



NOVEL

7

WRITTEN BY
Touya

ILLUSTRATED BY
chibi

A Tale of the
**Secret
Saint**

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TRANSLATION: Kevin Ishizaka

ADAPTATION: Michelle McGuinness

COVER DESIGN: Mariel Dágá

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

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COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner

PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen, Amanda Eyer

EDITOR: Laurel Ashgrove

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

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THE STORY THUS FAR

FIA, 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.

Fia reunites with her sister at the foot of Blackpeak Mountain, then meets Zavilia at its peak. They spend time in peace together when, suddenly, a demon known as The Bird Cryer of the Dual Crests attacks the three men journeying with Fia.

The three men struggle against the demon, but Fia comes to their aid riding Zavilia. Together, they succeed in sealing the demon away.

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.



CERULEAN, LEON, DOLLY

Court jesters who serve the king.

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	
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	Cody	Oria Ruud
Twelfth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR EAST	Kurtis Bannister		
Thirteenth Knight Brigade BORDER PATROL, FAR SOUTH			
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

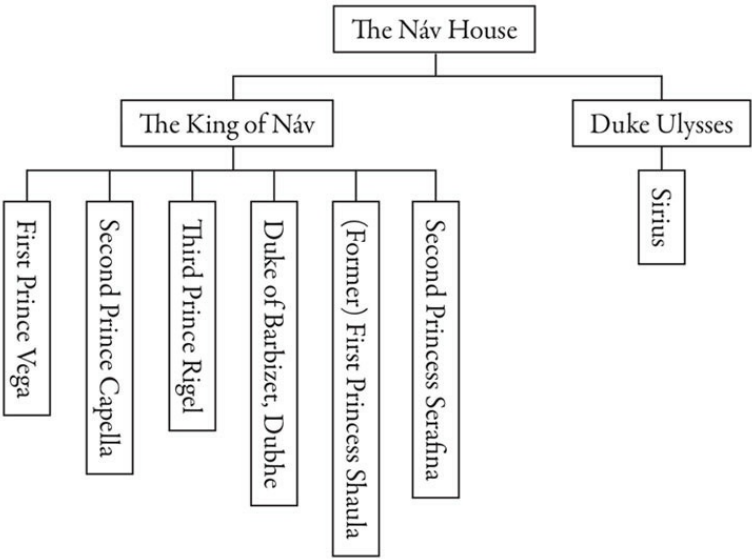
Knight Brigade Commander	Wezen
Second Knight Brigade Captain ROYAL CASTLE SECURITY	Hadar Bononi
Third Mage Knight Brigade Captain MAGES	Tsih Brando
Fifth Knight Brigade Captain ROYAL CAPITAL GUARDS	Alnair Calandra
Sixth Knight Brigade Captain MONSTER EXTERMINATION, ROYAL CASTLE VICINITY	Elnath Cafaro

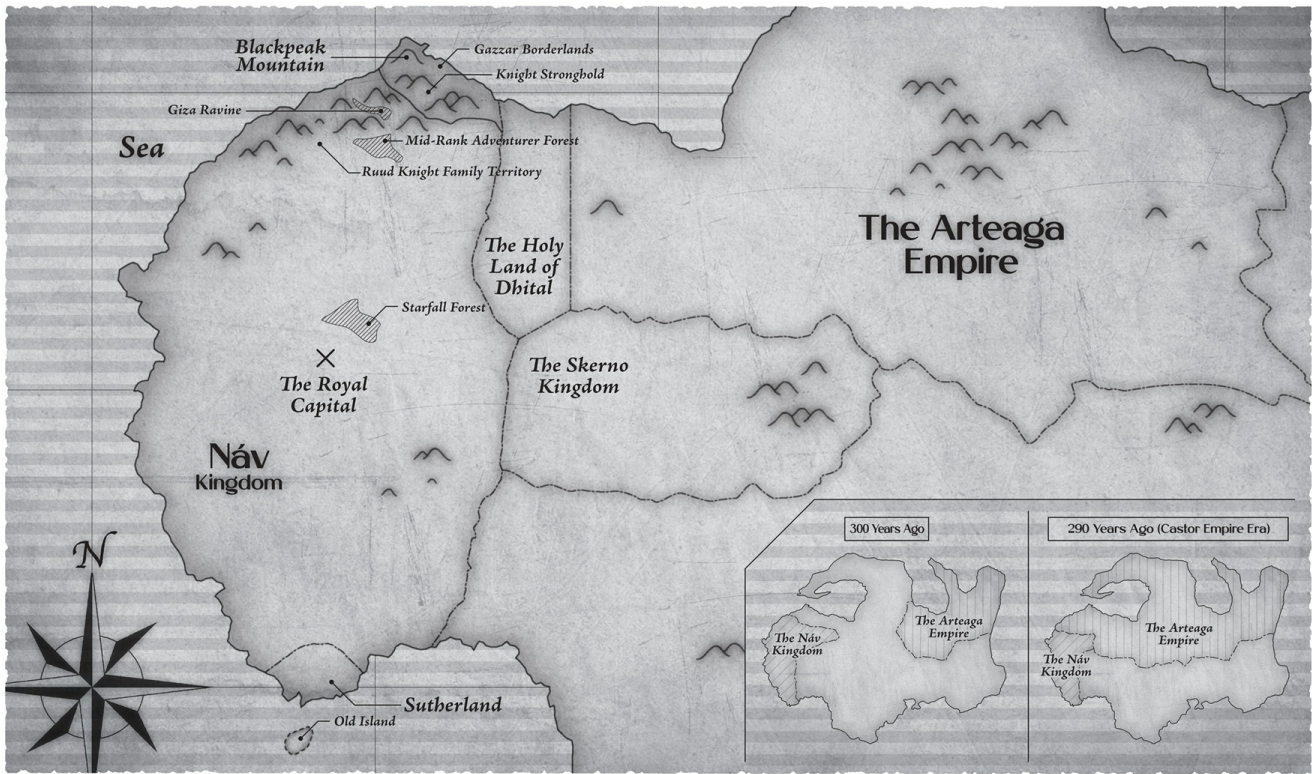
THE ROYAL RED SHIELD

Captain	Sirius Ulysses
Serafina's Personal Knight	Canopus Blazej

Náv Kingdom Royal Family Tree

(300 YEARS AGO)





Chapter 42:

Return to the Capital

(Three Hundred Years Ago)

THE MOMENT I RETURNED to the royal capital, I needed to report to my captain, Cyril. Only problem was, I'd gone over my allotted vacation time just a *tiny* bit.

Okay, that's not true. I went over it by *a lot*. But I had a good reason! Cyril himself said that my time at the Eleventh Knight Brigade stronghold would count as working time, and I did in fact do a bunch of work during that time, so I should be in the clear!

Well, except...I guess my trip up Blackpeak Mountain wasn't *really* for work reasons. That part might have been a lie. But he didn't need to know that...

I knocked on the door of Cyril's office and loudly stated, "Good morning, Captain Cyril! This is Fia Ruud, reporting!"

I entered to find him seated at his desk, writing furiously. He set his pen down and smiled when I came in. "Welcome back, Fia. How was your vacation?"

I returned the smile as I approached him. "It was the best! I got to meet my sister and a dear friend of mine as well!"

Said dear friend, Zavilia, had returned to the capital with me and was currently waiting obediently in my room. Unlike the Monster Tamer Knight Brigade, the knights of the First Knight Brigade didn't keep familiars. Hence, I couldn't carry Zavilia around on my shoulder like I did when I was on loan to the Monster Tamer Knight Brigade. During working hours, the two of us would have to remain apart. He was totally fine with that, and he had his own tasks to keep him busy, such as staying in touch with his dragon buddies.

Cyril listened to my report, his pleasant expression never wavering. When I was finished, he said, "I'm happy to hear your vacation was a fruitful one. Now,

I'm not sure if you remember, but before you left for vacation, we discussed a scheduled meeting between you and His Majesty the King. We plan to carry this out once Commander Saviz returns to the capital. Does that work for you?"

Oh, right. Cyril said something about that before I left, didn't he? What in the world did that have to do with Saviz returning, though? I wanted to ask, but I was worried about being too direct, so I tried coming at it from another angle. "Oh? Is Commander Saviz out somewhere?"

With a slight frown, Cyril said, "Indeed. When it comes time for His Majesty to meet with the new additions to the First Knight Brigade every year, Commander Saviz *just so happens* to find himself away on business that needs to be done outside of the capital. This time, he's left to check on the various brigades in the countryside. He should return in a few days."

There was more to this—I could hear it in his every word. I wanted to ask, but even more than that, I *really* didn't want to get tangled up in some sort of mess, so I simply smiled and kept my mouth shut.

Cyril chuckled before continuing. "This time, however, I took the liberty of scheduling things so he could attend your meeting. He and His Majesty are brothers, so it only makes sense that he should be present, and I've had just about enough of attending alone when this was originally a job for the both of us. Oh, I assume you have no issue with the commander joining, Fia?"

A lowly peon like me had no right to say no. "Oooh... His Majesty has already finished meeting with all the other recruits, right? Which means my meeting with His Majesty will be *the only one* with Commander Saviz in attendance? That's...such an honor."

Aha... So *this* was why Cyril allowed me to extend my vacation. Of course, I'm sure he genuinely meant well. He truly was a kind man at his core, but with his freakishly strong memory, there was no way he hadn't also factored in Saviz's yearly escapade.

"Gahhhh! I keep getting tricked!" I exclaimed. First, he talked me into

becoming his friend so he could get me to come to Sutherland, and now this. I've been in the palm of his hand at every turn.

Of course, my visit to Sutherland and my extended stay at Blackpeak Mountain both ended up being good things, but the fact that he could manipulate me so easily didn't sit right with me. I told him exactly that, earning nothing but a pair of raised eyebrows in response.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect to hear that from you," he said. "If anything, I'm the one who feels as though I'm being played by you. I would love nothing more than to have you completely under my thumb, but life is unfortunately full of surprises."

That was weird. I had no idea how we got from me complaining to him pondering life as a whole. Regardless, I was exhausted, so I asked to be excused. He nodded, and I bid him farewell and got out of there just about as swiftly as I could.

After a long work day, I returned to my room and found Zavilia absent. "...I knew it." There was just no way that bundle of mischief would ever be obedient and stay in my room.

With a sigh, I retrieved the sword I left by the bay window. I held it up, enjoying its sturdy weight and beautiful design. I had brought it back with me from the Eleventh Knight Brigade stronghold. At one point, it had belonged to Sirius.

As it was custom-made for him, the blade was too long for me, but I kept it in my room as a kind of good luck charm anyway. Every time I picked it up, my eyes flitted to the same part of the sword, the only part that was different than it had been three hundred years ago. Back then, a silver jewel sat embedded in the lower part of the handle, a perfect match to Sirius's gray hair and silver eyes. The jewel had been changed for a red one at some point. Perhaps that was to be expected. The jewel was just a decoration, after all; it made complete

sense to switch it out when the sword fell into someone else's hands.

My buddy flew in while I was studying the blade. **"I'm back, Fia!"**

"Zavilia!"

I set the sword aside and rushed over to Zavilia. He didn't wear the Blue Dove disguise I made for him, instead donning his miniature dragon form. I stuck my head out the window, worried somebody might have seen him.

"Relax. I'm not so clumsy that I'd let someone see me. Besides, when I was at that northern stronghold, nobody even thought to guess I might be the Black Dragon. This miniature form is good enough of a disguise as is."

He had a point. Back at the Eleventh Knight Brigade stronghold, he got along fine in his miniature form. Of course, I would have brought his Blue Dove disguise along with me if I'd known he was coming back to the capital, but none of the knights who saw him in the stronghold had an inkling he was the Black Dragon. They all came to their own, different conclusions as to what he was.

"Hey, Fia, what's that on your shoulder? A bird? It looks a lot like a lizard, but I guess a lizard wouldn't have wings, huh? Wait, did Blackpeak Mountain have a bird like this?"

"C'mon, you gotta take better care of your bird, Fia. You didn't even brush his feathers? They look like scales, they're so messy. He's so filthy, he's pitch-black too."

"Ha ha ha, wow, that thing is dirty dirty! You better be careful, Fia. Black is considered the strongest color among monsters. Another monster might get jealous and eat your little familiar up if you drop your guard."

Yep. Not a single person thought anything of Zavilia back there, so maybe he was right about being fine here too. I mean, nobody in their right mind would think the Black Dragon would shrink itself, right?

"Hmm, all right, I guess most knights wouldn't notice you're the Black Dragon. The weather's going to get cold soon, though, so wear the Blue Dove disguise I

made if you think you'll need it. Oh, and if you do get outed as the Black Dragon somehow, you should still be able to give them the slip when they kneel to you and all that. The kingdom's guardian beast is the Black Dragon, after all."

"...I see. You think the knights would take a reverent knee before me if they discovered my identity? The fact that you genuinely believe that is incredible in its own way, Fia."

"You wouldn't happen to be making fun of me while pretending you're giving a compliment, would you?" I shot him a heavy look.

He smirked and said, **"Perish the thought! I could never be so snide, not when you're so astute. I'm praising you out of the goodness of my heart."**

"Oh, how kindly of you, Your Majesty! 'Tis an honor to be praised by a king!"

We bantered back and forth, but eventually I had to get ready to turn in for the night. I had only just returned to the royal capital yesterday, so I was still exhausted. I retrieved Sirius's sword from near the window, then set it beside my pillow as I crawled into bed. With the sword and Zavilia by my side, my whole body relaxed, safe and secure. Of course, I might have simply passed out from exhaustion and not thanks to their soothing presence. Likewise, if the sword impacted my dreams at all, I did not notice it.

Side Story:
My Royal Guard Captain
(Three Hundred Years Ago)

“**S**ERAFINA, IF YOU’RE GOING to step on my feet regardless, at least look me in the face while you do it. I can’t help but think you’re *aiming* for my feet when you look down and step on me.”

I snapped my gaze up at Sirius’s exasperated tone. He had a point. Watching my feet had only made my toe-stepping look intentional. I met his lovely silver eyes, just as enviously beautiful as always. His harsh words seemed out of place coming from such a handsome face.

“You’ll wear a dress that reaches the floor at the soirée, so no one will notice you stepping on my toes, assuming I keep a straight face. So instead of the ground, look at me and make sure I don’t grimace.”

What he said *sounded* nice, but it was actually quite mean. The soirée was a whole two weeks away, but he was acting on the assumption that I couldn’t possibly improve by then.

I puffed my cheeks out and said, “*You* may be able to keep a straight face, but all my other dance partners will definitely react when I step on their toes! And it’s not like I can be so rude as to ask them all to try and not make a face! I should just take more dance lessons before the event.”

“You don’t need to worry about having any other dance partners. The only one you’ll be dancing with is me.”

“What?” I halted, surprised. The pianist in the corner kept on playing, filling the room with soothing music.

“What’s wrong? Do you want to stop here for the day?”

“N-no, it’s just... I’m pretty sure I can’t *not* dance with other people, you

know? This is the first soirée I'm officially attending. Plus, I'm both the second princess of the kingdom and the Great Saint."

"And I'm Sirius Ulysses. Need I say more?" He grinned, the curl of his mouth full of mischief.

That smug grin left little doubt that he really would wind up as my only dance partner—he only grinned like that when he knew things would go exactly as he intended. No one could get in his way when he schemed like this.

I sighed in defeat and resumed my dance lesson.

My schedule had been swamped lately, mainly with preparations for the upcoming soirée. Up until now, I'd been busy with saint-related things, so I was a bit lacking in the princess-skills department. However, my father, the king, ordered me to attend this soirée, so I had to scramble to learn proper etiquette and all the other things I'd been neglecting. Perhaps out of pity, Sirius had been helping whenever he could, even though he must have had his own duties to attend to.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Sirius! I was so worried when Father ordered me to attend a soirée a month ago, but it looks like I might actually be ready for it!" I tried to keep my eyes on him while we danced instead of letting them drift down to my feet.

He cocked his head. "Hmm. It seems we have completely different ideas of what 'ready' means. In my view, you're nowhere near where you need to be."

"Wha—Sirius! C'mon!"

"Ha ha ha. I'm only joking. I know you're trying your hardest. Now, why don't we take a short break?" He opened the glass door leading out to the terrace and led me to a spot overlooking the flowers sprawling through the garden below. Maids with tea appeared, as though they'd been waiting for the precise moment we stopped dancing.

“I see you’ve got even my break timings down to perfection, my dear Royal Guard captain.” I was just about to suggest taking a break myself, having grown a little fatigued. I looked up at him, wondering how he knew. He just shrugged and nonchalantly poured milk into my tea, knowing exactly how I liked it. “Yes, yes, I understand. There’s nobody who knows me better than you.” I took a sip of my tea. “By the way, Sirius, when exactly did you learn to dance? I find it hard to imagine you’ve had much free time, seeing as you’ve devoted most of your life to knighthood. So how’d you get so good?”

I’d devoted most of my life to sainthood, which explained why I was so awful at any non-saint-related task. And I’d accepted that long ago. No one could excel at *everything* in a single lifetime; we had to pick and choose. Or at least, most of us did. Sirius seemed to be somehow perfect at everything he’d ever tried. He was the strongest knight in the kingdom, the highest-ranking duke by a mile, and the most refined noble.

“The nature of my work as a knight has given me stamina. I’m able to wake up earlier than you and have used that extra time to gradually learn to dance.”

So he said, but I seriously doubted I’d ever be able to learn all the things he had even if I could somehow halve my sleep starting today.

“Does time pass slower for you than it does for me or something? Or am I just not trying hard enough? Even supposing I could wake up at the same time you do, I seriously doubt I’d be able to match you.” I huffed a huge sigh and frowned up at him.

His gaze was curious. “You’re the only one who thinks it’s strange at all. Just hearing my name is all it takes for others to accept that I’m different from them.”

I glared, appalled he’d say such a thing. “I’ll admit you’re perfect at everything you do, but there’s not a soul in this world who can achieve results without putting in effort! It’s clear you had to work really hard to get to where you are—not to mention to stay that way!”

He squinted, as though blinded by a bright light. “Those golden eyes of yours always see me for who I really am. And even then, you approve of me, without even knowing how much that means to me.”

“Huh?” I tilted my head, unsure what he was getting at.

He laughed away his comment and said, “It’s nothing. I was just happy to be truly seen.”

He extended his hand. By reflex, I reached out and set my hand in his. He brought my hand up and kissed the back, then raised his gaze to meet mine and swore a vow, enunciating each word carefully. “O Great Saint of our kingdom, I swear to protect every fiber of your being. Your beautiful glowing crimson hair, your golden eyes full of benevolence, your miracle-granting hands—I promise to protect all of you forever.”

His words, full of sincerity, resonated within me. But a hot wave of embarrassment swiftly followed. “My, how reassuring. Especially from the strongest knight in the kingdom, the captain of my Royal Red Shield. Thank you.”

I curtsied with mock formality, thanking him like a lady. He bowed with a hand over his heart and a hand behind his back, returning my curtsy like a gentleman.

We stood like that in silence for a few moments before simultaneously breaking into smiles. Sunlight bathed the terrace in warmth while birds warbled in the distance.

Oh, Sirius... My time with you always felt so dazzling. If only you were still here with me now, my dear Royal Guard captain.

In spite of myself, my heart called out for him...

“What’s the matter, my little Great Saint?”

Somehow, it seemed like he gently called back to me.

Chapter 43:

The King's Game

I WOKE UP IN A GOOD MOOD the next morning. Usually I completely forget my dreams after waking, but this one lingered in bits and pieces, filling me with nostalgia for the happy times in my past life. Did I dream about Sirius like that because I slept with his sword beside me?

In the dream, he said, *"...Those golden eyes of yours always see me for who I really am. And even then, you approve of me, without even knowing how much that means to me."*

Those words in particular stuck in my mind. Wasn't it a bit of a weird thing to say? Of course I'd approve of someone who always tried their hardest. Yet he'd commented on that, as well as pointing out my eye color. How odd.

"O Great Saint of our kingdom, I swear to protect every fiber of your being. Your beautiful glowing crimson hair, your golden eyes full of benevolence, your miracle-granting hands—I promise to protect all of you forever."

I can't quite remember who it was, but someone had pointed out how rare it was for someone to have red hair and golden eyes like me. Maybe Sirius had commented on it simply because it was so unusual.

Come to think of it, the deep-red color of my hair, the red of the Great Saint, was already super rare on its own. There weren't many people with golden eyes either, so my hair and eyes certainly could draw attention.

Wait... Hadn't someone just recently pointed out the rarity of this combination? I was sure it was recent and not three hundred years ago, but I couldn't quite remember who it was...

Ah! Right. It was Saviz, just before I left for Sutherland.

Red hair was the mark of a talented saint, so naturally it followed that many

red-haired women were saints. As a member of the royal family, Saviz probably met with many saints and was likely used to seeing red hair, so it made sense for him to be the one who'd pointed out that my color combination was exceedingly rare.

