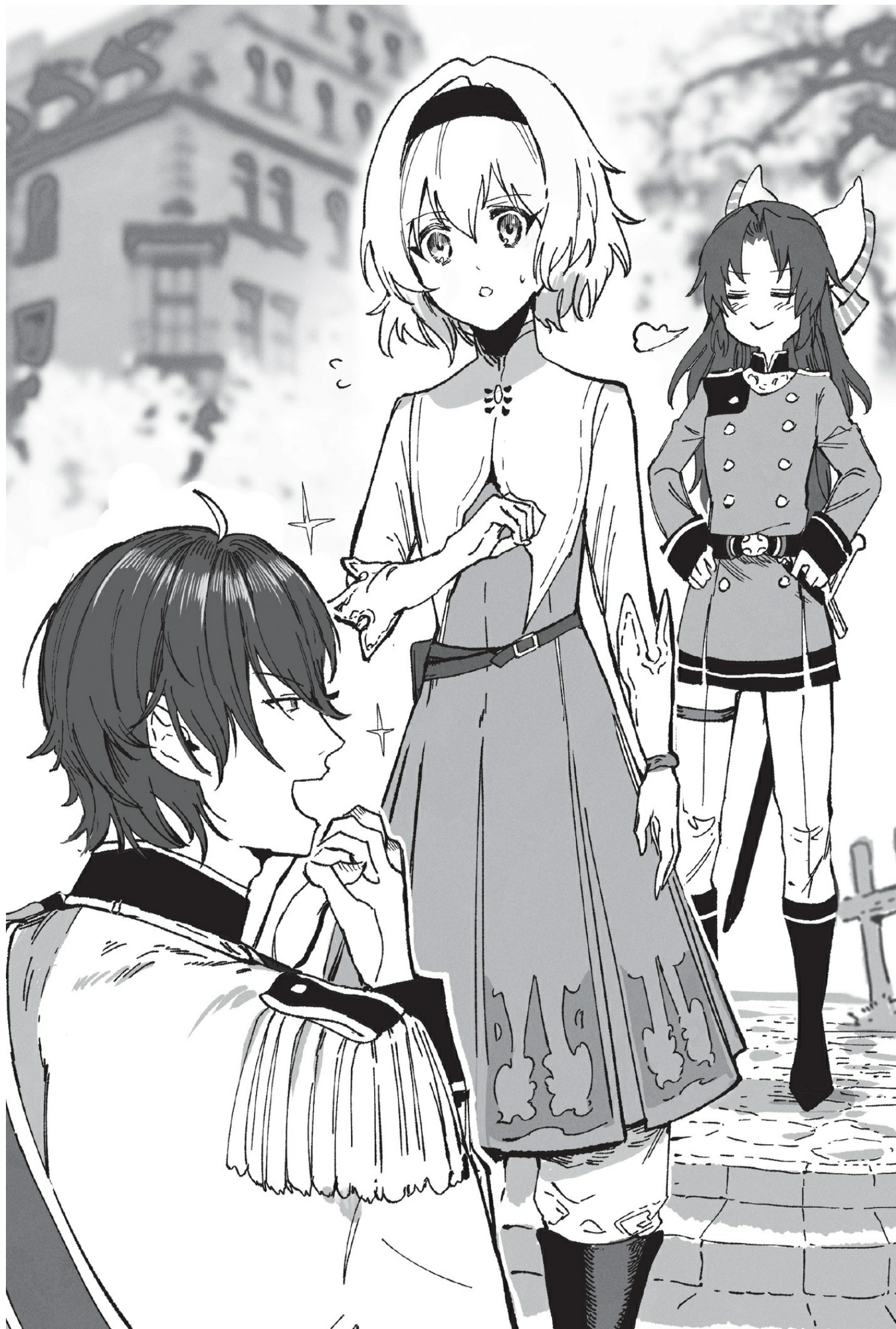
I put my hands on my hips and triumphantly exclaimed, “Well, of course it can hear! Would you expect anything less from a saint as great as Charlotte?”

“O-oh, right! Thank you so much, Lady Charlotte!” He clasped his hands together and bowed his head with gratitude. His earlier comment about being fine with one working ear was just bravado, it seemed.

Having overheard, Princess Gerda was overjoyed. “Wait, the hearing restoration potion actually worked?! Th-that’s incredible!”

In the carriage on the way back, she’d told me that her older brother had similarly lost his hearing in one ear from overwork, which was why she was here looking for a way to help him. With the other hearing restoration potion held tightly in her hands, she returned to her country that same day.





Of course, no good deed goes unrewarded. For a whole week afterward, Charlotte and I were treated to luxurious dinners by Desmond. Miraculously, Desmond didn't utter a single word of complaint the whole time, no matter how much we ate or drank. Far from it, he seemed eager to order us more.