I see... Then there must be very few saints in the current world with my combination of colors! Finally, I felt I understood why Sirius was so fixated on it.

Speaking of Saviz, according to his schedule, he would return to the royal capital in just a few days. My meeting with the king would occur shortly after his return. It seemed Cyril would hold fast to his desire to drag Saviz into the meeting at any cost. Or maybe Cyril was just being sarcastic and really only wanted to give Saviz a chance to meet with his older brother, the king. Saviz was a busy man, after all, and the king was probably even busier. They likely couldn't meet much if someone didn't go out of their way like this to get them into the same room.

From what I'd heard from Cyril in Sutherland, Saviz and the king had been close as children, so they were probably still close today, right?

I tilted my head to the side in wonder. It would be another four days before I had my answer.

When the day finally arrived, I headed to the office of the First Knight Brigade captain as instructed.

"Come on in, Fia. It's finally your turn to meet His Majesty. Are you nervous?" Cyril stood up and greeted me, his usual easy smile on his face.

"Huh? Oh, I guess I am. My heart's pounding with anticipation. Does His Majesty have black hair like Commander Saviz? Is he as handsome? I'm just dying to find out!"

"That's...not quite what I meant, but I'll take it. It's reassuring to see you're

just the same as ever. Shall we be off then? Commander Saviz will meet us in the waiting room near His Majesty's office."

As we walked down the corridor, Cyril filled me in on the plan for the day.

"This meeting is meant to be an opportunity for His Majesty to examine the new knights who will become part of the guard. His Majesty is a very busy man, yet he always makes sure to hold these meetings one knight at a time. This, of course, means you will be meeting him alone today. Do not worry, however, as I will be in attendance as your captain, as will Commander Saviz."

"Yes, sir."

"His Majesty is by no means an intimidating man, so feel free to be yourself. This meeting is only meant to be an opportunity for him to understand who you are and what you're capable of."

"Yes, sir."

What I'm capable of? Did that mean there would be some kind of test? And if the king's so busy, why did he insist on meeting his new knights one by one? I had a feeling this wouldn't end with some casual chitchat.

I glanced at Cyril and caught a reassuring smile.

"His Majesty may try to test you in various ways," he said. "Just think of it as him examining the results of your training and try your best."

So I *would* be tested. I swallowed, mentally reviewing all I'd learned. Cyril smiled softly, but I knew that was pretty much his default expression. He wasn't going to give me any further hints.

I couldn't tell if there was something more to this meeting or if the king was genuinely curious about his knights, but Cyril told me to try my best, so I would do just that. At the same time, going in with no hints whatsoever was a little daunting. I had no time for worrying, however, as we soon arrived at the king's office. Servants allowed us into the waiting room neighboring the office and told us to wait. Eventually, Saviz joined us. He took one look at me and raised an

eyebrow in surprise.

“Fia? So you’re the one he’s meeting today?”

Cyril paid Saviz’s surprise no mind and said, “She was in the north on a special mission up until last week, so her meeting was postponed. Luckily, that has allowed you to attend. I’m sure she’s thrilled to have you join us.”

Saviz fixed me with a flat expression, but I knew his mind was whirling.

Cyril continued, “Of course, I’m sure you very much wished to attend her meeting with His Majesty yourself. This works out conveniently for us all, doesn’t it?”

Still looking at me, Saviz said, “It doesn’t appear we can expect much this time.”

“And that is fine. In fact, as her captain, I much prefer nothing of note happening.”

Saviz sighed with exasperation and plopped his large hand on my head. “Fia, Cyril and I will be right behind you. There’s no need to be intimidated.”

He was trying to comfort me, but it really felt like he and Cyril had already concluded that I was about to fail at something. What’s up with that? Still, I set that aside and told him it was an honor for an ordinary recruit like me to get his support.

“Roger that, Commander!” I said. “I’ll conduct myself with decorum, like I always do.”

“Like you always do, eh...?” Cyril muttered under his breath with a weary look on his face. I chose to believe that was the exhaustion talking.

The king’s chamberlain, wearing a blue and gold uniform, eventually retrieved us from the waiting room. Saviz led the way, with Cyril behind him and me at the rear. We passed a huge door and stepped into a spacious room where a man sat at an extravagant desk. I kept my gaze low as I paced forward, waiting for the formal greetings before I looked at the king’s face. I couldn’t help

noticing his gaudy attire from the corner of my eye, however.

The man sitting at that huge desk, wearing a triple crown and looking me over with great interest, was none other than the king himself, Laurence Náv.

White, blue, and gold adorned every surface of the king's office. The ceiling rose higher than even the one in Saviz's own office. A fine rug warmed the floor and beautiful bookshelves and display cabinets stood throughout the room. Gold leaf or gold thread infused every surface with elegance, turning even the most mundane items into priceless artifacts. Two dozen knights, half a dozen aides, and even a few court jesters attended King Laurence in this room.

The pressure of merely standing in this office would probably make a normal person cry. The king and his whole entourage had gathered simply to pick on a new recruit. That was probably why Cyril was so wary of having to do these meetings, come to think of it. He probably didn't want to deal with the aftermath of having to console a knight devastated by whatever I was about to go through.

I stifled a sigh and scanned the room. A blue rug cut down the center of the office, leading straight to the king. Knights lined the walls on both sides, evenly spaced out and all belonging to the First Knight Brigade. Near the back of the room, the king's aides, dressed in fine, noble clothes, stood at the base of a series of steps. The court jesters sat ostentatiously on the steps themselves. And at the top waited the king, glittering in all his gaudy finery as he gazed down at us from his massive desk.

As instructed beforehand, I walked between Saviz and Cyril, who had stopped in front of me, and bowed when I reached the foot of the steps.

"It is an honor to meet you. I am Fia Ruud of the First Knight Brigade."

Behind me, I heard Saviz and Cyril bow as well.

After a few moments, one of the aides said, "You may raise your heads! His

Majesty grants you the honor of laying eyes on him.”

I looked up and met King Laurence’s eyes. His blue eyes met mine. Golden blond hair adorned with a sparkling triple crown framed his handsome face. I guessed he was about thirty. He leaned back in his golden chair and crossed his legs, regarding me with interest as he rested his chin on his fist.

He certainly fit the image of a king, but I couldn’t help but think he didn’t resemble Saviz much despite being his older brother. Saviz had black hair and eyes, as well as a quiet confidence to him; meanwhile, King Laurence had blond hair, blue eyes, and a rather overwhelming appearance. One was the stoic type, the other gaudy. Both were handsome, but in very different ways.



“So you’re the last knight to come.” The king spoke kindlier than I anticipated. I had half expected him to see knights as disposable pawns or something, but that wasn’t the sense he gave me with those first words.

Perhaps I should have seen that coming. Saviz himself might have turned out so noble partly thanks to having a good example to follow in his older brother. Or maybe it was the other way around: Perhaps the king recognized the worth of knights through Saviz’s excellent example.

“I’ve heard about you,” he said. “You’re the one who had a bout with Saviz at the welcome ceremony, correct? You’re smaller than I expected; you seem like you’d be sent flying easily by him. Did my little brother perhaps hold back on you?” Still resting his chin on his hand, the king cocked his head.

I politely, and *properly*, answered, “I was indeed sent flying back by Commander Saviz, so my weight is as lacking as you say, Your Majesty.” I took pains to only speak about myself and refrain from commenting on Saviz’s actions at all. It would be impertinent for me to presume I understood the intentions of the king’s younger brother. Even if the king himself asked me about Saviz’s intentions, I had to avoid answering.

“Hmm...” King Laurence raised an eyebrow. “Cyril, this final knight you’ve brought me has been well instructed. Her answer is as proper as that Fabian you recently brought me.”

Pride swelled in my chest at the mention of my fellow recruit and friend. It was a rare thing for the king to remember you after only one audience. Fabian really was something else, wasn’t he?

Despite the praise directed at his knights, Cyril showed no emotion and responded flatly. “Your praise is greatly appreciated. However, I have no hidden intentions behind the order in which I bring you my recruits.”

King Laurence scowled. “Cyril, there’s no need to be so formal. Not even I can read you when you act like this. I am not trying to bully your precious knights in the least. I simply wish to better know the ones who will be protecting me.

Don't you think mutual understanding is best for both parties?"

"Of course. I wish for that as well. But be that as it may, I still see a need to attend these meetings myself to act as a facilitator on the off chance something goes awry."

Cyril spoke calmly, but I could sense a warning directed at the king in his words. His relationship with the king was a strange one. I expected the king's will to supersede all others, but it seemed that wasn't quite the case. King Laurence, Saviz, and Cyril had close ties, even more so than I had imagined.

As though to lend credence to my hypothesis, King Laurence turned to Saviz with amusement plain in his face. "What a thing to say, Cyril. I'm saddened. Incidentally, Saviz, it's been two years since you've attended one of these meetings, hasn't it? You always seem to be busy around this time. Come to think of it, you went out of your way to spar with Fia at the welcome ceremony too, didn't you? You must be quite fond of her."

Saviz took the king's teasing in stride. "As you say, Your Majesty, I am quite fond of Fia. But I am fond of all my knights."

"I see. Well, I'm happy to hear the brigades are as tight-knit as ever. That said, I'm not sure if I can take your words at face value. Given our respective positions, you have incentive to paint a rosy picture for me. I have no way of knowing if Fia here is genuinely amazing enough to command your interest, or if she's actually inept and merely needs your babysitting. Hmm... Cerulean, what do you think?"

A court jester sprawled on the steps responded. He wore a hood with horse ears and a bell. White-and-blue checkered tights covered his legs. His shoes curled at the tips. A bell sat on one knee, while another hung from his waist. He was the very image of a court jester, but unlike the other two jesters, he was also quite young—maybe twelve or thirteen—even younger than me. He was cute, with blond hair and cerulean-blue eyes, and he spoke with the high-pitched voice of a young boy. "Huuuh? You're asking meeee? Hmmmmm. I

dunno. Let's just go with the latter and say Fia's ineeeeept! Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

The other two court jesters joined in, and soon all three were cackling with glee.

Looks like they're having fun, I thought with a smile, but...

"Huuuh? What're you smiling for? You realize we're making fun of you, riiiiight? Are you stuuuupid or something?" The very instant I smiled, Cerulean called me out.

Out of all the aides and knights present, King Laurence had asked his youngest court jester for an opinion, and now I could see why. Cerulean was clearly more than he let on.

Many kings kept court jesters for all sorts of reasons. Some enjoyed the company of the humorous fools, while others used them to appear more magnanimous by forgiving the rude things they'd say.

Cerulean seemed to do as he pleased without thought, which was only fitting for his role, but I couldn't help but wonder if that was all there was to it. He rudely pointed a finger my way and laughed. "Be careful, Fia. If you're *tooooo* stupid, Saviz and Cyril might get fed up with yooooou."

He addressed Saviz and Cyril without titles. Surely *that* was over the line, right? I glanced back at them, but their expressions were flat. Normally I would assume they were ignoring the court jester's words, but they looked directly at him. Weird... Perhaps they were deferring to the king and his attitude toward the jester.

I was growing flustered trying to sort out how to respond when a low, exasperated voice chimed in. The jester next to Cerulean sat with his legs spread wide and his chin rudely resting on someone's arm.

"No, nooo, they adooooore Fia," he said. "She's clearly getting *special*

treatment with her late arrival and all. She's popular all over, in fact, didn't you know? Whether it be during training, in the north, in the south, or with other brigades here in the capital, she's as popular with the knights as one could be."

The court jester spoke nonchalantly but seemed to know quite a bit about me. My eyes widened at his keen observations.

He waved his hand my way and introduced himself. How polite. "Helloooo there. You can call me Leon."

I reflexively bowed my head in greeting, causing him to giggle.

He had a masculine face and seemed fairly well built. He wore a hood with cat ears on it, as well as yellow and orange tights with a leopard-spot pattern. Star motif ornaments hung around his neck and waist. Such an outfit would be cute on a small girl, but for a man of his build, it simply highlighted the nature of his ridiculous role.

Leon's look was impressively gaudy, but the final jester was somehow even louder. He swished his long, curled hair back and said, "Oho ho ho. How can we be so sure this scraaaawny knight isn't being dragged this way and that just to make the other knights look better by comparison? Goodness, the knight brigades can be so, sooo wicked, no?"

I clenched my teeth at such a blatant insult to the brigades as a whole. Saviz and Cyril must have noticed as well, but they remained silent.

"Helloooo. I'm Dolly."

The third court jester finally introduced himself. He was a tall man with an air of feminine grace. Upon his head sat a hat festooned with bird feathers and decorated in just about every color imaginable.

As strange and varied as the three court jesters were, I couldn't deny that they were all also conventionally attractive. Perhaps that was what King Laurence wanted?

I slapped my hands over my mouth as memory struck me. Back when I first

entered the knight brigades, I'd heard that the king was apparently incapable of loving a woman! Could he be keeping these attractive court jesters around for *other* reasons then?

Bug-eyed, I gaped at King Laurence. Of course, I could not ask him such a question, but my eyes flickered between him and the jesters over and over. It had to be true. I mean, if I were king, I'd certainly want to surround myself with aesthetically pleasing people. Now that I thought about it, the reason why Saviz and Cyril—no, everyone present—couldn't say anything about the jesters must be because they were the king's "favorites."

Convinced beyond a doubt, I took in the three court jesters. When I glanced behind me, Cyril looked tired for some reason. *Don't worry, Captain! I grasp what's going on loud and clear!* I gave him a nod of understanding, but he just stared back at me with the blank eyes of a dead fish. Weird.

The three court jesters caught my confusion and smirked. They really did look the part. And as court jesters, they had the right to say whatever they wanted since everyone considered jesters too stupid to fully understand what they were saying. Still, I suspected they were more capable than they let on. Otherwise, the king wouldn't have gone out of his way to choose these three to stay at his side. They've already shown themselves to be quick-witted and sharp, and they freely used clever sarcasm to mock authority. Despite all this, most people would probably only see them as fools. Their sarcasm hid their true intentions, and their forced *dialect* gave the impression that they were inarticulate country folk. Their manner of speech could also be interpreted as mockery directed at the listener, but I saw it as an intricate game of sorts. *Wait*, I thought, cocking my head. *Could this be the king's test for me?*

Cerulean, having watched me think for a while, snapped at me with irritation, like I'd insulted him. "Huuuum, you're the kind to show eeeeverything you're thinking on your face, huuuh? I'll bet you're reeeel good at charades. You must think the way I speak is strange, don't yoooou? Do you think I'm stuuupid?"

Exasperated, I replied, "You *want* me to think you're stupid, right?"

“Huuuum? I dunnoooo. Doooo I?”

“You do! You want to think you’re a fool so you can laugh at me for being the fool!”

“Huuuuh? Whatsoever do you meeeean?”

Seeing he was intent on feigning ignorance, I cut to the chase. “Your manner of speech is an homage to Návian’s root language, Lua, right?”

“...Huh?” He blinked at me, mouth hanging open. He’d probably performed this little game many times without anyone correctly identifying what he was up to. The kid was likely a genius of sorts—and he knew it too. I’d bet he came up with this sarcastic manner of speaking to freely ridicule the adults around him. He was likely a close aide to the king as well, which was why the king asked only him for his opinion earlier.

Once I understood his game, I could deconstruct what Cerulean was doing. As a proper adult, I had a responsibility to put an end to this childish game of his. ... Not that I was bitter about his remarks or anything.

“The Lua language places emphasis on vowel sounds and inflections at the end of sentences, but that emphasis faded when the language slowly became our current Návian language,” I said. “Your way of speaking pays respect to the traditional Lua language, accenting the vowels and inflection points of modern Návian the way a Lua speaker might.” I paused for dramatic effect before speaking with a played-up Lua accent. “Buuut ooof cooourse, yooou alreeeady kneew thaaaat, didn’t yooou, Ceruleeean?”

The moment I perfectly imitated his speech pattern, Cerulean snapped his mouth shut and glared at me.

Good. Now I’ve got your attention. I continued my explanation. “The Návian language has changed greatly in the past hundred or so years. Today, it barely resembles the Lua language it came from. To those who don’t know the rules of Lua, your manner of speech would seem very quirky. However, to those who *are* familiar with Lua, your speech would sound quite pleasant.”

He didn't respond, biting his lip in frustration. I met his gaze, but there was no ill will in mine. At least outwardly. Internally, I seethed. *How dare he make fun of Saviz and Cyril, the pride of our knight brigades?!* That insult alone was enough to push me to say the words I knew he wanted to hear the least.

In a tone of mock praise, I said, "Woow, Cerulean! You're so smart!"

As I expected, Cerulean grimaced at my words and glared even harder at me.
"Pfft."

Someone snorted behind me. I turned to find Saviz clearing his throat.

"...Apologies," he said. "I seem to have something caught in my throat."

He'd probably bottled up a lot of gripes toward Cerulean over the years. Cerulean played the fool with his speech, knowing all the while that his manner of speaking actually hid something refined. Those who insulted him for sounding like a fool would instead find the tables turned on them for being the real fools. It was a silly game and in bad taste. He might be a child, but he deserved a scolding for it. The problem was that he had the king's support, so no one could admonish him. That was why he glowered so much at my backhanded compliment—it was likely the first real pushback he'd ever received.

"Cyril! Just what is this knight?!" he said angrily. Notably, he dropped his quirky manner of speech.

Cyril could ignore the question, as a court jester's words held no weight, but in his usual polite manner, he replied, "Fia is a knight of my proud First Knight Brigade."

"There's no way she's just some knight! The only people who know Lua are linguists!"

Obviously, Cyril knew I was no linguist, but he looked at me with a totally serious expression and asked, "Fia, is that true? I thought you were a knight this

whole time, but are you actually a linguist?”

I played along, ever the loyal subordinate. I scratched my cheek to appear confused. “Oh my. Maybe I am a linguist after all?” Then I grinned and said mockingly, “As if! Knowing Lua is nothing special at all. It’s child’s play, really.”

Laughter bubbled past Cyril’s lips before he quickly contained it and donned a serious expression. “Apologies. I seem to have something caught in my throat as well.”

I glanced toward King Laurence, wondering just how long this farce was going to continue. To my confusion, he was staring at me with big, bugged-out eyes. How odd. Just how much of this meeting was a game?

Cerulean scratched at his hair, fidgety and irritated. Strangely, he didn’t move his left arm at all.

Many became court jesters due to injuries that left them with few other options, so it wouldn’t be strange if Cerulean had some kind of impairment. But I could tell his arm was cursed—powerfully so at that. Generally, whenever I saw a curse, I could discern a method of dispelling it. Even if I was seeing that particular curse for the first time, I could work out the dispelling method for a similar curse and play things by ear from there. But as I examined Cerulean’s curse, not a single method came to mind. Confounded, I stared, and he met my gaze with irritation.

“What? You got something to say?” he said.

“No. It’s nothing.”

What was the meaning of this? Had a powerful curse I knew nothing about come about some time in the past three hundred years? Or maybe my skill had decayed. Either way, the fact that there was a curse I couldn’t dispel meant my ability as a saint was lacking, a realization that left me hanging my head.

“Fia, what’s the matter?” Cyril said. “Have Cerulean’s foul words put you in a sour mood?”

I shook my head, but it seemed everyone believed it was Cerulean's words that had me down.

Cerulean apologized, saying, "I don't particularly enjoy hurting girls or anything! So, you know...I'm sorry if I made you feel bad." He bowed his head. Though cheeky, it seemed he had a cute side to him as well.

After Cerulean apologized, King Laurence spoke up to smooth things over.

"I hope we've all made amends? It would be good for you two to make up, seeing as Fia will be serving as my guard. I'm sure you'll have many chances to meet her considering you are always by my side, Cerulean." A thought seemed to occur to him, and he continued. "Oh, I know. Fia, why not play a card game with Cerulean? There's nothing better for deepening your bond."

A suggestion from the king was never actually just a suggestion but a command. Everyone around me understood that as well as I did. The king's word was absolute, so I had no choice but to go along and play cards with Cerulean.

Servants led us to a corner of the office near the windows where a table specifically for playing card games sat waiting. The court jesters must have been well liked to have their own card game playing space in the king's office.

I was just beginning to wonder how often they played when Cerulean spoke up. "The three of us are almost always in this room, but it gets boring just sitting on the steps and listening to the king and nobles talk, so we play games here from time to time."

"Oh, I see. Thank you." I nodded with understanding. Listening to difficult political talk all day sure would get boring, wouldn't it?

Cerulean gave me a suspicious look and asked, "Why are you taking what I say so seriously? Actually, why do you insist on being so polite to me? I'm a court jester, you know. You don't need to mock me, but there's nothing more

insulting than knowing you're just pretending to be polite while actually looking down on me. Speak more casually, like the other knights that come for these meetings."

I laughed like a refined lady. "Oho ho ho ho. Why, I could never be so rude to someone so academically gifted that they knew Lua!"

"What's with the act?!" Cerulean snapped. "And if you really believed that you wouldn't have said so many snide things earlier! What happened to Lua being child's play?!"

I gave another exaggerated laugh, playing up my dramatic act. "Oho ho ho ho. I always treat others with utmost respect. 'Tis simply how I am. Oho ho ho ho."

Without a moment's delay, he shot back, "There's no way that's true! I may not know what you're normally like, but I don't believe what you just said one bit!"

"Goodness gracious, my dear Cerulean. Surely you know that if the Lua language is child's play for me, then always being classy is also an easy feat for me, oho ho ho ho."

He sighed. "Please stop. You have no idea how people with *actual* class talk. You're a terrible copycat."

Excuse me? I'll have you know I used to be a princess! I couldn't let him know that what he said had gotten to me; I was dealing with a child, after all. Better to let things slide. Plus, it was cute how he'd apologized properly, so I had to be the adult and look the other way.

I shot a quick glance behind me as I sat at the playing table. Saviz and Cyril were making small talk with King Laurence, clearly paying no attention to what was going on over here. Perhaps that meant my meeting with the king was over?

I put the meeting out of my mind and dove into the game with the young Cerulean, the well-built Leon, and the feminine-looking Dolly. I was a complete

beginner though, and the three played cards whenever they had time, so I didn't expect to win and didn't really try to. However, luck scored me third place in our first game.

"I-I did it! Not last!"

In our second game, I got second.

"Whoa. Maybe I'm actually a card game prodigy? I'm beating people who know how to play this game!"

Maybe this meant I'd come in first in our next game. I was getting kind of excited to keep playing. That was when Cerulean changed things on me.

"Hey, Saviz, Cyril. Come play with us." He addressed the two casually and without title again.

Leon and Dolly laughed at his rude tone. I, on the other hand, was not so pleased. *The nerve of this boy! How dare he be so disrespectful to the commander and my captain!*

Saviz and Cyril paid no mind to the boy's rudeness, however, and joined us at the table after finishing their conversation with the king. Leon and Dolly gave up their spots so Saviz and Cyril could join Cerulean and me.

"What game will we be playing then?" Cyril asked Cerulean.

"A game called 'Revere the King.' The rules are simple. First, the strength of the cards goes from ace to king, with ace being the weakest and king being the strongest." I nodded, and Cerulean continued. "We each take turns putting a card into play. The card put in always has to be stronger than the previous one. If you can't put a card in, you may pass. If everyone passes, or someone plays a king, then we remove all the cards and the last person to play a card starts off a new round. This repeats until someone wins by emptying their hand."

I understood the rules, but... "Revere the King"? The title was bugging me. In fact, everything from the moment I entered this room had felt off.

Before I could think any deeper about it, however, Leon spoke up. "Hey, why

don't we add the joker while we're at it?" He pulled a card out of the box.

Cerulean frowned. "Hmm... The rules get complicated when we play with the joker though. It's the strongest card, but there's only one of them, and you can only play it after a jack, queen, or king."

"Oh!" I exclaimed.

So *that's* what was going on. My meeting with the king wasn't over yet. Or rather, my meeting with the king was all a test of sorts.

"Ah... So this is another bad-taste joke..." I muttered, carefully watching Leon deal the cards. Everything was different now that I realized what was going on. Leon looked clumsy at first glance, but he was probably an expert with cards. Through some technique or trick, he could shuffle exactly how he wanted and dole out specific cards to specific people.

I watched the cards as Leon dealt, and sure enough, I received the one and only joker. That just made me more certain that I was being tested. Curious how many of the players were conspiring with the king, I glanced at Saviz. He appraised his hand with a serious look. Cyril bore a similar expression. This was all normal enough, but I couldn't help noticing how zealous they were about this game. They had no reason to take it so seriously, so there had to be something more going on. In all likelihood, they were playing the game on the king's absolute orders.

I remembered what Cyril had told me in the corridor earlier: *"His Majesty may try to test you in various ways. Just think of it as him examining the results of your training and try your best."*

I glanced over at the king sitting on his gilded throne with a triple crown on his head. He met my eyes and smiled.

...I see how it is. I'm being tested here. And if I fail this test, I will probably be removed from the First Knight Brigade. Well, I can't let that happen! Especially not when Captain Kurtis left Sutherland just so he could be with me!

I held fast to my resolve, determined to give this game everything I had.

The play order was Cerulean, me, Saviz, and then Cyril.

As the first player, Cerulean put down a one, then added to his earlier explanation of the rules. “Oh, so I said the player that empties their hand first wins, but there’s a special rule added now that we’re playing with the joker. If a player empties their hand on a king, and the next player plays a joker, then the player that finished with a king ends up in last place instead of first. Having the king have a weakness makes the game more fun, you see.”

I barely managed not to sigh. Of course he’d held back on explaining the connection between the king and joker for some dramatic reveal. This was all a farce, but I decided I would play along. I studied my cards and eventually set down a three. That left me with a three, a four, two fives, a six, an eight, a nine, a ten, three kings, and a joker. I had three of the strongest cards, the king, and the one and only trump card, the joker. Leon had definitely delivered this hand to me on purpose.

But thanks to that special rule Cerulean just revealed, my joker could throw someone into last place if they played their king right before me. Of course, it also meant I didn’t need to worry about someone revealing a joker, since I had the only one. In other words, saving a king for the end was the simplest route to victory. The joker may be the strongest card, but it had the limitation of only being played after a face card, so I needed to use it early. Plus, I already had three kings, so the value of the joker was a lot lower.

...Or at least, that’s what I was *meant* to think after being dealt this hand intentionally.

Without a word, I continued to play my cards out. I started with my weakest cards first, getting rid of my three, four, five, and so on. As the game proceeded, my hand shrank. Cerulean played a queen, then I played a king, leaving me with two kings and the joker.

Cerulean played a jack. I played a king, leaving me with one king and the joker.

Cerulean played another jack. Without hesitation, I played the king—and for a brief instant, the three other players tensed.

I don't know how the rest of them managed to resist gaping at me then. They tensed minutely, a move I wouldn't have noticed if I wasn't keyed into their every flinch. Perhaps I should have expected such strong poker faces from the leaders of our nation. This made me certain, though: The three of them knew my hand. At the very least, they knew I had three kings and the joker. That's why they were so shocked to see me play the king instead of the joker. It was by all means a terrible move, as it left me stuck with a joker I could only play after a face card instead of a king I could play whenever I wanted. Of course, this game was set up so I would win no matter what, and they all knew it. The only thing I had to choose was *how* I would win.

And so, the hand arrived. I had one card in hand, while Cerulean, Saviz, and Cyril had two each. A nine sat on the table. Cerulean wordlessly played a jack. I impassively looked at the card and said, "I pass."

His eyes jerked up to mine. "Fia, do you understand the rules?"

I nodded. "Of course. The first player to empty their hand wins, right? And since there's a king and joker still unplayed, the special rule you mentioned is live. If a player plays a king as their last card, they'll win, unless the next person plays a joker, in which case the player that played the king becomes last place. Oh, and the joker can only be played after a face card. Did I get everything?"

"...Yeah," he reluctantly replied.

Oh dear... I thought, exasperated. *You really do know my hand, don't you, Cerulean?* After all, why else would he question me? Why else would he think it weird that I didn't take the first-place prize so graciously handed to me on a silver platter?

Saviz played a queen, and Cyril passed. Cerulean hesitated to make his play,

but he had no real choice. He played his last card, a king, then looked resentfully at me.

Tauntingly, I said, “Oh, what’s this? You played your last card? Wasn’t there something you had to say when you won?”

“...Revere the King!” he mumbled, seeming to drag every word out of his own mouth.

I lifted my face and looked around the table. Every eye was focused on me, and I smeared on a wicked smile before saying, “Oh my. Someone remind me, was that special rule still active? Because it looks like I won.”

I overlapped Cerulean’s king with my joker, which depicted a jester with white-and-blue checkered clothes and a hood with horse ears. Talk about bad taste.

“Revere the King!” I declared. After being forced to dance along with this meaningless charade, I was feeling pretty smug about my victory. “Interesting. So the joker outranks the king, huh?”

Horried gazes met my snide comment. That included Saviz and Cyril, of course, but they had to reap what they’d sown here after forcing me into this senseless game with the king.

I stood while everyone was still in shock and approached Cerulean. Without missing a beat, I saluted him in perfect knightly form. “...Am I wrong, Your Majesty?”

The room fell dead silent.

Cerulean, the king of the Náv Kingdom, glared at me with indignation.



Saviz regained his composure first. Calmly, he said, "Your Majesty, I ask you to clear the room."

Cerulean's eyes went wide. He shot a look at King Laurence, who'd gone rigid with shock but still understood what went unspoken in that look. He stood and ushered all of his aides and knights out of the room, leaving only Cerulean, Saviz, Cyril, Leon, Dolly, and me. Knights likely stood just outside the doors guarding us, but it was only us inside, which probably meant those other jesters were really the king's aides. It seemed I was right to assume they were more capable than they appeared.

I was sizing up the muscular Leon and the feminine Dolly when a sharp voice exclaimed, "Saviz! Was it you?!"

Cerulean glared angrily at Saviz, who was sitting across from him.

Saviz shrugged. "I've done nothing to interfere with Your Majesty's game. I know full well doing so would only make problems for me later."

"Then it must've been you, Cyril!" Cerulean narrowed his eyes at Cyril, who had been quietly observing the situation. "Fia's your direct subordinate, right?! Did you leak the truth of the meeting to her?!"

Cyril's shoulders drooped. "I'm saddened that Your Majesty would doubt me. Have I not played along all this time as you toyed with my recruits year after year? Why is it only now that you suspect I broke your rules?"

"Then how did she know?!" Cerulean's white-hot rage turned on me. "How could this young, imperceptive-looking knight figure out I'm the king?!"

How rude. Did he realize I was right in front of him? I held my tongue, as I had not been permitted to speak.

Incredulously, he questioned me. "Fia, just what made you think I was the king? Any reasonable person would have assumed it was the guy sitting on the throne!"

I chose to interpret this question as granting me permission to speak. “Indeed. But your names were a clue. The letters in ‘Laurence’ can be rearranged to spell ‘Cerulean.’ At first, I thought Your Majesty was named Cerulean because of your blue eyes, but it’s actually just you having some fun in bad taste by hinting that you’re the king, correct?”

“Wha... I... How?!” His eyes flew even wider, but I had no pity for him. He deserved to be in shock after pulling this prank. It wasn’t my fault I’d seen through it.

“Your Majesty’s outfit was also a clue,” I said, looking him over from head to toe. He wore a hood with horse ears and white-and-blue checkered full-body tights. “The Náv Kingdom’s current guardian beast is the Black Dragon, but before that it was the White Unicorn. The national flag back then was white and blue. Considering you paid homage to the Lua language, it makes sense to think you were also imitating the national flag and guardian beast from the time Lua was at the height of its power.”

Cerulean opened and closed his mouth like a fish hauled out of the water and gasping for breath.

“But those two clues alone could only make me believe a young jester was just having some childish fun. After all, it’s hard to imagine the proud leader of our kingdom disguising himself as a court jester.” I stared at his left arm. “I only realized the truth after noticing the curse afflicting your left arm. This is the first time I’ve ever seen a curse this powerful, but that would make sense as this is... the Spirit Lord’s curse. Am I right?”

I delivered this observation with confidence, but, in truth, it was pretty shocking to think the Spirit Lord had cursed someone. In my past life, all saints made pacts with spirits, so spirits were close to humans. But even then, nobody had ever seen the Spirit Lord. The fact the elusive Spirit Lord had appeared before a human was surprising on its own, but to think they had cursed someone bordered on inconceivable. Still, I couldn’t think of any other being that could cast a curse I was unable to dispel.

Two things about this still bothered me, however. First, I didn't understand why the Spirit Lord would appear before Cerulean to curse him, especially when spirits haven't appeared in so long. Second, how did Cerulean look so much younger than Saviz when he was supposed to be his older brother? I couldn't figure those two things out, but this was hardly the time to ask.

Cerulean was breathing raggedly. His voice was strained when he said, "Even... Even supposing the Spirit Lord did curse me...that would not tell you I was the king..."

Slightly exasperated that I had to explain something so obvious, I said, "No, it would. Spirits can only interact with humans as their pacts allow them to. Naturally, it follows that they cannot curse humans...unless that human was part spirit. The fact that you were cursed by a spirit is proof you have royal blood in you. And, as you know, the ancestor of the royal family came from the union of the Spirit Lord and a human woman."

The only royalty who would bear such a curse and disguise themselves as a court jester was the king. Saviz was the only other member of the royal family, after all—at least, from what I'd heard.

Cerulean went stiff as a board, panting between clenched teeth. With a mighty effort, he strained his voice to speak again. "...Ha...ha... Saviz...just...what is this girl...?"

Saviz's face was stiff when he replied. "Good question. I was able to listen calmly up until the part where she mentioned the White Unicorn, but...beyond that... Really, just who is she?"

"Huh?!" My beloved Commander was really going to toss me to the wolves? It couldn't be. I rushed to him, eager to soothe his suspicions. "C-C-Commander Saviz, please don't abandon me! It's me, Fia! Your ever-obedient, useful, and one-hundred-percent ordinary knight!"

Saviz, Cerulean, and even my ever-kind Cyril bore holes through me with their eyes, not saying a word.

The first to break the silence was Cerulean.

“Fia, there’s a lot I want to ask, so sit down for now. ...No, actually, let’s move to the neighboring room. I’m exhausted.” He rose sluggishly from his seat and trudged toward a door to an adjoining room. Leon promptly swept ahead of him and opened the door for Cerulean. I followed, sandwiched between Saviz and Cyril.

The adjoining room contained a fireplace, some sofas, and a smattering of other fine furnishings. It was probably the king’s personal relaxation chamber. Cerulean, Saviz, Cyril, and I settled on sofas surrounding a table. Dolly was there in an instant, setting down drinks for each of us with practiced grace. Afterward, he and Leon settled elsewhere in the room to give us a little privacy.

Cerulean flung back his horse-eared hood and scratched at his golden-blond hair. He snatched the glass Dolly had set out for him and drank it all in one gulp before speaking. “Allow me to reintroduce myself, Fia. As you have already figured out, I am Laurence, King of Náv. However, my body double is the one publicly acting as the king, so continue to call me Cerulean and treat me like a court jester, if you could.”

“Uhh...” I shot a confused look over to Cyril.

“Very few people know the king is actually a body double,” Cyril said. “The chancellor knows, as do a few ministers and a few members of the knight brigades. In total, only about twenty people know the king’s secret.”

Twenty was not a lot considering the number of people attending the king. But perhaps such a number was necessary to prevent the secret from spreading.

...Wait. Didn’t new recruits to the First Knight Brigade meet with the king every year? They had to have played this game with Cerulean, and this year alone saw about twenty new recruits. Did none of them figure out his secret? I cocked my head in wonder.

As though reading my mind, Cyril began to explain. “The knights of the First Knight Brigade do not know the king is a body double and guard him believing he’s the true king. However, they believe Cerulean the court jester to be dear to the king and have been ordered to prioritize him over the king in a situation where both come under threat. For the times Cerulean acts alone, a knight is assigned to guard him.”

“Oh, I see.”

A good knight follows orders, even if they think they’re strange, so they’d probably really protect a court jester over the king if it came to it.

At my nod, Cyril continued. “Similarly, the knights who meet with the king believe the meeting is simply for the king to introduce his favorite court jester to them. Nobody until now has seen through Cerulean’s strange speech or detected anything odd about the fact that the court jesters are all terrible at the card games they supposedly play regularly. Their only takeaways are that they’ve been given an oddball to protect, nothing more.”

“Wait, you mean...”

“Yes. You are the first of all the recruits to figure out who Cerulean is. None of the others know the true king’s identity. My poor knights. Year in and year out, they’re toyed with by Cerulean with nothing to show for it.”

“Could have done without that last bit, Cyril.” Cerulean scowled, sinking back on the sofa to sulk.

Saviz spoke up then, a stern look on his face. “If you do not wish to hear such a complaint, then you should reconsider this boorish test of yours. It hasn’t been a problem yet, as no one’s discovered the truth, but now that Fia’s seen through things, those who overheard all that will need an explanation.”

Cerulean pursed his lips but didn’t complain. The look he leveled at me was full of exasperation. “You heard the man, Fia. All the knights and aides in the neighboring room need an explanation as to why you called me the king, so we’re going to tell them you were just spouting nonsense.”

“Whaaaaaat?!” I exclaimed. Seriously, wasn’t that too cruel? Why did I have to be embarrassed in such a way? The knights of the First Knight Brigade would forever think I lost my mind and called a court jester the king! Why should I be punished when I was the only one who actually saw through that silly game?!

“If it makes you feel any better, Fia,” Saviz said, “Cyril and I know just how capable you really are. Please bear the humiliation for the well-being of the nation. Of course, Cerulean is the one truly at fault for engaging in such a twisted game in the first place, so I’m sure he’d be more than happy to give you some pocket money for a luxurious dinner.”

“Huh?” Cerulean had been resting his chin on his hand, but at this suggestion his head slipped off his palm.

Saviz did not relent, his tone icy. “Why are you so surprised? You realize you’ve greatly embarrassed a promising young knight, don’t you?”

Cerulean straightened out of his slouch. His voice was meek when he responded, Saviz’s words apparently inspiring a change of heart. “O-oh, of course I do! I apologize for shaming one of your knights, Saviz! My bad!” He nervously fiddled with his collar and continued. “Oh, right. Fia doesn’t have a clue what’s going on, does she? Let me explain some things. For starters, my appearance. About ten years ago when I was nineteen, my body suddenly began aging in reverse. This is probably due to the Spirit Lord blood in me. It sometimes causes royalty to inherit strange powers. Explaining that to the citizens would only scare them, however, so I’m using a body double.”

My eyes went wide with surprise. “Wow, such a thing can happen? Then your current body must be around twelve or thirteen years old. Actually, you come up to my chin, so maybe you’re a little older than that.”

“Not quite. I grow a year younger every year, so my body should be that of a nine-year-old right now.”

“Huh?! Aren’t you a little too big to be a nine-year-old?!” I, at the very least, was a lot tinier when I was nine years old. I checked with Cyril and Saviz, but

they didn't seem to agree with me.

"Not at all," Cyril said. "If anything, I feel as though Cerulean is small for a nine-year-old. I was far larger when I was nine myself."

"It was the same for me. I wasn't this tiny," Saviz said.

Off in a corner of the room, Leon and Dolly expressed similar sentiments.

Of course. I'd forgotten that everyone else in this room was a monster of a man who couldn't comprehend what it was like to be my size. Grrr... It made sense for Cyril and Saviz to be huge, them being knights and all, but why would Leon and Dolly, mere king's aides, need to be so big? It wasn't fair!

...Unless the two of them doubled as the king's guards. The knights would probably protect a court jester as ordered, but on the off chance something went wrong, Leon and Dolly would be there to serve as protection. Wow. The two weren't just smart but also strong.

With some awe, I sized up Leon and Dolly. Seeing this, Cerulean said, "Don't worry about those two. I want to talk about you."

"What?! Your Majesty has taken a personal interest in me?!" I put my hand over my heart in surprise, earning a disdainful look from him.

"No. And didn't I tell you to call me Cerulean? Don't be so formal with me. What did you mean by 'personal interest,' anyway? Why would I take 'personal interest' in someone who doesn't even respect me?!"

Oh dear. Apparently, I'd given my king the impression I didn't respect him. I rushed to amend this, saying, "Wh-whatever are you saying?! Of course I respect Your Maj...you, Cerulean! You're our beloved monarch, and—"

He stuck a hand out to stop me. "Enough. If you respected me at all, you wouldn't have so smugly humiliated me when we played cards! I may be a jester, but I'm no fool!"

Leon and Dolly began to whisper in their corner.

"I'm pretty sure even a fool of a jester could tell Fia was mocking Cerulean..."

Leon said.

“Indeed. Wouldn’t it be hilarious if Fia playing dumb here was just her continuing to mock him?” Dolly said.

When Cerulean overheard this, anger flashed through his eyes. “I’m tired of this veneer of politeness!” he shot at me. “I just know there’s no way you normally act that polite, no matter what you say! I don’t want anyone suspecting I’m not a court jester, so just treat me rudely!”

I really was polite, though, and the idea of disrespecting the king made me flinch instinctively. But this was a direct order, so I had no choice but to obey, it seemed. “...Fine. It’ll be hard to talk rudely to you with how polite I always am, but I shall endeavor to follow Your Majesty’s orders!”