Cyril seemed a little put off by all this, muttering something about it only being natural that knights look out for each other, so the idea that one should get special treatment for doing something that was a given was wrong. He had a point, but...surely a teeny-tiny reward like this was fine, right?

I continued to stuff my cheeks with the highest-grade meat there was, basking in the worldliest of joys.



## Side Story:

### Sirius Questions Serafina on the Similarities Between Dolphins and Jellyfish

I WAS TAKING A STROLL with Sirius in the garden when I happened across Canopus frowning intensely as he read a letter. Worried about grim news, I stopped and observed him for a bit.

Sirius, seeing that I was worried, decided to ask Canopus directly. “Canopus, what is that letter? Has something happened?”

Canopus looked up from the letter with a start, his eyes widening when he noticed us. “Please excuse my inattentiveness. I was just reading a report from my hometown.”

“That’s fine, but has something serious happened?” It wasn’t often he had such a grim look to him, so I was worried.

“No, it’s just a normal report, but...it seems they will be hosting a festival every year in Sutherland to commemorate the day you visited. They’re hoping to showcase our folk dances at the festival and seem to have decided our best dancers will do a jellyfish dance first.”

“Oh...oh!” I understood at once why Canopus was so hesitant. He was trying to protect me from Sirius—or to be more exact, one of Sirius’s lectures. My gut instinct was telling me this topic was dangerous, so I quickly moved to end it. “I-I see! Well, that festival sounds like it’ll be a lot of fun.”

I tried to walk away then, but Sirius stood in my way, crossing his arms with deep creases in his brow. “Canopus, why would your best dancers go first? Isn’t it standard to have the children perform first at such an event?”

*Gahhh! Sirius is just too sharp...* I thought, flustered. It was honestly crazy how he could fish out something wrong from Canopus’s fairly unassuming words.

Canopus cast his gaze down. “Normally, yes, that would be standard. However, it seems the people of Sutherland wish to have their best dance first,

specifically to commemorate Lady Serafina's visit."

He spoke fluidly, saying nothing I could find unnatural. I thought I was in the clear and mentally thanked my capable knight for getting me off scot-free, but my royal guard captain was sadly even more capable and somehow derived the truth from what Canopus said.

"I see... Serafina, you fell asleep midway through the first dance when the Sutherlanders performed for you, didn't you?" Though he framed it as a question, it was a statement. How he could be so certain was beyond me, but he was indeed correct.

I knew better than to give him a clear yes or no and instead kept my mouth shut, trying my best to smile. But I quickly realized that even if I didn't say anything, he could just question Canopus and extrapolate even more problematic truths from what he said. I had to get us away from Canopus before this hole we were in got deeper.

"S-Sirius," I said, "look! There's some yummy-looking white fruits over on that side of the garden..."

To my surprise, he flat-out ignored me for once and questioned Canopus again: "And why is the dance being performed a *jellyfish* dance? Weren't dolphins worshipped as divine messengers in Sutherland because the area was home to so many? I'd understand if it were a dolphin dance, but I just can't recall that locale having anything to do with jellyfish."

*So sharp! Sirius, you're waaay too sharp! But nobody wants you to be so sharp right now, okay?! Take a hint!* With a guiltless smile, I answered in Canopus's place. "Is that right? I don't think it's particularly odd myself. I mean, jellyfish and dolphins are *basically* the same if you really think about it, so a jellyfish dance makes complete sense."

Sirius glared at me. "Really, now. Jellyfish and dolphins are the same? In that case, all living creatures might as well be the same." His eyes narrowed, his glare grew fiercer. "You mistook the Sutherlanders' dolphin dance for a *jellyfish* dance, didn't you? I can see no other reason why they would think to do such a thing."

"Gwafhuuuh?!" I exclaimed. *Literally how does your brain even work, Sirius?!*



*How can you possibly arrive at a correct conclusion without any hints whatsoever like that?!* I tilted my head to the side, trying to understand the enigma that was Sirius.

With his gaze still cast down, Canopus sadly muttered, “You gave him plenty hints enough, Lady Serafina... Your error was in speaking at all.”

“Huh? Canopus, did you say something?”

“No, I did not...wait, yes! Yes, I did! It is about time for your appointment with the saints. Allow me to lead the way.”

*Brilliant move, Canopus! Get me away from Sirius by force, my sweet savior!* I nodded along. “Oh yes, yes, we wouldn’t want to keep those saints waiting!” But as I moved to follow Canopus, Sirius grabbed my arm. “O-oh my, Sirius. What’re you doing? I’m pretty sure a gentleman isn’t supposed to hold a lady’s arm this way, oho ho ho!”

“Sadly, I am no gentleman right now,” he said. “Right now, I am nothing more than the captain of your royal guard, and as the captain of your royal guard, I need to know: In what way are dolphins and jellyfish at all similar? Just how could you possibly mistake the two?” He looked at me as though mystified from the depths of his heart.