Cerulean sighed. “...Saviz and Cyril must have it rough, always having to deal with you. Anyway, back to what I was saying: I want to talk about you. Oh, and just so you don’t misunderstand again, I’m not interested in your hobbies or whatever, but about what led you to be able to tell I was the king.”

“Oh, of course.” I nodded my head in understanding.

“You can skip the parts where my name and outfit served as a hint. Honestly, it’s pretty eerie that those served as any kind of clue whatsoever in the short time you had with me, but whatever. Someone with an interest in anagrams could have figured out the name thing, and someone with knowledge of the old Náv flag and guardian beast could have pieced together the significance of my clothes. But how in the world did you notice my curse?”

“Huh?” But that was the easiest part! One look was all it took to tell he was cursed.

“What’s stranger yet was that you identified my curse as the Spirit Lord’s. Just how did you do it, Fia?”

I shrugged and said, “Well, you haven’t moved your left arm at all, so it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

“What? There’s no way that alone would tell you I’m cursed! It’s amazing you were observant enough to realize I hadn’t moved my left arm, but...don’t tell me you just *guessed* I was cursed from that alone?”

I didn’t guess at all. It was obvious when someone was cursed, just like how you could look at someone and tell if they were sleepy. What was there to explain here...?

Come to think of it, I’d had a similar conversation three hundred years ago... I’d tried to explain to other saints why it was obvious when someone was cursed, but they just gave me the strangest looks. Not a single person understood what I was getting at. That past failure left me even more lost about how to explain myself now.

Cerulean, who’d been studying my face this whole time, narrowed his eyes in disbelief and said, “No way... Don’t tell me you blindly guessed that the royal family are descendants of the Spirit Lord.”

“I didn’t blindly guess anything! *Everyone* knows the child of the Spirit Lord is the ancestor of the royal family! And a curse strong enough to make your whole arm unusable can’t be the work of anything but the Spirit Lord!”

“Hold on, Fia. It’s true that everyone knows the child of the Spirit Lord is our ancestor, but people consider that to be a fairy tale, not a literal truth. Don’t tell me... Was it your lack of common sense that allowed you to guess my identity?” His eyes widened with shock.

Wrong, wrong, wrong! I knew the truth because I was a member of the royal family and had inherited the Spirit Lord’s blood in my past life. There was no way I’d ever doubt the legend when I had felt the Spirit Lord’s blessing so strongly myself! But...how could I possibly explain that?

“I see... So that’s how it is... You spoke with such certainty earlier, so I assumed you had some firm evidence, but you actually concluded I was the king on shaky grounds, didn’t you?”

“Uh...”

How odd. Moments ago I was a freaking genius, but here he was frowning at me like I was some sad, pitiful dolt. How did it come to this?

Cerulean nodded to himself as though all of this had suddenly fallen into place for him. In reality, he couldn't be farther from the truth. Figuring out his identity took some brilliant deduction on my part, but he was declaring it all a lucky guess brought about by my lack of common sense! The nerve.

Then again, how *could* I explain myself here? There was too much I couldn't talk about. Perhaps it was better to bear the humiliation and let him misunderstand.

Having made up my mind, I shifted the conversation in a different direction. "Hey, Cerulean, can I ask you something? Did the Spirit Lord appear before you when it cursed you? Because I thought spirits haven't appeared before anyone in a long while."

"If you're asking *that* kind of question, then you must really not know a thing," he said. "No, Fia, I've never met the Spirit Lord myself."

"Huh? Then how are you cursed?"

"This curse was inflicted on one of my ancestors three hundred years ago and has been passed down to me."

"Wait, what?!" Three hundred years ago sounded really specific. I knew the world didn't revolve around me or anything, but I couldn't help but wonder if I'd had some part in that curse somehow. Probably not though, right? I mean, I'd never even met the Spirit Lord, so it didn't seem likely...

As I pondered, Cerulean grinned, saying, "I can tell from your expression that you're thinking something I'd have no hope of even coming close to understanding. I can't believe the knight brigades have kept such a fascinating knight from me for so long." He extended his right hand. "At any rate, congratulations. I never thought somebody would actually see through my ruse,

but it wasn't a bad experience. Now, I've got some urgent business to attend to, so I'm going to have to call it here for today. But let's meet up every now and then; I'll make time for you."

He acted like a child, a whimsical court jester, and a king in equal parts. I couldn't refuse his request, so I accepted his hand and shook weakly.

He sighed with exasperation. "Your true feelings are readily apparent. I'm shocked you have the gall to claim I'm your 'beloved monarch' when you're this reluctant to even shake my hand."

"H-hmph, I'm sorry to say there's no way a child like you could understand my true feelings. From the moment I reached adulthood, I've endeavored to become a mysterious lady who can't be read by anyone!"

He laughed. "Don't be fooled by my appearance. I'm no child—I'm twenty-nine already." With some hesitation, he added, "...And in another year I'll be thirty."

I seized on that beat of hesitation. "Oh, I get it! Hitting your thirties is rough! The women in my dorm always tell me turning thirty is a nightmare. Don't worry, I get you!"

I meant to console him with my words, but he furrowed his brow in confusion. "...I see. Well, it's no surprise you wouldn't know anything. How very interesting. I wonder how I'll feel when I turn thirty." He turned to Cyril. "Let's call it here, Cyril. You have a captains' meeting after this, right? Report the outcome of my meeting with Fia for me." Cerulean was clearly ordering him as the king, not a court jester, so Cyril bowed his head. Then Cerulean murmured, "...It's too bad, though. If you all weren't already so taken with her, I would've loved to make Fia a court jester."

His words hit me like a bucket of cold water. I scanned the weird outfits and baubles that he, Leon, and Dolly wore. "N-no way! *Absoluuuuutely* not!"

"Oh? It might not look like it, but we court jesters actually have quite high status," Cerulean said. "Saviz and Cyril are just about the only ones who can

stand shoulder to shoulder with us.”

The three court jesters left the room then, laughing as they went. I grimaced at their retreating backs.

Once they were gone, I turned to Cyril and gave him a big nod. “I finally understand why you loathe these meetings so much, Captain! They’re an exhausting affair.”

He looked me over for a moment as though trying to assess how much I truly understood. In the end, he didn’t dispute my assessment. “Indeed. His Majesty holds these meetings to gauge the knights who will enter his guard, so they are something of a necessity. But maintaining the farce is still rather taxing. Today, however, I’ve learned that seeing my knights toyed with is preferable many times over to seeing His Majesty himself toyed with.”

“...Huh?”

“Just between you and me, it was a bit refreshing watching you dismantle His Majesty’s strange manner of speaking, impudent as you may have been. But that card game left me in shambles. The suspense of wondering what you would pull as you intentionally misplayed had me thinking my stomach would turn itself inside out.”

“O-oh, is that so...?”

“In fact, I thought my stomach would explode the moment you so proudly said, ‘the joker outranks the king’ and humiliated His Majesty.”

“O-oh, Captain Cyril, you’re so funny. Someone as sturdy as you wouldn’t have their stomach burst at something like that.” I hoped the flattery would appease him, but his grim expression didn’t let up at all. Switching tactics, I changed the topic. “I-Incidentally, uhh, it looks like I’m your most loyal knight out of all of the First Knight Brigade!”

“What do you mean?” He furrowed his brow.

Proudly, I said, “Before the meeting, you told me His Majesty might try to test

me and that I should think of it as him examining the results of my training and try my best. Well, your loyal subordinate has carried out your orders to a T and figured out who the real king was as a result! This proves my loyalty to you is higher than all the other knights!”

“Oh...” he said flatly. “So I dug my own grave, did I? How silly of me.”

Just what, I wondered, could he mean by that?

Interlude:

The Twin Jewels of the King

IF ONE WERE ASKED who the twin jewels of the knight brigades were, just about everybody would answer the Dragon of Náv and the Tiger of Náv, First Knight Brigade Captain Cyril and Second Knight Brigade Captain Desmond, respectively.

But if one were asked who the twin jewels of the *king* were, how would they answer? Many people served the king, and in a far less public manner than the knight brigades. There were separate people for diplomacy, internal affairs, public health, agriculture, and more. Surely it would be impossible to narrow things down to the king's two best?

Not at all, as it would turn out. No matter who you asked, everybody named the same two people as the king's finest: Duke Lloyd Alcott and Duke Noel Balfour, both among the Three Great Dukes of the kingdom. The king regarded no one else as more indispensable. Indeed, the more one learned about the true affairs of the kingdom, the more apparent this fact became. King Laurence always had at least one of the two in attendance for important functions, and they always provided the perfect counsel.

"Your Majesty, this proposal seems rather excellent, does it not?" One of the two would voice their opinion in such a manner, and the king would have all he needed to move forward with a proposal. Even the neighboring nations and their nobles agreed that these two excellent aides to the king made the Náv Kingdom unassailable. No one had ever seen the likes of these two before now.

What was more, the king's younger brother stood at the helm of the country's knight brigades, and he was further aided by the Duke of Sutherland, the most prominent of the Three Great Dukes. Together, the two fortified the entire kingdom.

All could see that the country rested in good hands and that having the Three Great Dukes directly aid the royal family produced the best results for the nation. Hence, few complained about the king keeping three whimsical court jesters by his side for amusement. These court jesters were known to say strange things out of the blue, but that was expected from the simple-minded. Most believed they lacked the intellect to understand their own words, after all. The king's court jesters took advantage of these preconceptions to say what they pleased, even airing their grievances this way. Oftentimes, their pointed sarcasm struck at the very core of the country, critiques few would understand. This was, of course, only possible because one of the jesters was actually the king. As for the other two...

Three houses alone enjoyed the rank of duke in Náv. They each enjoyed great authority, leading the heads of the houses to earn the moniker the Three Great Dukes out of respect.

Men regarded the Three Great Dukes with awe, while women adored them. Their high status most certainly played a role there, but their good looks also garnered attention. They included: Cyril Sutherland with his handsome, gentle features and long, gray hair tied back at the nape; Noel Balfour with his masculine, striking face and orange hair that reached his shoulders; and Lloyd Alcott with his soft eyes and silver-blue hair that ended at his neck. Women who saw so much as a portrait of the men all agreed each was dashing in his own way.

That day, Duke Noel Balfour and Duke Lloyd Alcott were enjoying a walk in the royal castle's garden. Anyone who saw them hurried clear out of their path with deep bows to show their respect. The dukes were indifferent to their surroundings, however, as they were lost in their own conversation.

Or at least it had appeared that way until Duke Alcott noticed a figure off in

the distance. Squinting, he said, “Oh my. Isn’t that Fia over there?”

“You can see that far? I can barely tell that’s even a person.” Duke Balfour strained his eyes.

With confidence, Duke Alcott replied, “Oho ho ho. That’s Fia, all right. Perhaps you’d recognize her if you were as enraptured by her as I am. Why, in just the few hours we were with her, she captivated me completely! Before I knew it, she’s become all I can think of! I’d wager I could identify her by silhouette alone now.”

“Lloyd, you’re mixing up voices.”

“Oh my. I mean... Oh. Pardon me.” Duke Alcott’s voice switched from a high-pitched feminine register to a deeper, masculine one. In a more hushed tone, he continued. “I’m quite fond of smart girls like her. She’s sharper than any of us, I’d venture. Never in a million years did I think someone would figure out Cerulean’s identity, but she did so with ease—and made quite a spectacle of it. All the evidence she gave for her deduction was spot-on as well. She’s the real deal.”

Duke Balfour lowered his voice to a whisper before replying. “But wasn’t her figuring out Cerulean was cursed, as well as a descendant of the Spirit Lord, ultimately a shot in the dark?”

Duke Alcott regarded his friend like he was a fool. “Of course not! There’s no way she’d coincidentally guess such an impossible-sounding thing twice. She must have noticed somehow but lacked the evidence to clearly explain herself.”

“You really think so?” Duke Balfour said.

“I do, beyond a doubt! I suspect her ability to analyze and reason is far better than our own. She simply had too few facts to work off of, so she couldn’t logically explain herself. Of course, all present but you noticed this.”

Shocked, Duke Balfour said, “What? Really?!”

“Of course. Cerulean noticing goes without saying, but the same is true for His

Highness Saviz and Duke Sutherland. Why do you think those two were so quiet? It's because they didn't want to inadvertently reveal anything to Fia." Nonchalantly, Duke Alcott adjusted his course, turning them toward Fia.

Duke Balfour, still blinking in surprise at his friend, didn't notice the minute adjustment. "...All right, so what are you getting at?"

"Well, as far as I can tell, Fia's a kind of genius. She can observe things we can't even perceive and reach the truth through means beyond logic. Of course, such a person is a double-edged sword to have around. She can provide us with useful information, but she'll also pick up on things we *don't* want her to know." Duke Alcott paused to look meaningfully at Duke Balfour. "Now, her figuring out Cerulean was the true king isn't a massive issue in itself, but, well...Cerulean and His Highness have a certain limitation they have to keep in mind, don't they? And despite the secret nature of this limitation, Cerulean almost revealed it just for fun."

Duke Balfour nodded along. "Right. I almost jumped out of my skin when he said, 'I wonder how I'll feel when I turn thirty.'"

Duke Alcott spread his arms wide and said, "I'm sure it's only a matter of time before Fia pieces things together with a hint like that. What's worrying is that there's no telling what will actually give her the final piece to the puzzle, given her genius nature. That's why His Highness and Duke Sutherland chose to not say a single word. And as luck would have it, Fia's thoughts went down a different track. Something about hitting your thirties being a nightmare for women. Her thoughts are truly beyond our comprehension." He turned his gaze skyward. "...I can't help but look at her and wonder if similar things have happened around her before. Perhaps such logic-defying, earth-shattering experiences are commonplace for her. Yes, that must be the case. There's probably never a dull moment with her. I would love to be her friend, but it seemed His Highness and Duke Sutherland did not want me getting close to her."

"Good. Only bad things can come of you getting involved with her," Duke

Balfour said with utter seriousness.

Duke Alcott snapped his fingers with realization and laughed. “Oh, but of course! Ha ha ha ha ha! I may not be able to approach her as a court jester, but I’m not a jester around the clock, am I? As a duke, I can approach her whenever I want.” With that, he made a beeline for Fia.

Unfortunately, Duke Alcott only made it a few steps before Duke Balfour grabbed him by the arm to halt him.

“What’s the meaning of this, Noel?” Duke Alcott frowned.

Without missing a beat, Duke Balfour raised his voice as he shot back, “That’s what I should be asking you! The secret of the Spirit Lord’s curse is something none can know! Don’t go sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong!”

Duke Alcott scowled at his friend. “Hah! As if any of that matters now! What Cerulean said will give that secret away one day! What’s the point of walking on eggshells?”

Leaning in so close to Duke Alcott that their foreheads met, Duke Balfour lowered his voice and replied, “Perhaps you’re right. But that doesn’t mean we can go around stirring the pot. Have you forgotten why we’ve distanced ourselves from the knight brigades to begin with? It was to draw a clear line between our king’s faction and His Highness Saviz’s faction, to lower the difficulties of the latter’s eventual rule.”

“So I shouldn’t go near the knight brigades at all? Why don’t you be honest? You just don’t want me getting near Fia, do you? And I think I know why. That red hair and those golden eyes. She’s incredible! She resembles *her* perfectly, as if she walked out of the portrait herself!”

Duke Balfour widened his eyes in horror and shock. “Wha—you’re really going there?! You’re *seriously* kicking up that hornet’s nest?!”

“I know you’re worried that me getting close to Fia will draw attention to her, but her colors are so blatantly similar that she’s guaranteed to draw attention

sooner or later regardless! Given that, it's better I become acquainted with her so I can handle the fallout myself as much as possible."

Duke Balfour buried his face in his hands and squatted down. "Ahhh, why do you always say what you're thinking so directly?! At least be a little ambiguous and leave me some hope, damn it! ...Fine! I'll admit, I also noticed the similarities! But I don't see it as anything but a portent of disaster. Just thinking about what the high-ranking saints will say when they lay eyes on her already has my stomach churning..."

"Surely you can bear it. Unlike His Highness Saviz and Duke Sutherland, the two of us can get away with the bare minimum of interaction with the saints. Come to think of it, it's quite a surprise His Highness Saviz is keeping Fia by his side, considering her colors are so similar to Her Holiness the Great Saint. That alone is enough to make her special. My interest in her grows by the minute." Saying that, Duke Alcott resumed his determined stride toward Fia.

Duke Balfour hurriedly raised his voice. "Lloyd! All that nonsense about getting closer to her so you can handle the fallout was a lie, wasn't it?! You only want to get closer to her out of pure, selfish interest!"

Duke Alcott waved away the comment without looking back. "Fia joined the knight brigades almost half a year ago, yet I haven't seen her once, even though knights approach me at every opportunity in hopes of making connections with me."

"So what? She's not into that kind of stuff! Leave her be!"

"Indeed, she is the rare person who has no interest whatsoever in politicking. In other words, I have to approach her myself if I want to get to know her. And as I've already mentioned, I am utterly captivated by her."

"So you admit you're doing this out of your own selfish desires after all!"

Duke Alcott ignored his friend and continued to briskly walk away. When he reached Fia, he found her crouched down picking weeds with zeal. For a time, he stood over her, waiting for her to notice him. But when she didn't look up at

him, he grew impatient and said, “Hello, Fia.”

She jerked her eyes up to him, blinking several times. “Oh, umm...”

He smiled kindly as he mused over her reaction. Her bewildered response would typically mean she didn’t recognize him, but that obviously couldn’t be the case. She had easily seen through the king’s court jester disguise, so it stood to reason that she would recognize Duke Alcott as Dolly. Ah, but there was another reason she had reacted in such a way. Once he realized this, Duke Alcott hurried to apologize. “Oh, do forgive me. I haven’t given you my real name yet, have I? How rude of me!”

But of course. She acted bewildered to nudge him into properly introducing himself. How graceful of her, though, perhaps, a little roundabout. He found himself bemused.

Fia was the first person he had ever seen drive their—to borrow her own words—“beloved monarch” Cerulean into a corner. Hence, she was something of a wonder. He’d hoped she’d turn out to be as sharp as he suspected...and it seemed those hopes were well placed from how cleverly she’d asked for his name.

He smiled broadly and bent to extend a hand to her. “I apologize for forgetting to introduce myself. I am Lloyd, Duke of Alcott. Please, feel free to just call me ‘Lloyd.’ Would you mind if I called you ‘Fia’?”

Despite definitely already knowing who he was, Fia scrambled to her feet and rejected his offer. “Y-you’re a duke?! I could never be so impertinent as to call you by your first name! Let me call you Duke Alcott. That’s much more appropriate!”

He frowned. “But it would be quite strange for you to address me by my title when you address Cerulean by name.”

“Huh? Wait, you know about Cerulean...?”

She couldn’t seriously be confused. No, this had to be some sort of joke. He

smiled and leaned close to her ear to whisper, “But of course. I am one of the twenty in the know.”

Such was all she needed to understand. Wide-eyed, she exclaimed, “O-oh, I see! Yeah, I guess you would know! You’re a duke, after all!”

Duke Balfour, who’d been quietly observing the scene up until now, said, “Wait, are you sure she isn’t *actually* surprised?! Hey, Lloyd, I’m pretty sure Fia here doesn’t have a damn clue who you are.”

“Impossible! Although that would be amusing in its own right... Er, Fia, you *do* recognize me, don’t you?” Fia fidgeted awkwardly. He gaped at her, exclaiming, “Genuinely?! Fia, it’s me! Lloyd! L-L-O-Y-D! And if you rearrange the letters, you get...?”

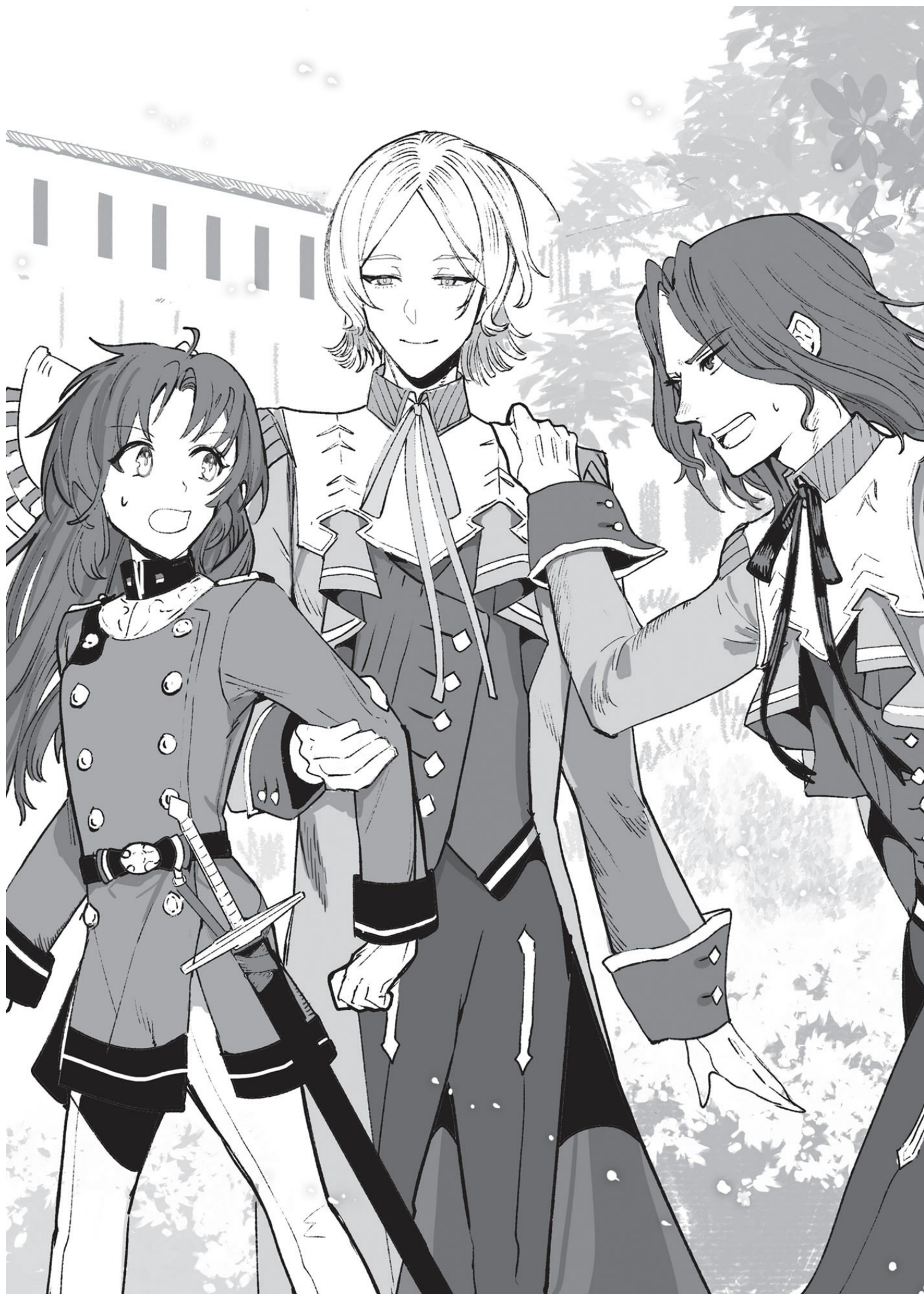
“Huh? Your name’s Lloyd, right? Why would I rearrange the letters in your name?” she said.

“Whaaaaaaat?! Why is she acting so differently than she did with Cerulean?! She doesn’t care to think about my name at all! Such a clear lack of interest is... is...is wonderful in its own way!” Duke Alcott’s eyes glistened with excitement.

“Lloyd, your weird fetish is surfacing again.” Duke Balfour grimaced. Then, seeing Duke Alcott reach for Fia’s arm, he yelled, “Run, Fia! This guy’s usually apathetic toward everything, but he gets really persistent whenever something does catch his interest! He’s going to latch on to you if you don’t get out of here!”

“U-um, okay?!” Fia might have fled, but it was already too late. Duke Alcott had her in his grip, and he was grinning from ear to ear.

“Let the girl go, Lloyd!” Duke Balfour tried to pull Fia away from Duke Alcott, but the latter remained unfazed, his smile never wavering.



Caught between the two, Fia attempted to yank her arms free, but to no avail.

“C’mon, let her go already!”

“Wait, how is a knight like me weaker than these two?!”

“Are you free to chat, Fia?”

Their voices carried through the serene royal castle gardens. Castle inhabitants observed the exchange with a mixture of fear and fascination. The two dukes at the center of it all rarely spoke to anyone but each other, and here they were, kicking up a fuss.

Interlude:

The Third Captains' Meeting

“ALLOW ME TO BEGIN with an apology.”

At the end of a long corridor cutting through the central wing building lay a luxurious meeting room. Cyril appraised those gathered around the round table in that room as he issued his apology.

“There is a good chance I will not be able to properly moderate this meeting. Normally, I would personally review what we discuss beforehand to better direct things, but there were too many unknown elements this time.”

Usually, such a statement would be unthinkable for the meeting’s moderator, who should know every detail of the upcoming discussion. Yet no one in the room spoke up to reprimand Cyril for this; a few frowned, while others held fast to a blank neutrality.

These were the best of the best, after all, those in the royal capital with the rank of captain or higher: First Knight Brigade Captain Cyril, Second Knight Brigade Captain Desmond, Third Mage Knight Brigade Captain Enoch, Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade Captain Quentin, Fifth Knight Brigade Captain Clarissa, Sixth Knight Brigade Captain Zackary, Thirteenth Knight Brigade Captain Kurtis, and Commander Saviz. In all, eight sat in attendance, and only those eight. For this meeting alone, no attendants were permitted to accompany them. The significance of that weighed on every person in that room, and Cyril’s opening statement only increased the air of unease permeating the meeting.

“So, what’re you starting us off with?” Desmond asked, spinning a pen in his hand. “I’m sure this meeting will be full of things that’ll make me want to rip off my ears, but I’m ready! Bring it, Cyril! I can take it!”

Cyril leveled a blank stare at Desmond, then flicked through the documents in

his hand. “Yes, well, why don’t we begin with information Desmond is already familiar with then? I’m sure a few more of you are already aware, but Fia Ruud of my very own knight brigade has a familiar.”

Desmond jumped up from his seat and exclaimed, “Wait, you’re starting with *that*?!”

Quentin, Zackary, and Kurtis tore their eyes from Cyril and looked around the round table at their brethren. Confusion clouded the eyes of those around them.

“That’s news to me, but is little Fia having a familiar really something worth bringing up in a captains’ meeting?” Clarissa spoke up for all those confused faces.

Cyril shrugged a shoulder and said, “It is, actually, for Fia’s familiar is the Black Dragon itself.”

Clarissa burst into laughter. “Pfft, ha ha. I can’t believe you, of all people, would make such a joke! I didn’t expect that at all. Not bad, Cyril.”

“Is that so? Indeed, as you say, I am not one to make such jokes.”

“Huh? But you did just now!” She tilted her head to one side.

He sighed. “I’ve often thought about how nice it would be if it *were* just a joke, but unfortunately, it is the truth. As you all know, the Black Dragon is the guardian beast of Náv. Fia has that very same Black Dragon as her familiar and has brought it back to the capital from Blackpeak Mountain after her trip to the Gazzar Borderlands.”

“Whaaat?” Clarissa said.

Cyril furrowed his brow. “I doubted my own eyes when I saw a black, winged creature flying about the royal castle garden. However, it would appear Fia is letting it roam freely within the grounds—and undisguised at that.”

Clarissa gasped. “Wait, I saw it too then! Fia was chatting with some black bird like it was a person! I thought that was strange, but I figured she just really

liked birds or something...” Her voice trailed off before she continued her thought. “B-but, it was only the size of a regular bird, small enough to sit in her hand! The Black Dragon is supposed to be massive! And it’s supposed to be stronger and wiser than any human—a superior, not a *pet*! It would never serve a human!” She looked to Quentin for support.

Quentin spread his arms wide, as though about to preach, and nodded deeply. “It is as you say. The Black Dragon King is a supreme, magnificent, divine existence! It would never serve the likes of man!”

He seemed about to continue, but Clarissa interrupted. “See? What’d I tell you?!”

His expression set, Cyril continued, unperturbed. “Apparently, the Black Dragon became Fia’s familiar before she joined the knight brigades. Fia’s father, Vice-Captain Dolph, confirmed that he saw her familiar, claiming it was, ‘definitely not the Black Dragon but a blackish, dragonish creature.’ I believe we can confirm her familiar is indeed the Black Dragon from this, as there is no other black, winged creature in the world.”

“Seriously...?” Clarissa sounded unconvinced. At her side, Enoch shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

With a troubled frown, Cyril said, “I understand this is hard to believe and apologize for not having made a more convincing case. I figured explaining this gradually wouldn’t help, as I lacked concrete evidence, so I tried starting from the conclusion, but that seems to have only invited more confusion.”

“So you don’t have evidence?” Clarissa asked.

Cyril nodded. “Only testimonies. That being said, some of these testimonies come from captains. At a previous meeting, you might recall we discussed the search expedition for the Black Dragon. After that meeting, Fia joined Quentin and Zackary on the expedition, and the two saw the Black Dragon protecting Fia.”

“What?! But Quentin, you just said yourself that the Black Dragon would

never serve a human!” Clarissa said.

Quentin shot a glare at her. “You interrupted me before I could finish! The Black Dragon King would indeed never serve the lowly likes of man, but Miss Fia is an exception! She is an exceptional individual who commanded absolute obedience from the Black Dragon King with only a glance!”

Everyone regarded Quentin with cold, weary eyes as he clenched his fists with excitement.

“I was also present,” Zackary spoke up to defend him. “I can testify that the Black Dragon does, in fact, serve Fia. From what Quentin’s told me, it seems she encountered the Black Dragon while it was greatly injured and healed it with a healing potion she happened to have on hand, earning its loyalty.”

Enoch had held silent thus far, as was his wont. But he’d followed the conversation with intense interest and finally voiced his own doubts. “This all sounds too good to be true. We’re dealing with a legendary beast here. There’s no possible way someone could form a pact with it so easily. And from what I’ve heard, Fia is nothing more than an average knight. I find it hard to believe she’d have the power to keep the Black Dragon in check, given how weak—”

Cyril cut in. “Apologies, Enoch. I hadn’t finished explaining everything quite yet. As Quentin mentioned, Fia has earned the Black Dragon’s absolute obedience. Thus, the two are always connected to one another. For that reason, the Black Dragon can read Fia’s thoughts and emotions. If someone causes Fia discomfort, it is highly likely that the Black Dragon would tear them to pieces on the spot.”

“What? That is...horrifying.” Enoch covered his mouth with both hands, his eyes darting around the room. His fearful gaze settled on Cyril. “But wait, it’s not as if Fia is in this room right now. There’s no way she could hear what I’m saying, right?”

Cyril smiled soothingly. “Indeed, but things aren’t so simple. The Black Dragon has made the royal castle grounds its home for the time being, and we have no

clue how well it can hear. It is best we avoid rash comments.”

“O-oh, yes... I see...” Enoch swallowed hard, still scanning his surroundings. Desmond muttered something about Enoch acting like he himself had not so long ago.

Cyril continued, “Fia hasn’t come forth and told anyone that her familiar is the Black Dragon, so the odds are high that spreading that fact goes against her wishes and may incur the Black Dragon’s wrath. That being the case, we’ve previously only shared this knowledge with a select few who were prepared for the possibility of death at the hands of the Black Dragon.”

Nervous glances shot around the room. Everyone now understood why no one directly questioned Fia about her familiar and why she hadn’t been summoned to this meeting.

“That said,” Cyril went on, “unavoidable circumstances have arisen that have necessitated the difficult decision of sharing this information with all of you. Of course, we have factored in Fia letting the Black Dragon roam freely in a sized-down form. That might be a sign that she has lost interest in hiding her familiar’s identity.”

Cautiously, Desmond asked, “C-Cyril, what could these ‘unavoidable circumstances’ you speak of be...?”

Cyril retrieved a stack of documents from the table and waved them for all to see. “I will explain that in detail soon enough. But let me just say that our next talking point, and the one after that, and the one after that...all have to do with Fia Ruud.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Eek!”

“You’re kidding me?!”

Desmond, Enoch, and Zackary exclaimed in surprise, jumping to their feet.

Cyril met their gazes and smiled patiently. “Please sit down, gentlemen. This

meeting is far from over.”

The men reluctantly complied, the same thought running through their minds: *Surely the Grim Reaper himself bears the same smile.*

“Wait just a moment!” Clarissa said. “I understand we’re pressed for time as we have lots of ground to cover, but there’s one thing I want to get straight before we move on. If Fia’s familiar is genuinely the Black Dragon, then that’s seriously something... Honestly, that alone has me dizzy, even without hearing the rest of what you have in store for us. Er, but I digress. Let me make sure I understand something here. The Black Dragon is the guardian beast of Náv, right? Wasn’t it the royal family’s dearest ambition to make it serve them?” She glanced at the seat of honor, and everyone else followed her lead, their curious eyes landing on Saviz, the commander of the knight brigades and first in line to the throne.

He tapped the table, a rare display of consternation. “I received a simplified explanation of this meeting’s contents beforehand from Cyril. However, I am not fully convinced that what we have is the actual Black Dragon. It is not that I think so little of Fia but rather that I think too much of the Black Dragon. I’ve never laid eyes on the Black Dragon myself, but without a doubt it is a terrific being, one that has lived for more than a thousand years. Hence, it is sure to be cunning and cautious. I cannot envision such a creature deigning to serve a human.”

Some of the captains murmured their agreement. Among them, Desmond, despite having been one of the few to know the secret of the Black Dragon beforehand, spoke up. “Yes, yes, of course! I could understand any other monster being Fia’s familiar, but the Black Dragon is in a class of its own! Fia’s too physically weak and not all that skilled as a knight. She’s simpleminded too—and clumsy! There’s no way a thousand-year-old dragon would serve her! Just what could it see in her?!”

Doubt hung over the meeting room, despite various captains' testimonies. Saviz's words just now, as well as Enoch's a bit earlier, had loosened Desmond's tongue until his true thoughts about Fia spilled out for the first time in a long while.

Cyril fixed his friend with a cold look. "We have testimonies supporting the claim that the Black Dragon serves Fia from Quentin and Zackary, as well as from Kurtis, who joined Fia on her journey to Blackpeak Mountain. Fia has also been seen recently with a black, winged creature who is very likely to be the Black Dragon. We even have a horn of the Black Dragon. But...I suppose I must admit that we lack decisive evidence."

"Wait, Kurtis, you've seen the Black Dragon too?" Desmond exclaimed. "Oh right, you did go to the Gazzar Borderlands with her, huh? I guess you saw her meet up with the Black Dragon and bring it back. But are you *sure* the Black Dragon is subservient to her? Just what could possibly draw the Black Dragon to her anyway?"

Kurtis sneered at Desmond, offense clear on his face.

Desmond flinched. "Wh-what?"

With some exasperation, Kurtis said, "I'm appalled you could be so blind! Any monster would come running for the opportunity to serve Lady Fi, even the Black Dragon! You must be insane not to recognize her in all her glory. Why, I would love to explain her greatness to your empty brain, but I'm afraid it would take me more than three hundred years to cover everything."

Silence fell like a lead weight. Somehow, they'd all forgotten one important fact: While Kurtis had been a sensible knight at one point, he had returned from Sutherland even stranger than Quentin. He was once a soft paper-pusher, but something in him had changed. He packed muscle onto his lanky body, even, as though he'd spent his free time in Sutherland body building. Perhaps his brain had become all muscle by extension. Whatever the cause, there was no saving him. Kurtis was too far off the deep end for anyone to rescue. All the captains

understood this, so they placated him by agreeing with what he'd just said.

"Oh yeah, sure, Kurtis. I can totally see the Black Dragon serving someone as amazing as Fia," Desmond said flatly.

Clarissa quickly moved on to Zackary. Quentin and Kurtis were too partial to Fia to be objective. As far as testimonies went, only Zackary's carried any weight. "Zackary, I'm afraid we have a hard time believing all of this given how unrealistic it is. The Black Dragon is a monster we wouldn't be able to defeat even if all us captains fought as one. It'd take nothing short of a miracle for Fia to make it submit to her. Or are we really supposed to believe she's the one person in a thousand years to encounter the Black Dragon near death with a healing potion in hand, and that the Black Dragon is the type to feel indebted to others?"

Zackary stroked his chin in thought. Back during their expedition into Starfall Forest, Fia had displayed a number of inexplicable powers but tried to explain them away as the Black Dragon's abilities. Zackary owed Fia for saving his knights and swore on his title as captain to protect her secret, so he would not reveal it here, yet he needed to offer *something*. "...I wasn't present when Fia made the Black Dragon her familiar, so I can't say I know what made the Black Dragon choose to serve her. But I *was* present when the Black Dragon protected Fia from two blue dragons. Hence, I can say with utter certainty that Fia commands the Black Dragon."

Even with this, Clarissa struggled to accept that the Black Dragon could be Fia's familiar, given their power discrepancy. Zackary had conceded on some points yet still insisted the Black Dragon served Fia. Thus, Clarissa began to fear there really was some truth to all this. "Is that so... Then maybe we all better start walking around with healing potions," she joked. "We might happen across the two remaining Three Great Beasts on the verge of death and be able to make them our familiars." She looked to Enoch, but he weakly shook his head.

"I'll pass on that," he said. "I've been sweating nonstop at the mere thought

of the Black Dragon overhearing this. If I ever encountered a wounded Great Beast, I'd run for my life without a second thought!"

"Oh, Enoch. I had no clue you could be such a coward! But I guess that's why you're a mage before you're a knight," Clarissa teased, boldly badmouthing the man right to his face. One might say it was just her being honest, perhaps. "Incidentally, we were talking about sightings of a black, winged creature, but isn't it more natural to assume that's a normal bird dyed with pigment instead of leaping to the conclusion that it's the Black Dragon? You see pink-colored birds and gold-painted frogs all the time at festivals, right? Usually being used as cheap prizes from lottery draws and the like."

Desmond spun his pen in his hand and spoke up. "You know, Clarissa, that reminds me of a certain First Knight Brigade Captain who grew up so sheltered that he had no clue about that sort of gimmick. Maybe you've heard the story before? A well-to-do boy, only five years old then, from some prominent duke's family went wild at a festival playing the lottery draw. He then ran up to his cousin—the then second prince—with twenty-five yellow baby chicks and one blue baby chick in his arms, saying, 'Look, look! I pulled the grand prize, a lucky blue baby chick, on my twenty-sixth try!' The poor kid had no idea it was just colored blue."

No one voiced it aloud, but all understood that the sheltered boy Desmond described was Cyril, and the second prince was Saviz.

Cyril smiled faintly and ignored Desmond, shifting the meeting's topic of discussion. "I understand the lack of evidence makes it unclear how exactly Fia could have made the Black Dragon her familiar. Hence, I would like to end with us concluding that Fia Ruud *may* have made the Black Dragon her familiar. Keeping the possibility open will help us act in the event of an emergency, if one should arise." With this, Cyril ended this first topic on a definitive note, in spite of the lack of strong evidence. "I forgot to mention, but everything we discuss today is top secret. Please refrain from sharing this with others."

Everyone understood that without Cyril spelling it out. After all, that was the

whole reason they'd left their attendants out of this particular meeting.

Still, Cyril fixed each of them with a steady stare to gain their confirmation. Satisfied, he shifted his attention to the documents in his hands. "Now then, our next topic is—"

"Hold on, there's one thing I'd like to add." Quentin raised his hand. After receiving permission to speak, he stood up, his face serious and stern. "The testimony I gave was one-hundred-percent truthful! So please change the meeting's conclusion from 'the Black Dragon King *may* be Miss Fia's familiar' to 'the Black Dragon King is *very likely* to be Miss Fia's familiar'!"

"...Very well." Cyril looked like he had more to say, but he held his tongue, apparently deciding that an argument was more trouble than it was worth.

Quentin's stiff expression eased into a smile. "Heh. Also, one more thing... Heh, heh heh, ha ha ha ha! Listen and be amazed! Miss Fia and the Black Dragon King went on a rampage in the home of the griffons and brought back their lord! And would you believe it, that griffon lord is now *my* familiar!"

Cold looks met this pronouncement. Quentin's claim was certainly amazing, but his timing left much to be desired. What kind of achievement was a griffon, even the lord of the griffons, when Fia had the one and only Black Dragon? Besides, all the captains already knew about Quentin's griffon, as he dragged it along with him everywhere he could. The fact that Fia and the Black Dragon brought the griffon back was news, but this filled the captains with more dread than awe. There might have been a world in which everyone congratulated Quentin on his new familiar, but over the course of this meeting, the name "Fia" had started to produce dread and weariness in those who heard it.

After a long silence, Cyril said, "...Well, that's... Congratulations, Quentin..."

Quentin glared at everyone in the room. "Why are you all not more impressed?! Don't you get how amazing this is?!"

Nobody met his gaze.

And so, in such a manner, the first topic of the meeting finally came to an end.

“Now, for the next item on the agenda...” Cyril flipped through the documents before him, ready to move on in earnest this time.

Desmond grinned and leaned back in his chair with relief. “Phew, well, at least we got the worst of the news out of the way first. Everything else should be comparatively harmless. I bet you’re the type to eat the stuff you don’t like first to get it out of the way, am I right, Cyril?”

Cyril smiled elegantly. “I actually prefer to eat all my food at the same rate, regardless of preferences. In fact, since my youth, I’ve been trained to eat even things I dislike without a grimace.”