I pouted, a bit angry he was even asking such a thing. “Isn’t it obvious? The way dolphins look when they’re tired and the way jellyfish look when they’re all hyper and want to leap out of the water is basically the same! They’re so similar, you could easily mistake them for twins if they were side by side.”

Even though I deigned to go in detail for him, he furrowed his brows and dared to disagree. “What? No, they’re not similar at all. For starters, jellyfish do not get ‘all hyper’ and ‘want to leap out of the water!’ They don’t even have *spines!*”

“Oh come on, Sirius! Quit trying to use logic to think about it like you’re some animal expert or something. Stop thinking about spines and start going with your gut, okay? Use your *feelings.*”

“I...understand. I understand that I will never be able to grasp what you mean for as long as I live...but let me ask you just one more question: Why did you fall

asleep during the Sutherlanders' performance? I find it especially strange you fell asleep during the first dance, right at the beginning."

"Huh? O-oh, uh..."

"I've never once seen you fall asleep when being entertained as a guest. I can't imagine you would intentionally allow such a thing to happen given how much you value the feelings of your hosts. Which means you fell asleep against your will, perhaps due to fatigue? But what could have you so fatigued? Just what was the journey to Sutherland like?"

"C-Canopus...sh-shall we be off to see the saints?"

*Oh no, oh no, oh no.* Sirius hated me being in harm's way more than anything. If he found out I rode a horse day and night with hardly any breaks to get to Sutherland, he would be furious. *Welp, better run.*

"Serafina, I'll come with you to apologize to the saints for being late, so just forget about them for now and tell me what your journey to Sutherland was like. Come to think of it, I haven't received a report from you, Canopus, despite it already being several days since you've returned from Sutherland. What's going on with that?"

"C-Canopus, let's book it! Sorry, Sirius!" I yelled, waving behind me as I ran. *Nope, nope, nope.* There wasn't a single soul in the world who would fess up to something they did knowing they'd get scolded for it. Obviously, running was my only option. I was pretty sure he could catch me with ease even if I ran full speed, but he didn't chase after me. Seeing that, I let out a sigh of relief and made my way to my meeting with some saints.

I returned to my room that evening, thinking about what a tiring day it had been, only to find Sirius sitting on my sofa as though he owned the place.

"Quite a day it's been, Great Saint," he called out gently. It was so unnerving to hear him speak gently for once that I immediately moved to flee the room. Unfortunately, he beat me to the door with ease and blocked my way. "You have nothing planned for the rest of the day, right? Then why don't we take our time continuing our discussion from earlier?"

“Eek!”

I saw his handsome face make a beautiful smile and thought, *Oh no. If only I had let him lecture me back in the garden when my schedule was full! He’d have to keep it short then...*

But alas, it was all too late now.

Our “discussion” went long into the night.

## Afterword

**H**ELLO, EVERYONE! Thank you for reading Volume 6 of *A Tale of the Secret Saint*.

We held the popularity poll I mentioned back in the last volume. This was actually the first time I've been able to see what characters were popular, so I was quite nervous to check the results, kind of like I was opening a Christmas present! To everyone who submitted votes and left comments, thank you so very much! An opportunity like this doesn't come around often, so I wrote some short stories for the top six winners. The fantastic illustrations in them were made by chibi, who I cannot thank enough! Thank you, chibi, for always creating such wonderful illustrations!

As an aside, my editor has a parrot, so whenever we have meetings, I can hear it asserting its presence by going, "*Tweet tweet.*" It probably comes as no surprise that this is where the inspiration for the demon that appears in this volume, the Bird Cryer, comes from. I'm the easily influenced type, it seems.

In my afterword for the second volume, I mentioned that my eyesight got worse. Well, I have a follow-up report on that. At one of my regular checkups, I did that eye exam thing where you say whether a circle has its opening to the left, right, top, or bottom and, well...it did not go well for me. My right eye is at 0.1 strength, and my left eye is at 0.4 strength (20/200 and 20/50 vision respectively). This means my vision has gotten even worse than before. I stare at a computer screen all day, and the only thing beneficial I do for my eyes is eat blueberries, so...yeah. It's no mystery why my eyes aren't getting better. However—*however!* I am a fighter who overcame many tests in my school years! If there's a question I don't know the answer to, I know to at least write something down so I can go out swinging! With that in mind, I tried guessing on the eye exam when I didn't know which direction to say. I figured I'd at least get a few seeing as I had a one in four chance...

"Your right eye is at 1.5, and your left eye is at 1.2." (Both are better than 20/20 vision.)

“What?!”

*That’s crazy! I got so many right when I can hardly see!*

It would appear I have gained some kind of incredible power to make up for my loss of vision. I’m thinking of trying my luck at a lottery ticket.

(Note: Yes, I know doing this defeats the purpose of an eye exam.)

I’d like to end by thanking you for reading to the end. To everyone who helped make this book, and to everyone who read this book, thank you so very much. I had yet another blast writing this volume thanks to you all.



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