“W-wait, what’s he getting at?” Desmond looked around the round table for support, but nobody said a word.

With the room quiet, Cyril’s voice rang out all the more clearly. “Let’s move on to a similar topic: The Rose of the Great Saint has been rediscovered.”

“The Rose of the Great Saint?”

“What’s that supposed to be?”

“Rose? What’s that? I can’t say I’ve heard that word before.”

Confusion tittered through the room. Several of the captains hadn’t heard of the Rose of the Great Saint. Zackary was even more lost than the rest, stumbling over the word “rose” itself. A fellow at the pinnacle of manhood such as himself wasn’t the slightest bit familiar with flower varieties; however, the group disregarded him as Enoch stood from his seat and smacked his hands down on the table. Red in the face, he exclaimed, “But that’s impossible! The Rose of the Great Saint was lost three hundred years ago!”

Flummoxed, Clarissa said, “Uh, what’s with you today? Didn’t you have this whole ‘quiet guy’ thing going on? I’ve heard you speak more today than in the entire past year.”

Enoch ignored her, his hopeful gaze fixed on Cyril. “Don’t play with me here, Cyril! Is the Rose of the Great Saint really back? Or is it only *maybe* back like the whole thing with Fia’s familiar? Where was the Rose of the Great Saint found? No, where is the Rose of the Great Saint located right now?!”

Zackary listened to these rapid-fire questions and whistled. “Wow, I’ve never seen Enoch talk this much before either. Ha ha, he can sure talk fast too. I bet he’d be good at tongue twisters.”

“Try saying ‘Rose of the Great Saint’ three times without stuttering, ha ha!” Desmond laughed.

Clarissa shot a withering look at the two before urging Cyril to continue. “Please, go on.”

Cyril looked up from his documents and said, “As the name suggests, the Rose of the Great Saint is a red flower that symbolized the Great Saint three hundred years ago. Its petals are unique in that they sparkle like cut gems.”

“Such a flower exists? Looks like the jewel industry is doomed!” Desmond joked.

Enraged, Enoch raised his voice. “You fool! This is the Rose of the Great Saint we’re talking about! Its worth is many times greater than the likes of any jewel! No, we can’t possibly attempt to measure its true value! To be granted one such rose from Her Holiness was considered the honor of a lifetime back in the day!”

Cyril watched Enoch prattle on, his gaze icy. It was like the mage meant to make up for all his years of quiet. And, quite frankly, he was hindering the meeting. However, Enoch didn’t even seem to notice Cyril’s glare.

Cyril cleared his throat instead. “This special rose was lost with the Great Saint. Or at least that’s what we thought, as nobody had seen the rose in the past three hundred years—until recently when some were found in the royal castle garden.”

“The *royal castle garden*?!” the captains exclaimed in unison.

“Really? Wow... I do believe the Great Saint was a princess of the Náv royal family at the time. Maybe a seed remained somewhere in the castle,” Clarissa wondered out loud.

“Oh! So that’s why!” Desmond exclaimed. “Cyril, you told me to cordon off part of the northeastern garden not long ago, right? That must’ve been because that rose thing bloomed there! Man, so that’s what it was! I thought it was weird to make a garden a prohibited area protected by guards!”

“That is correct,” Cyril said. “At that point in time, however, we weren’t certain if the roses were genuine, so I withheld certain details. I apologize.”

“Nah, don’t worry about that,” Desmond said. He then grabbed his head and groaned. “Gah! I’m bitter I wasn’t the one who found it though! I patrol the castle every day, yet I never noticed a cash cow like that just lying around! I could’ve gotten rich off the reward for finding it! Ah, jeez! I don’t know who found it, but they must be one eagle-eyed guy!”

That was when Cyril dropped the bomb. “Oh? But didn’t you enjoy a share of the reward, Desmond?”

Desmond froze. “What do you mean by that?”

“I believe I mentioned the second topic on our agenda would also deal with Fia Ruud.”

“You did,” Desmond replied slowly, sensing where this was going.

Sure enough, Cyril said, “The one who found the rose was Fia.”

“What?!”

The captains froze. The first to regather themselves was Desmond. “Just what is that girl?! She goes for a stroll in her family territory and just so happens to meet the Black Dragon! She goes for a stroll in the royal castle garden and just so happens to find the Rose of the Great Saint! She’s *unbelievable*! Does she have a curse where she has to make unprecedented, world-shattering

revelations or she'll explode or something?!"

"Ha ha ha, she's unprecedented all right," Zackary said. "I thought I would get used to such crazy achievements one after another from her, but I'm still shocked! Ha ha ha ha ha! Oh man, I can't stop myself from laughing! My whole body's trembling!" He hugged his arms around himself as he cackled.

Cyril raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Oh? You don't seem aware Fia shared her reward with you too, Zackary. What a relief. It seems the knights of my brigade are tight-lipped after all."

"Huh? What are you getting at here?" Zackary scowled.

"Zackary, Desmond, you two joined Vice-Captain Gideon and Fia for dinner not long ago, correct?" Cyril asked.

"What?! Gideon had dinner with Miss Fia?!" Quentin said. Cyril ignored him, as sure as everyone else that his complaint was not about the rose or the reward.

"That was the same day Fia found the Rose of the Great Saint and was rewarded by Commander Saviz," Cyril said.

"Oh really?"

"That so?"

Zackary and Desmond sounded genuinely confounded by this revelation.

"Let me explain from the start," Cyril said. "The request to look for some flowers originally came from His Majesty the King himself. His Majesty regularly offers flowers to a saint's grave, so he requested Commander Saviz prepare some for him. Fia is, despite what you might expect, quite reverent toward saints, so the commander tasked her with procuring the flowers. By some stroke of luck, she then found the Rose of the Great Saint in the royal castle gardens."

Just as when he'd explained about the Black Dragon, Cyril left out the most important part of his explanation: *how* Fia found the Rose of the Great Saint,

which was thought to have been lost for the past three hundred years.

Clarissa latched on to something else entirely, however. “Wait! I met Fia that day! She told me the commander asked her to go buy flowers and that she had just finished delivering them. She talked about it like it was no big deal. Did she not realize the value of the flowers she found?” She turned a questioning look on Saviz.

“I certainly do remember her insisting the flowers only *resembled* the Rose of the Great Saint,” Saviz provided. “Perhaps she really didn’t know its worth.”

“Ha ha! That’s kinda like what Dolph said about Fia’s familiar definitely not being the Black Dragon and only resembling one! Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Zackary said.

Desmond raised his voice. “Who cares about that! Isn’t it weird she didn’t know the worth of what she’d found?! ...Although, I suppose I wouldn’t think some pretty flower I happened to find in the castle gardens would actually be an ancient, historic rose either. I certainly wouldn’t have the guts to present a flower I’d plucked from the ground to the commander, no matter how beautiful. Does Fia have any respect for authority at all?”

“Certainly, it is a bit of a surprise that she’d present handpicked flowers when His Majesty gave her money to purchase flowers,” Cyril said. “She might be more daring than we give her credit for. But as I alluded to earlier, it’s thanks to her doing so that you two, Zackary and Desmond, were able to enjoy a meal with her that night.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhh!” the two exclaimed in shock as they rose to their feet.

“I remember now!” Zackary said. “At the restaurant, Desmond said, ‘You gave His Majesty some random flowers you found and got paid for it?! Dang, common weeds must look no different than proper flowers to Commander Saviz!’”

“Bwah?! Zackary, what the hell do you think you’re saying?!” Desmond shouted. He clasped his hands together as he faced Saviz. “Don’t

misunderstand, Commander! I was just saying someone with your discerning eye would find something amazing in what others can only see as common weeds! My phrasing was a bit off because I had been drinking! I swear!”

Saviz nodded, granting forgiveness.

Desmond sagged with relief, then abruptly raised his voice again. “Ah, wait! I just remembered something too! When Fia told us she was covering the bill, I said, ‘I’ll definitely pay you back one day, no matter how staggering the price is!’ I must be paying that price now, huh?! Ah shoot, I should have just paid for myself that day!”

Cyril sneered at this confession. “I can’t believe you, a captain, let a knight in her first year treat you to dinner. Have you no pride at all?”

“W-wait, uh, how’d we get to that?” Desmond said.

“Did you at least hear Fia say anything worthwhile?” Cyril asked calmly. “From what Commander Saviz has said, it doesn’t seem like Fia knows the value of the flowers she brought, but that strikes me as strange. There are too many unbelievable coincidences with her at the center, far too many to dismiss as mere happenstance, yet we still don’t understand why this happens to her.” Cyril’s mask of calm slipped, revealing his bewilderment. “That’s precisely why I allowed *all* of you to keep making side comments throughout this meeting, in the hopes that someone would say something useful about Fia. Well, go on then. Feel free to tell us exactly what you’ve discovered, Desmond!”

“W-w-well, um, we had been drinking, so we really didn’t discuss anything important...” Desmond pressed himself flat against his chair, trying to distance himself from Cyril as much as possible. He hemmed and hawed before working up the courage to say, “Th-this meeting’s unreasonable in the first place! You’re giving us one insane revelation after another! It’s not my fault I’m grumbling so much! I’m holding back and am only complaining one-fifth as much as I’d like to because the commander’s here, so let me off the hook already!”

“This is one-fifth...?” murmured Cyril. He rubbed at his forehead as though

warding off a headache.

The meeting room fell deadly silent, so quiet the dropping of a pin would have boomed. Unprecedented things kept happening around Fia, yet nobody present could provide Cyril with the faintest idea as to why.

The meeting ground to a standstill when, abruptly, Quentin spoke up. “If you ask me, Miss Fia’s just on a whole ‘nother level from us!”

Everyone grimaced, thinking Quentin was on his usual nonsense, but this time, at least, he genuinely intended to help.

“She probably sees things differently than we do,” he said. “If she says she found the Rose of the Great Saint in the royal castle gardens, then it was probably always there, just unnoticed. For three hundred years. There’s something about Miss Fia that allowed her to spot the rose everyone else overlooked.” Quentin tried his best to explain, but it didn’t seem to move the others, who grimaced at him. Even so, he continued. “It’s probably the same thing with the Black Dragon King. Even if we were thrust into the same situation and gave the Black Dragon King a healing potion, the result likely wouldn’t be the same. Who’s to say we’d even recognize the Black Dragon King? But Fia’s different. She’d notice something strange like that right away and take the best course of action, whatever the circumstances. That’s what separates her from us!”

Saviz spoke up in agreement. “Now that I think about it, the first thing about her that caught my attention was her eyes. Despite being a fresh recruit, she observed the welcome ceremony calmly, analyzing every little thing. I sensed the eyes of a ruler from her. ...She even noticed my old wound, something no one has managed to detect these past ten years.”

Desmond murmured agreement as well. “Yeah, that’s right. She aimed for your wounded side back then. The nerve of that girl! She even lied and said she attacked the side without an eyepatch because of her honor as a knight, if you’d

believe it! All on her first day in the knight brigades! Honestly, I'm impressed by her shamelessness! No wonder she was okay giving you flowers she picked up off the ground. You know, I was thinking she'd learned these bad habits from her captain, but I guess she's always been that way."

Said captain of Fia glared at Desmond. "At least I don't make new recruits treat me to dinner."

"Oh c'mon, you're twisting things! The money came from His Majesty and Commander Saviz, so I was in no position to refuse. I'm not struggling for money or anything!"

"Oh, I'm sure. You're unmarried, without even a lover. What could you even use your money on?"

While the two continued to bicker, Kurtis was in deep thought. He was the only one who knew the truth about the Rose of the Great Saint, including how feeble it appeared in its unaltered form. Only when the Great Saint poured her magic into it over a long period of time did the flower bloom into what was known as the Rose of the Great Saint—which meant Fia not only discovered the rose in the castle garden but also poured her magic into it.

From what Cyril said, Saviz had taken note of Fia's abilities; that was why she had to prepare flowers for a saint. Fia had gone on to choose the greatest flower in all the world, oblivious to the consequences of such a decision.

"I see. There's some logic to Quentin's words," Kurtis mused. "Perhaps Lady Fi noticed some abandoned roses in a corner of the royal castle garden and reached out for them. Then, in the same way the people of Sutherland recognized her as the Great Saint, the roses recognized Lady Fi as the Great Saint and bloomed."

"Hmm..." Doubt greeted Kurtis's dreamy theorizing. *Ah, that's right, they all thought. The people of Sutherland thought Fia was the Great Saint, didn't they?*

At their last meeting some months ago, that news had dropped, shocking everyone. What's more, it came to light that many of the captains received holy

stones as gifts, except Cyril, who'd sulked about it. It didn't help that the only one who could usually comfort him, Saviz, had received the best holy stone of the bunch... Oh but if only it had ended there.

Cyril had wrongfully assumed the holy stones were brand new, so he suggested sending them to the saints, who could imbue them with healing magic. That was when the other captains grew suspicious. *"Is something wrong?"* he had asked.

Somebody foolish answered, *"No, it's just... The holy stones are already filled with some unbelievably powerful healing magic, you know?"*

The meeting room descended into chaos. Those holy stones the captains had received contained healing magic unlike anything ever witnessed.

"Cyril, stop! This isn't the battlefield!" somebody cried in vain as Cyril's rage boiled around him in such a fearsome aura it was like he was about to go into battle.

The captains recalled the events of the last meeting and shivered. Their minds refocused on the present, where the same danger faced them all over again. *Kurtis, you fool! You were at that meeting too, were you not? Have you forgotten your fear of Cyril? How can you be so stupid as to say something that'll remind him of that day?!*

Half the captains glared at Kurtis, willing him to shut up. The other half watched Cyril warily, praying he wasn't also remembering that previous meeting. Only Clarissa dared to change the topic, putting forth a bold suggestion.

"No matter how long we talk, we're just making blind guesses. So why don't we just ask Fia directly what's going on?"

"What?!" Desmond said. *"Who the hell would even think to try that?! One misstep and the Black Dragon will burn us all to a charred crisp blacker than its own hide!"* Clearly, this was a sincere concern given his genuine fear for his life after he misspoke earlier.

Clarissa grinned fearlessly. "About that. I actually know someone who Fia won't get angry at no matter what they ask. You see, I've heard straight from her own mouth which man she's gunning for!"

"Wh-wha... Clarissa, I don't even..." Overwhelmed with surprise, Desmond stumbled over his own words.

She ignored him, drawing herself up as she addressed the group. "Ehe heh heh, and would you believe it..." She paused for dramatic effect before looking right at Cyril and Kurtis. "She says Cyril was her first pick up until recently, but she has lately taken an interest in Kurtis as well..."

"Huh?"

"Wh-what?"

One blinked in surprise; the other froze in shock. Everyone waited breathlessly for Clarissa to reveal who the top pick was.

Clarissa's elated voice echoed through the meeting room. "But in the lead by a mile is...Commander Saviz!"

No one dared to breathe as this unexpected outcome rang through the room. Their eyes darted restlessly about, but no one managed a single word in their state of befuddlement.

The first to collect themselves was Desmond. Still shocked, he spoke in a shrill voice. "H-how am I even supposed to respond to that...? Should I say Fia has good taste? Or should I just say she's mad and reckless?! You know what, I was right earlier! She *one-hundred-percent* has a curse where she has to make unprecedented, world-shattering revelations or she'll explode! Why else would she attempt such an outlandish thing?!"

Desmond, and most of the other captains for that matter, churned over this startling new information. *...Of course, there's no way Commander Saviz would ever reciprocate Fia's feelings. No way... Surely... But... But...if he for some reason did choose to be with her, I can only imagine he'd be in for a rough time.*

It's likely not even he, the commander himself, can change Fia. Yes, there's no doubt she would run circles around him. And as his subordinates, we'd inevitably have to share his burden...

"N-not one more word, Clarissa! You're opening Pandora's box! Slam it shut, lock it, and throw away the key!" Desmond thrust his arms out and waved them in a wild panic.

Clarissa frowned. "Oh my. So Enoch wasn't the only timid weakling here. Desmond was one as well! I thought all you captains were gallant men, but it looks like this has become a den of cowards without my knowing!"

No one bothered to refute her, accepting being called names if it avoided an irreversible calamity. In a way, they were acting more gallantly than ever, and they all knew it, even if Clarissa didn't.

The captains-deemed-cowards swung heavy, exhausted looks toward Cyril.

"Is there anything else we should know about this Rose of the Great Saint?" Zackary asked.

Cyril wearily searched his documents. "Ah, yes, there is. As Desmond mentioned earlier, the Rose of the Great Saint was discovered in a garden on the northeast side of the royal castle. According to the gardener, there were a dozen green rose bushes there that were of a slightly different breed than the other roses in the garden. Of the dozen, two bushes have become Roses of the Great Saint. We believe the plant was somehow capable of changing itself."

"Oh, I see. So plants can change themselves, just like how butterflies and bees can metamorphose from larva to imago!" Zackary tried to sound self-assured, even while blatantly understanding nothing. The Rose of the Great Saint existed because Fia had poured her magic into a rose of certain species. Plants did not typically change on their own, for their biology was nothing like insects—but nobody wanted the burden of the task of explaining this to the dolt at the table, so Zackary's comment went ignored. This would lead to misunderstandings for

him later, but that is a story for another time...

Cyril continued. "The section with the Rose of the Great Saint is currently cordoned off by Desmond. We intend to observe the situation to see whether the two bushes remain as they are, as well as to see if the other ten bushes around them will turn from green to red as well."

Desmond crossed his arms over his chest. "It's quite a miracle for green roses to suddenly turn red, huh? And if it sparkles like a jewel, well, I can see why someone might want to steal it! No wonder you wanted me to keep it heavily guarded. But still...isn't it *just* a flower?"

"I had a feeling someone might express such an opinion, so I brought the real deal for us to examine today." Cyril reached for a long, slender box without a lid on the round table. He stood up and brought it over to Desmond. "Please, have a look."

Desmond peered inside, clearly not expecting much, but the moment he beheld the rose, his eyes went wide. "W-wait, this is a flower?! The petals are *shimmering*! How?! This isn't anything like what I expected!"

Cyril tried to explain that the rose would go around the table, but Enoch rushed over to Desmond right away. Gently, yet forcibly, he took the flower, whispering in awe as he beheld it, as though his very breath could damage it. "Ah... Simply incredible. There can be no doubt: This is the Rose of the Great Saint. Just look how it shines. Oh goodness, it's so beautiful..."

"Uh, Enoch? You sound like a swooning woman."

Enoch ignored Clarissa's chiding, his cheeks rosy and eyes glassy as he gazed at the rose as though in a dream.

Cyril took the opportunity to add, "We have some personnel gathering old materials on the Rose of the Great Saint. Once we straighten out the facts we can determine the authenticity of this rose."

"Why? It's obvious it's real just by looking at it! Do you seriously think there's

some other flower that can shine like this?!" Desmond exclaimed.

Enoch agreed. "Desmond's right! The very act of doubting the validity of this rose is an act of irreverence!"

Seeing the captains begin to bicker, Kurtis spoke up. "Since it's called the Rose of the *Great Saint*, it's likely been bred in a way that suits the Great Saint's own tastes. The Great Saint is said to have loved rose hip tea, so when the Rose of the Great Saint is done flowering, we should try making tea from its fruit. Perhaps we'll learn something about her from the experience."

Cyril furrowed his brow at those cryptic words. "What do you mean?"

"I simply mean we might learn something about the wants of the greatest *healer* to ever live. That is all."

Kurtis was hard enough to read normally, but he was even harder to read when he refused to elaborate like now. Even so, the ever-brilliant Cyril pieced together his message. "I see. So tea made from the fruits of the Rose of the Great Saint might display effects the Great Saint herself desired?"

"Ah, yes. I believe so. In fact, perhaps just soaking the flower petals might produce some interesting effects... Who knows?" Kurtis said.

His mind wandered to three hundred years ago... The flower had always been a thing of mystery. Each petal used revealed a different effect. Sometimes they cured paralysis or recovered stamina, and other times they worked like a truth serum. When Serafina poured her mana into the flowers, she must have poured her own heart into them as well, producing the effects she desired.

Serafina liked to invite guests to tea parties and serve tea with petals of the Rose of the Great Saint floating in them. Those offered the tea had to gather their courage to brave a sip of the brew, as they had no way of knowing what effect the petals might manifest... Of course, Serafina herself also did not know. Over time, Serafina's tea parties came to be known as the tea parties of fate.

It wouldn't be bad to hold another such tea party... Kurtis was still reminiscing

when Cyril questioned him with a suspicious look.

“Kurtis, just how did you get a hold of that information?”

After a beat of hesitation, Kurtis replied, “...It’s common knowledge in Sutherland.”

Cyril seemed to accept that answer. “Oh, I see. I suppose there would be many such details passed down there where faith in the Great Saint is so high.” In a quieter voice, he murmured, “In that case, perhaps I should return every now and then and learn some things from the people of my domain.”

Everyone watched Cyril without a word, knowing full well the circumstances behind him and the people of Sutherland.

Eventually, he lifted his head and calmly brought the topic to a close. “That is all I have to report on the Rose of the Great Saint. I’ll keep you all apprised as new information comes to light.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed the topic of Sutherland wasn’t so problematic for him anymore.

In a faint whisper, Cyril said, “For the Rose of the Great Saint to be found now of all times is worrying, though. I can only hope it’s not an omen of trouble to come...” Thoughtfully, he flipped through his documents.

Seeing this, Desmond teased him. “Oh, are we moving on? Ha ha, surely we’re running out of Fia-related topics, right? All right, let me try guessing the next topic. Did Fia find a lucky blue baby chick on the street and give it to her captain? No? Maybe she’s moved on from Commander Saviz and is gunning for Cyril again then? Well? Did I get it right?”

Cyril glanced up from his papers. “Ah, yes. This topic will be just perfect for a knight made lax from peace like you.” He lowered his tone. “This next topic is the direst of the bunch. According to a report received from Kurtis, he, Fia, and two others they were traveling with encountered a demon while searching Blackpeak Mountain.”

The captains jumped up from their seats, exclaiming in surprise.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Whaaaaat?!”

“A demon?! Those humanoid monsters that haven’t been seen in three hundred years?!”

“Are you sure?”

Everyone clearly had more to say, but they held their tongues and watched Cyril nervously, urging him to continue. Cyril slowly swept his eyes around the table with a grim expression. “I’ll start by covering the basics, so, everyone, please be seated. Among the monsters that exist in our world, there are humanoid ones we call demons. Furthermore, among demons, particularly powerful ones are called crest-bearing demons.”

The others lowered cautiously into their seats, their eyes never leaving Cyril as he continued.

“These powerful crest-bearing demons are named as such due to the crests on their bodies. These crests are a point of pride for the demons, so they keep them somewhere easy to see, such as on their faces or the backs of their hands. The number of crests can vary and is proportional to the demon’s strength.”

“Wait... Why do you need to go as far as explaining *crest-bearing* demons?” Desmond interrupted.

Cyril ignored him, meeting everyone’s gaze calmly as he said, “I apologize for repeating myself, but allow me to remind you all that the contents of today’s meeting are strictly confidential. Of course, that also goes for what I am about to explain. This information comes from the Book of Beginnings and is typically only shared with those on the level of royalty. However, as this is an emergency, I shall disclose it now.”

“W-wait, give me just one second. I don’t think my heart is ready for

something this serious out of the blue..." Desmond set his hands over his heart, but Cyril pushed onward with the explanation.

"Among all the demons in the world, there are a total of thirty-three crests. This number has remained the same since the time the world was formed and cannot increase or decrease. Three hundred years ago, however, the Great Saint sealed away many demons, including the Demon Lord of the Thirteen Crests, leaving only six crests unaccounted for."

"Wow, the Great Saint was incredible," Zackary breathed in awe.

Cyril nodded in agreement before continuing. "The demons vanished without a trace three hundred years ago, leaving their castles empty. There hasn't been a single sighting of one since then, so we've largely forgotten their threat...but one has reappeared."

"Y-you're kidding me..." Desmond said, trembling. "I've got shivers running down my spine. Kurtis, did you and Fia really encounter a demon? How are you two still alive? You expect me to believe Fia can outrun a demon?" He tried to jest, but his voice quivered.

"They encountered the demon on Blackpeak Mountain, where the Black Dragon—suspected to be Fia's familiar—has made its nest," Cyril said. "The true purpose of Fia's visit to the Gazzar Borderlands seemed to be reuniting with the Black Dragon. She, Kurtis, and the two others they traveled with climbed the mountain as a group and spent a night there."

"Huh? No way. They climbed up *that* mountain as a group of four?!" Desmond exclaimed, rudely jabbing a finger at Kurtis.

Cyril just shrugged. "The Black Dragon seems to have been gathering dragons from all over, which led to a demon growing curious and entering the mountain, then unfortunately encountering Kurtis's group. Kurtis, could you please explain what happened from there?"

Kurtis nodded and stood.

Everyone turned their eyes to Kurtis as he rose to his feet.

“Allow me to explain,” he began. “Firstly, two adventurer acquaintances of Fia’s joined us on our journey. I knew beforehand that Lady Fi’s true purpose for going to the Gazzar Borderlands was to meet the Black Dragon, so I allowed her two acquaintances to join us for extra security.”

In truth, Kurtis believed he and Fia would be fine on their own, so he was initially against Green and Blue joining them, but there was no need to explain all that to the captains.

“Would those two adventurers happen to be the two men I met here in the capital?” Clarissa asked.

Kurtis nodded. “Yes. They are Arteaga-born adventurers Lady Fi met near her family’s territory. She joined them on a monster hunt before. They have apparently traveled all over and are quite experienced in combat, so I asked them to join us as honorary knights.”

Desmond folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Huh? Was Fia an adventurer or something before becoming a knight? ...I can’t see it. I’d understand if she had joined a party of newbies or something, but she’s not strong enough to join up with adventurers capable enough for Kurtis to acknowledge.”

After a moment of silence, Kurtis explained. “...I am told Lady Fi was looking for an herb at the time and that the adventurers were strong but had a habit of being reckless. Thus, they allowed her to join them to keep them in check. Of course, at the end of their journey, Lady Fi shared the herbs she gathered evenly with the whole party, so it was a completely fair arrangement!” Kurtis tried to insist on Fia’s usefulness, but the other captains would come to their own conclusions.

“I see,” Desmond said. “So they *just so happened* to need a weak member to keep the party from going too wild. That’s...amazing in its own right. Fia keeps

outdoing my expectations in the weirdest of ways.”

All the other captains nodded along with Desmond’s statement. Fia’s actions were always hard to understand. But there was one thing about her that was clear: She was absurdly lucky. For Fia to be allowed to join a party of first-rate adventurers despite being of no use was nothing short of miraculous.

Kurtis frowned as everyone agreed with Desmond. He pushed on with his explanation anyway. “The circumstances in which we encountered the demon were exactly as Cyril said. The two honorary knights and I were surveying the mountain when a young girl suddenly appeared before us. I was instantly wary of her as there was no way a young girl would be strolling the home of the Black Dragon alone, and sure enough, she revealed herself to be a demon.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Desmond interrupted, waving a hand wildly. He pressed his other hand to his forehead like he was getting a headache. “I’ve never heard anything about demons disguising themselves as humans! Aren’t demons supposed to be horned creatures that speak their own language and live in forests and near lakes, far removed from people?!”

Kurtis nodded. “That was what I believed as well. But this demon disguised herself. She hid her horns and characteristic eyes and wore human clothing and spoke our human language.”

“Eek!” Desmond shrieked at the implications. “W-wait, but where did she learn to act human? Oh no. I think I can guess. Damn it, why’d I have to be so smart?!”

“You don’t need to be smart to piece this together. Even someone like me can see what’s going on,” Zackary said quietly.

To his side, Quentin nodded. “Personally, I don’t think there’s been much difference between people and demons from the start. Monsters are considered wild and dangerous, so we hunt them down, but if we make a pact with them, they can become allies, and given time, they are truly loyal. It’s not too surprising then that demons would be able to adapt to the rules of human

society and live among us. It's kind of amusing, even."

Quentin's purehearted suppositions only left Kurtis warier. "Don't be a fool, Quentin! A demon will always be a demon! No matter where it's raised or what it's taught, its true nature is cruelty and mayhem! There is no reasoning with demons! We can only cut them down!"

Quentin relented in the face of this vehement opposition. "I see... I'm sure there are some things only you would understand, having actually met a demon. I'll take your word for it."

In the silence that followed, Cyril spoke up. "It was thought that the demons who disappeared three hundred years ago hid themselves deep within the woods, but this incident suggests that a number of demons may have hidden themselves among humankind."

Desmond slammed his fist against the table. "Ha! Do they think they're playing hide and seek? Are they keeping themselves near humans to prey on us, hiding so we don't group up and attack them? ...No, there's no way! That just wouldn't make sense! Demons are far more powerful than us. Even if a group of humans banded together, there's nothing they'd be able to do against a demon. Wait, demons don't even necessarily eat people, do they? So what's the point of them pretending to be humans?"

No one had a satisfactory answer for Desmond, so Kurtis spoke up. "It seems we have nothing further to discuss there, so I will continue my explanation. The demon we met was the one known as 'The Bird Cryer of the Dual Crests.'"

The captains gasped in surprise.

"Dual crests?!"

"She had two crests?! That puts her on the Black Dragon's level!"

"How ever did you escape?!"

Everyone gaped at Kurtis. They'd assumed he and Fia had encountered a crestless demon, since they'd made it out of the encounter unscathed.

“We deemed it impossible to escape, so we chose to fight,” Kurtis said.

“Whaaat?!”

“Kurtis, you idiot... That’s the worst possible thing you could’ve done!”

“You’ve been weird for a while now, but this takes it to a whole new level. Can you not even make a decision that simple?!”

Kurtis ignored their rude comments and smiled. “Midway through, Lady Fi entered the battle as well.”

“*Why?! She’d be useless!*”

“In the end,” Kurtis said, furrowing his brow, “we succeeded because Lady Fi’s magic weakened the demon, and those two honorary knights used their strength to fight her off. We healed our injuries with potions before descending the mountain, so the knights stationed there shouldn’t know about the demon. I thought it would be best to report to Commander Saviz first and defer to him before spreading information about the demon. We stayed in the area for a few weeks but saw no sign of other demons.”

Desmond stood up, knocking over his chair in his frantic rush to interrupt Kurtis. “W-wait, wait, wait! You just glossed over the most important part! You guys defeated that double-crested demon?! That should be impossible!”

Zackary stood up, his own chair clattering to the floor as well. “Kurtis, your party didn’t even have a saint! And I’m pretty sure you need a saint to seal away demons, like what the Great Saint did three hundred years ago! And what do you mean Lady Fia ‘weakened’ the demon?! Were you lucky enough to catch them after a jog or something?!”

As soon as he had backup, Desmond smirked smugly. “See?! Even Zackary thinks it’s weird! I’d have an easier time believing Fia was a princess or something! There’s no way you guys took down a crest-bearing demon!”

Everyone shouted over each other, filling the room with chatter. Quentin’s voice rose above the din. “You fools! Think carefully about what Kurtis said!”

“What?” Desmond shot Quentin a look.

“Just what was it that the people of Sutherland offered Miss Fia? Have you forgotten? They gave her holy stones! Ancient stones filled with power equal to the healing magic of saints, stones we thought lost forever! If they brought a few with them and used them in battle against the demon, then they could have mimicked the actions of the Great Saint, correct?”

“Oh!”

“What’s more, Miss Fia can command the Black Dragon King as she pleases. If Miss Fia were to die, then the Black Dragon King would die as well since their lives are tethered to each other. It makes sense then to believe the Black Dragon King would fight without holding back.”

“Oh...” The captains shuddered.

Quentin was right. Sutherland’s holy stones were bestowed to Fia, and said holy stones had been charged with healing magic by the excellent saints of Sutherland over many years. As a result, a single, tiny holy stone possessed greater healing power than even a band of saints. Additionally, as discussed in the meeting’s first topic, Fia commanded the Black Dragon as her familiar. While those assembled still had their doubts about that arrangement, the discussion so far made it seem *almost* certain that the dragon was subservient to her. In other words, Fia could sic the Black Dragon on whomever she wanted. And with that all being the case...

The captains swallowed, then turned silent glances on Kurtis. When he made no move to deny any of what Quentin said, the captains shivered.

Amid the heavy silence, Desmond voiced what everyone was thinking. “Ha ha...ha... It’s not exactly her own strength, but...doesn’t that kind of make Fia... absurdly powerful?”

Kurtis brushed aside Desmond’s timid question. “But of course! There is none

more powerful than Lady Fi!”

In Kurtis’s mind, Fia transcended all others. Hence why he sang her praises at every turn. In contrast, Desmond had been skeptical of Fia’s ability so far, which was why Kurtis was thrilled to see the man had finally come around.

Normally, the captains would have a thing or two to say about Kurtis’s behavior, suggesting that Fia had made him weird or that he was exaggerating Fia’s greatness, but this time alone, nobody said a word against him—*for they now agreed with him.*

Fia possessed both mind-boggling offense and incredible healing. It was no exaggeration to say she was absurdly powerful.

“Wow... Fia’s amazing!” Clarissa murmured.

Desmond quickly spoke over her, however.

“Aaaaah! Now that I think about it, she’s always really been something! Remember how she saw through the commander’s injury at that welcome ceremony? That was crazy! I tried investigating her like Cyril told me to after that, but I was never able to get a read on her because everything she did was just so nonsensical! She’s impossible to analyze! The only thing I could conclude was that insane, unbelievable coincidences keep occurring around her at an abnormal rate!”

“Indeed,” Saviz said. “Her scarlet hair may play a part there. She has the exact same red hair as the Great Saint of three hundred years ago. The redder the hair, the more spirits adore it, so it makes sense that the lost spirits are somehow blessing her. I, too, saw evidence supporting this theory when traversing Starfall Forest with her.”

Cyril nodded in agreement.

Desmond scratched his head. “Ah, I see! Fia was given those holy stones because the people of Sutherland saw her as the Great Saint, right? And they only saw her as the Great Saint because of her hair and some weird things she

said and did, right? What is with that?! She mistook a jellyfish dance for a dolphin dance and now suddenly, as far as the people of Sutherland are concerned, she's the Great Saint?! How am I supposed to get a read on her when everything about her is all kinds of messed up?! My pride as commandant of the military police is in shambles because of her!"

Kurtis scowled at Desmond. "Does anyone object to Lady Fi's greatness?"

Uncertainty and doubt flickered across the captains' faces, but eventually, they replied in a single voice, "No."

Just as Desmond had feverishly pointed out, it wasn't entirely clear how Fia had won over both the Black Dragon and the people of Sutherland. Still, it was a fact that they both had her back. Therefore, the captains couldn't deny Fia's greatness, inexplicable though it may be.

Understanding passed between the assembled captains. Desmond righted his fallen chair and settled down in his seat. "...So, when you said you defeated the demon, did you mean you killed her? That would kind of make all your efforts for naught, wouldn't it?"

The other captains tilted their heads and furrowed their brows at him.

"What do you mean?"

"If you killed her, wouldn't the number of crest-bearing demons go down? Wasn't that how the Great Saint thinned their numbers?"

"Fair question," Desmond said, "but that's not the case according to the documents I've read concerning demons. Every source from our predecessors concludes that you mustn't kill the demons if you want to lower the number of crests they have available. You have to seal them away in some kind of special box, apparently, as the crests and the demons themselves are separate."

"I don't get what you're trying to say." Zackary frowned.

Desmond matched his expression. "Look, I don't really get it myself, but all the sources I've read say the crests are something independent from the

demons themselves. That's why killing a demon will just mean the crests get split up among other demons. For example, killing a demon with two crests will result in two newborn demons with one crest each."

"What the hell? Then wouldn't all the crest-bearing demons eventually have only one crest?"

"You'd think so, but there wasn't any more information I could find on this topic, so I can't really say. It seems clear that if you seal a demon in one of those special boxes, however, they can't escape, so that's probably the best way to deal with 'em."

Zackary nodded. "I see. But if that's the case, then Kurtis defeating the demon wasn't necessarily meaningless. The difference between a crafty demon that's lived for over three hundred years and a demon with no experience is night and day."

Desmond agreed. "You have a point. Having the demon be reborn is like downgrading a rook to a pawn." Sadly, his chess metaphor went right over the heads of many of his brethren.

Cyril, having quietly watched the discussion unfold for a while now, rose while holding something in his hands.

"...What's up, Cyril?" Desmond asked.

Cyril moved his hands to reveal a box engraved with intricate patterns.

"What?!" Desmond froze, eyes flying wide. The others regarded the small box with curiosity.

"What's that?" Clarissa asked. "Desmond seems pretty shocked to see it. Is there a diary containing embarrassing secrets from his childhood in it?"

Desmond didn't say a word, tension holding him perfectly still. Everyone looked around at each other, increasingly bewildered.

That was when Cyril said simply, "I received this from Kurtis. It is likely one of the very same boxes Desmond was talking about."

“How... How do you have a box just like the ones described in those texts?! No, wait, don’t tell me that Fia just so happened to find one by coincidence like she always does?!” Desmond pressed himself flat against his chair, trying to distance himself from the box as much as possible.

“Desmond, I’m sure you’ll be happy to hear that this time Fia is not involved. The box was procured by Kurtis,” Cyril answered.

“That’s *still* weird! The fact that this box was found at all is absurd!” Desmond turned to Kurtis. “Has being by Fia’s side too much somehow made you catch her bad luck?! Where did you find this?! And that’s *empty*, right?!”

Kurtis regarded Desmond with a flat, level look and said, “Sutherland was once the domain of the Blue Knight, the Great Saint’s own personal knight. As he was originally a local, much of the information regarding him has survived. He apparently wrote often about demons, insisting they be eliminated from this world. He even left behind detailed accounts on how to deal with them.”

“The people of Sutherland possess a strong sense of duty, as well as a long history of passing down knowledge other peoples might have lost to time,” Cyril added.

Clarissa perked up as she remembered a tidbit from the previous meeting. “Oh, right. You mentioned yourself that official records don’t always relay history correctly. The Great Saint’s visit to Sutherland three hundred years ago, when she healed what was believed to be an incurable disease, was something no official record mentioned.”

Cyril nodded. “Exactly. The people of Sutherland remembered the truth, however, and have passed it down with gratitude for the past three hundred years. Their ability to relay information is admirable.”

Everyone thought back to that segment of the previous meeting, several nodding to themselves.

“The Blue Knight left behind several of these small boxes known as Boxes of Binding, along with a warning to seal demons away within them,” Kurtis said.

“When I left Sutherland, the chief entrusted me with one of them. That’s how I was able to seal away the demon we fought.”

“Eeeeeek! S-so there really is a demon in it after all!” Desmond squeaked.

The other captains were just as shocked.

“No way!”

“You’re kidding... For real?!”

Everyone pressed themselves flat against their chairs, trying to get as much distance from the box as possible.

“What the hell are you?!” Desmond complained at Kurtis. “It was hard enough to believe you helped defeat a demon, but now you’re telling us you sealed one away?! How is that possible?! There’s no way the information the Blue Knight left behind in Sutherland could’ve been enough to aid you in accomplishing that!” He slammed the table with his palms. “You’re telling me all those dozens of forbidden books I forced myself to read are on the same level as some folk stories passed down in Sutherland?! Come on! What were all my efforts for then, huh?!”

Quentin spoke up calmly. “Actually, the two aren’t comparable at all. Unlike you, Kurtis actually obtained a box to seal the demon away with.”

Desmond shot Quentin a glare.

Just when it looked like an argument might break out, Cyril interjected. “By rule, we must entrust boxes containing sealed demons to the Cathedral. But doing so would alert the leaders of nations across the world that demons have returned after a three-hundred-year absence, so Kurtis elected to postpone this and bring the box to the capital first. After conferring with His Majesty over the issue, we’ve concluded this information is too important for Náv to keep secret.”

Everyone straightened in their seats a bit at this mention of the king.

Cyril continued. “For that reason, we plan to send an official envoy with this

box, as well as word that a demon has appeared. While we're at it, we'll request several new boxes. Now, I would love nothing more than to be part of this envoy myself...but instead Commander Saviz and I will deliberate on who to send and inform them directly tomorrow."

The Cathedral lay in the Holy Kingdom of Dhital, a small country nestled between the Náv Kingdom and the Arteaga Empire. Reaching it required a lengthy journey, which all the captains secretly prayed to avoid.

In the ensuing lull, Clarissa murmured, "This has turned out to be quite the meeting, huh? It's amazing you were able to seal a demon away, Kurtis. That pair I met here in the capital must be rather strong as well if they were able to help you. Just between us, those two definitely seemed important, like celebrities or something..." She gave Kurtis a probing look. "They had a huge group guarding them, which made me think they weren't ordinary adventurers. Then again, maybe they were, seeing as they were brave enough to fight against a demon—that is, assuming their guards didn't tag along to Blackpeak Mountain and gang up on the demon in secret."

"No such thing happened, I assure you," Kurtis said.

Clarissa sighed. "I see. Hm. I guess there's no way those two would be allowed to go to such a dangerous area without their guards if they *really* were anybody important. Perhaps I misunderstood and the guards were just in the capital by chance or guarding someone else. I've never been wrong about something like this before, though... But I also can't imagine big shots throwing themselves into combat against a demon so casually, not unless they're an exception to the norm like Commander Saviz."

Saviz shifted in his seat, self-conscious about his own recklessness despite his status as the king's younger brother.

Kurtis shrugged. "The two did not speak of their backgrounds, so I cannot give you a clear answer. But from their speech and behavior, I do not think their upbringing was that of a noble."

“That’s what I thought as well,” Clarissa said. “In that case, perhaps they’re the illegitimate children of some high-ranking noble. Then again, maybe not. There’s no way someone with high-ranking noble blood would visit another nation without official notice. That is, assuming they’re not an exception to the norm like our Cyril.”

Cyril smiled thinly but did not otherwise acknowledge a snippet of history he’d rather leave buried and forgotten. He did not even risk refuting it. Sometimes, silence served best.

Quentin barked a laugh. “Heh. It seems like this meeting is full of people who can’t consider themselves normal!”

“Like you’re one to talk!” Desmond shot back.

And with that, only one topic remained for the captains’ meeting.

“Man, it was such a shock to hear that a demon has appeared after three hundred years without a sighting! This whole meeting has been nothing but surprises! The Black Dragon, the Rose of the Great Saint, a demon—any one of these would’ve been crazy enough on its own! But *surely* nothing worse can come now, right? I mean, there’s no way, *right?*” Desmond sank into his chair as he ticked off the meeting topics on his fingers. “C’mon, Cyril! End things on a high note! Something fun, like giving us all raises!”

Desmond couldn’t possibly have forgotten that Cyril said every topic for this meeting related to Fia. He was simply trying to brute force a topic change, sick and tired of hearing the name Fia.

Knowing this, Cyril flipped through his documents as though considering Desmond’s suggestion. “Hmm, yes, indeed... Very well then, let me report a related incident before moving on to our final topic.”

“A related incident?” Desmond groaned. Whenever Cyril nonchalantly tacked on information like this, things did not end well.

“Yes. Just the other day, my new recruits finished their annual meetings.”

“Ah, right. That thing. ‘C’ is still having fun with your newbies, huh?” Desmond nodded. Only about twenty people, among them the captains stationed in the royal capital and attending this meeting, knew that Cerulean, the young court jester, was actually the king. As an extra safety measure, they referred to Cerulean as “C” when talking between themselves, but using a nickname inadvertently conveyed a bit less respect than the king usually commanded.

Quentin chimed in with a question. “It’s hard to believe when she’s such a monster, but Miss Fia only became a knight this year, didn’t she? She must’ve met ‘C’ then. I know it’s a bit uncouth to prod, but tell me, what did he think of her?”

Foreboding settled over the group as Cyril studied his documents instead of responding. Cyril had an excellent memory; he’d memorized those papers before him, and everyone knew it. So his restless rustling and flipping had nothing to do with finding information and everything to do with calming himself before dropping another bomb on the group.

Finally, Cyril replied, in a roundabout manner. “This year, twenty knights met with ‘C.’ As usual, two other court jesters, His Majesty (the body double), His Majesty’s aides, and the guards joined ‘C.’”

Cyril was still stalling, trying to soften the blow. Despite this, Desmond spoke up, stalwart in his belief that the king’s meetings with the recruits must have been uneventful. “Wow, they met with *that* many people? Maybe the court is trying to show the newbies how impressive the royal guard they’re joining is, but a display like that is only going to leave them shaking in their boots.”

Cyril raised an eyebrow. “Oh? My brigade only accepts experienced knights with at least ten years of service. I genuinely doubt a large group would be enough to rattle them. Although...there were special exceptions made for two knights this year. Were you perhaps worried about those two in particular?”

Desmond scoffed. “As if! You’re talking about Fabian and Fia, right? I’m not

worried about them at all. I doubt anything crazy happened, no matter what Quentin expects, and I know they're not the types to freeze under pressure either."

"Is that so? Well, it's true they didn't freeze, but unfortunately, something *did* happen. The one to worry about isn't Fabian or Fia this time, but our 'C.'" Cyril dropped his gaze back down at his documents and flicked at the top page.

"...Huh? What do..." Finally learning from his own mistakes, Desmond clamped his mouth shut. Cyril's bearing was a portend of dire news, news it was far too late to stop.

"Of the twenty meetings, the first nineteen went normally," Cyril said. "After meeting His Majesty, the knights were questioned by 'C' and the other two court jesters. They responded well. Then they played a card game with 'C,' won, and were let go."

Desmond grimaced. "Such bad taste. I know 'C' is not merely toying with them and uses all this as an opportunity to gauge the knights' abilities and decide their assignments, but he is *definitely* getting a laugh out of making fools of them."

Cyril ignored Desmond as he continued. "Incidentally, I was present for all twenty of the meetings, and Commander Saviz was present for the final one."

"Is that right? Let me guess, you're going to say the final knight to go was Fia, aren't you? Aha ha ha ha...ha..." Desmond wanted to believe Fia had somehow screwed her meeting up. After all, her extraordinary good luck had to run out some day.

"Indeed, you are correct. She was busy with her trip to Blackpeak Mountain, so her meeting was postponed."

"I see..." Desmond fell silent as the foreboding aura permeating the room thickened. But then a flash of insight struck him. "Oh, I know what happened! Fia somehow lost that rigged card game, didn't she?! She probably didn't even understand the rules."

“Absurd! Lady Fi would never make such a blunder!” Kurtis said.

“Initially, I questioned whether Fia understood the game’s rules as well,” Cyril said. “The game was set up to guarantee she’d win if she played her king last, but instead, she went out of her way to hold back the joker.”

“Huh? But that’s...” Desmond might have called such a play meaningless, but his words trailed off into stunned silence.

“‘C’ has created such an unsavory game,” Cyril said. “‘C’ intentionally left a narrow path to victory that required trouncing him, but no one could know that unless they knew what was in his hand. Hence, everyone elected to use their joker early and play their king last for a guaranteed victory. Taking an easy path to victory and ignoring alternatives is only human nature, after all.”

“Right. Especially after ‘C’ egged them on like he always does. He uses that strange, mocking tone of his to rile knights up and make them want to demolish him, right?” Desmond said.

“No, his plan failed this time,” Cyril said. “‘C’ did indeed use his quirky speech to mock Fia, but she held her cool throughout it all.”

“Oh, really? Well, I guess she *is* rather coolheaded. It’d probably take a lot to get a rise out of her.”

Desmond was just starting to sound impressed with Fia when Cyril shot him down.

“That’s not quite what I mean,” Cyril said. “You see, Fia identified his manner of speech as being an homage to Lua, the root language of our current Návian language.”

“What?” Desmond blinked at Cyril, his mouth hanging open. Desmond had learned to read a little Lua while trying to decipher books about demons in the past, but the language ultimately proved too difficult for him—and yet *that* Fia supposedly recognized it?!

Cyril continued. “She went on to perfectly mimic the Lua accent in Návian,

then provoked 'C' by saying his speech sounded quite pleasant to those who knew the language. She even went as far as to mockingly praise how smart he was. The one who had been egged on wasn't Fia but 'C.'"

"That's...terrifying." Desmond shivered imagining Cerulean's rage.

Zackary lacked Desmond's imagination, however and cried out in excitement. "Wow! She really held nothing back!"

Quentin sounded moved to tears. "Miss Fia is more amazing than I ever imagined!"

"This much is only natural for Lady Fi!" Kurtis said with pride.

Cyril regarded them all with a sad smile, knowing he'd shatter their carefree attitudes soon enough. "Given the circumstances, Fia should have approached that card game calmly. When the time came, 'C' played a king as his winning card, which Fia then trumped with her joker."

"For real?!" Desmond exclaimed.

"Ha ha, Fia's amazing! I bet nobody's managed that before!" Zackary laughed.

"But there's no way she orchestrated that intentionally!" Desmond grumbled.

In sharp contrast to their excitement, Cyril kept his voice level. "After she won, she said, 'Interesting. So the joker outranks the king, huh?'"

The captains froze.

"Hm?"

"What?"

Why would she say such a thing? Fia couldn't have possibly figured out Cerulean was the king, could she? Surely not?!

This question hung in the air unspoken, everyone holding quiet as they waited for Cyril.

"After that," Cyril said, "Fia walked over and... Oh, let's just get to the point. With complete certainty, she addressed 'C' as 'Your Majesty.'"

“Eek!”

“You’re kidding me!”

“C-Cyril, no more!”

Humans feared that which they could not understand. The captains paled and begged for Cyril to stop, but he granted them no such mercy. He had experienced the horrific event himself and wanted to share that experience, even if only in part, with his fellow captains. “Cerulean was stubborn and insisted the king was the one atop the shiny throne. Hence, Fia went on to explain why she thought Cerulean was the true king.”

“Intuition!” Desmond sputtered. “She used intuition befitting a wild beast to figure it out! That has to be it!”

Cyril shook his head. “Fia first pointed out that ‘Cerulean’ was an anagram for ‘Laurence.’”

“Eek!” Desmond shrieked.

“She then explained how his court jester costume was based on Náv’s national flag and guardian beast from three hundred years ago.”

“Even that?!” Zackary exclaimed.

“She then mentioned that she noticed the curse on his left arm.” Cyril elected to avoid mentioning the fact that the curse on Cerulean’s arm came from the Spirit Lord. That was not a secret to share with the captains. The revelation was shocking enough without that, as evidenced by the pallid faces watching Cyril in shock.

Cyril solemnly finished his retelling. “With all this in mind, Fia concluded that Cerulean was the king... Hence, I share with you all now that Cerulean’s identity has been outed to Fia.”

The captains stared blankly at Cyril.

The first brave enough to speak up was Desmond. “Th-that all...really happened?”

“It did. I really do wish you could have seen it for yourself, Desmond. Then you would understand just how shocked I was and how speechless Commander Saviz and Cerulean were.”

“I-I think I’m good, thanks!”

Silence fell over the meeting room. The same question echoed in everyone’s mind: *Just what in the world is Fia?* They’d heard so much about her today, yet no one could answer that question.

“Now then, I would like to move on to our final topic,” Cyril said casually. “Before that, however, I’d like to amend one thing I’ve said. Near the start of this meeting, I stated that all the topics would have something to do with Fia, but that was not entirely truthful. Our final topic...only has very slightly to do with Fia. It mainly concerns Commander Saviz.”

“What? Really?” Desmond beamed. “Thank goodness! If I heard any more craziness about Fia, I’d probably become allergic to her!”

Zackary nodded in agreement. “If it’s about the commander, then it’s something normal, right? Finally, we can relax!”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

But then Cyril said, “Incidentally, Cerulean has given up any hope of marrying given his current state.”

The sudden shift left everyone confused, but Zackary and Desmond played along.

“Yes, well, he has regressed to a child, hasn’t he?”

“Even if he wanted to marry, nobody would want to tie the knot with a naughty court jester.”

Cyril shook his head in exasperation. “The greatest duty of the royal family is to leave behind descendants. And as Cerulean can no longer fulfill that duty, it falls on another’s shoulders.”

“Hm?”

“Wait...”

“Ah...”

Everyone sat up straighter but dared not speak. Thus, it fell to Cyril to break the stalemate.

“Soon, we plan to engage Commander Saviz to the next head saint.”

Awkward glances slid toward Saviz. He explained, “It is law to designate a new head saint when a member of the royal family marries. Hence, we plan to designate a new one soon.”

Everyone maintained their silence, holding back all they wished to say. After a bit, Desmond worked up the nerve to voice the words that were buzzing in everyone’s mind. “Commander Saviz, may I be so bold as to speak?”

“You may.”

“To my knowledge, we only choose a head saint when the king or the soon-to-be king marries, not when general members of the royal family marry. Have I misunderstood something here?”

“You have not.”

Surprised by Saviz’s easy tone, Desmond stuttered. “O-oh... I see...”

“Indeed, it is as you’ve surmised,” Cyril said. “Given Cerulean’s state, marriage is out of the question for him. Plus, his body double has sat on the throne for so long that the people would struggle to accept the real Cerulean as their king.” Cerulean had the body of a nine-year-old despite turning twenty-nine this year. The general public would never wrap their minds around such a contrast. “Hence, Cerulean, or, rather, his body double, will abdicate the throne and Commander Saviz will succeed him.”

Gasps rang out as the captains turned to Saviz—their future king. This was a

stroke of extraordinary good fortune. In their minds, no man better suited the throne than Saviz. The captains rose so they could drop to one knee and bow their heads.

“Commander Saviz,” Desmond said, speaking for all the captains, “we thank you for the trust you’ve shown us by informing us of this matter. We congratulate you from the bottom of our hearts.”

Saviz rose. “I am happy to receive such words. No matter where I stand, I will continue to strive to do my best for the kingdom. I hope you will continue to support me as you have.”

The captains bowed their heads once more, expressing their willingness to continue working under him. They then returned to their seats, sneaking restless glances between Saviz and Cyril.

Cyril, picking up on the burning question crackling in the atmosphere of the meeting room, said, “Indeed. With Commander Saviz becoming king, the position of commander of the knight brigades will be empty.”

“Right...”

“Yeah...”

Sad as the captains were to lose their commander, the news did not arrive without a bit of hope for what was to come.

Zackary said, “Wait, Cyril, weren’t you second in line for the throne after Commander Saviz?”

“That is correct. And as the position of commander is generally reserved for members of the royal family or those of distant relation, I’ll likely be nominated.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“Phew...”



“Oh, I see!”

“Congratulations, Cyril!”

Cyril was the only son of the previous king’s younger brother, as well as the head of the highest-ranking ducal family. He was a just and fair man as well. Though stern, he kept a cool head and saw the bigger picture. He’d be a perfect commander. In fact, he was already someone the brigades looked up to since he was the captain of the First Knight Brigade. The knight brigades would be in good hands with him at the helm. But a problem remained...

The mood in the meeting room dampened as the next topic loomed. The air seemed thicker, harder to breathe, as though they were suddenly underwater. Desmond, who’d mused over this final point for some time, was the first to gather the courage to speak.

“Um, Commander Saviz, may I be so impertinent as to speak once more?”

“You may.” Saviz nodded.

Desmond swallowed and said, “If we designate a new head saint, then I take it we can anticipate a succession ceremony?” His voice trembled faintly.

Saviz rubbed his chin and nodded. “That is correct. But that’s not truly what you wish to know, is it? You wish to know whether the current head saint will attend... That is, whether my mother—the queen dowager—will attend. Indeed, she will.”

“I-I see!” Desmond nodded deeply.

Saviz brushed his hand over his eyepatch. “Someone needs to go to receive her when the time comes.”

“Ah... Indeed.”

A pall rolled over the meeting like a cloud covering the sun. It was a death sentence to get assigned any work regarding the queen dowager. Earlier, everyone had prayed to avoid the assignment for that long trip to the Cathedral, and now everyone prayed for the opposite, just so they could evade

the queen dowager.

Part of the problem was her status as a saint, the highest possible status in society. Even when a saint married a king, they did not become part of the royal family; they remained separate, retaining their higher status. The queen dowager was well aware of this. When the king died, she left the royal castle, a sure sign that she'd only remained for her husband and had no desire to linger now that he was gone.

"We will need to assign knights to personally guard the head saint upon her engagement to Commander Saviz," Cyril said. "She likely will not accept any royal title and dismiss the protection of the First Knight Brigade. Hence, we will form a new guard for her alone once the engagement is set."

Tension rippled through the meeting room. Everyone held their breath as they awaited Cyril's next words.

"The head saint will determine the name of the new guard later, but...the tentative plan is for Kurtis to be its captain."

"Oh!"

"Nice pick!"

"So that's why Kurtis was called to the capital, eh?"

Everyone aside from Kurtis breathed a sigh of relief, overjoyed by the news that they had been spared this task.

"Congratulations, Kurtis!"

"Yeah, congrats! The position of captain of the head saint's guard is so much better than captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade!"

They piled on the praise, but not a single person expressed even a drop of envy at Kurtis's sudden promotion. None of them wanted to risk the role being suddenly "gifted" to them, after all.

All the captains but Kurtis rose to their feet and applauded. Naturally, they noticed that Cyril had called this a *tentative plan*, yet they clung to the belief

that the danger had passed them over for good.

When it came to Kurtis himself, he had only one question: “Will Lady Fi be assigned with me to this new brigade?”

“A fair question,” Cyril said. “We plan to transfer knights from the First Knight Brigade into it, and I believe it is likely that the new head saint will be a young woman in her late teens.”

That made sense. While saints were generally ranked by ability, they had to consider the age of the next head saint, as she would marry the new king. Cyril’s position gave him a good grasp on the abilities and ages of all the kingdom’s saints, so he had a few candidates in mind.

“For that reason, we’d like to assign knights of a similar age, in order to make the saint more comfortable. Fia and Fabian are both of the First Knight Brigade, and well suited for the task...or at least, that was the original plan. Now I am not so sure.”

When Cyril faltered, Desmond cut in. “Yeah, you’d better think twice about that! Assigning Fia is not a decision you should make lightly!”

“What makes you say that?” Cyril asked.

“Just think about it. Fia was assigned to the First Knight Brigade before the welcoming ceremony, meaning she was let in on account of her test scores alone. But everything she’s done after that has been insane! Now, obviously we could talk about her strange antics all day, but I’ll narrow it down to just two incidents.” Desmond put up a finger. “First, while we don’t know why, it’s in Fia’s nature to somehow cause unprecedented event after unprecedented event. If that somehow affects the head saint, we could find ourselves amid a disaster like no other! At the very least, I’m certain it would be a disaster beyond anything I could manage.” This could have been pragmatism, or just plain selfishness. He put up another finger and continued. “Second, Fia’s hair is a rare shade of red that made even the people of Sutherland think she was the

second coming of the Great Saint. We know the head saint will be haughty, so she could take offense to Fia's mere presence. I'm no prophet, but even I can foresee that assigning Fia to guard a new saint can only end in ruin!"

Desmond's plea came straight from the heart. Saints were a prideful bunch, and the head saint most of all. Such a woman would not take kindly to Fia, whose hair caused people to mistake her for the Great Saint. All saints longed to become closer to the Great Saint of legend, so Fia, who was indifferent to her striking resemblance to that saint, would only invite jealousy.

"Gah, we can't do it! The more I think about it, the worse it sounds! We can't place Fia and the head saint together no matter what!" Desmond shouted, his face draining of color as he spoke.

Zackary commiserated with his desperation. "Desmond's right! I'm also against letting Fia and the head saint meet. It just ain't worth the risk."

Clarissa, however, was unconvinced. "Hmm, but it would make a *really* spicy rivalry, don't you think? The head saint and official fiancée of Commander Saviz versus Fia, who's gunning for Commander Saviz's heart! The bigger the obstacles, the greater the romance! No matter who wins, the commander is guaranteed a colorful love life. I really doubt we can hide Fia's hair color from the saints for long anyway. Rather than flounder about, we should proactively send her into the lion's den." Clarissa finished with an impish smile.

"Clarissa, how dare you say that when you *definitely* know the truth!" Quentin said. "I've seen Miss Fia and the commander together myself many times and am certain she has no feelings for him! If anything, the only one in Miss Fia's heart is the Black Dragon King!"

"Oh, such good fortune," Enoch murmured to himself. "To think I'm alive for the inauguration of a new head saint! I wonder just how powerful she'll be. My heart is aflutter at the mere thought!"

"If Lady Fi is assigned to the saint's guard, then I will gladly accept the position of captain," Kurtis spoke up.

Cyril squinted, weighing the opinions flying across the table. “Your worries are warranted, Desmond. However, Fia’s hair color was in fact a reason why we thought to assign her to the saint’s guard in the first place. We hoped it would make the church feel as though their head saint was received warmly.”

Confusion greeted Cyril’s explanation, so he pushed on. “The church and the saints consider red hair sacred. Hence, assigning a red-haired knight to the head saint could serve as a sign we are treating her with the utmost respect.

Furthermore, it is unlikely the head saint would take issue with someone with red hair *who is not a saint*. After all, what threat could a non-saint pose to her? The problem, however, is that the people of Sutherland have acknowledged Fia as the Great Saint’s reincarnation.”

Given all this, would the church see Fia’s assignment as an act of respect or offense?

Cyril tapped the table. “It might be worth gauging the next head saint’s reaction to Fia before making any assignment official. Given the information I have, I expect the next head saint will be the Lady Alcott, barring any unforeseen circumstances.”

“Who...?”

“Lady Alcott...?”

Confusion washed through the room, but Desmond, at least, understood. “If you think about it logically, it can only be her,” he said. “Lady Alcott—or rather, Saint Priscilla—is one of the stronger saints we’ve seen in recent years. She should turn seventeen soon... Which... Ah, I see. We waited until she was of marriageable age.”

Saints could only marry after turning seventeen. Hence, Desmond suspected the church had put off selecting a new head saint until Priscilla came of age.

Zackary exclaimed in surprise. “Wait, isn’t House Alcott home to Lloyd Alcott, one of the Three Great Dukes? Since when did he have such an old daughter? I thought he was a bachelor!”

“Indeed, he is a bachelor,” Cyril said. “He is also the same age as me, twenty-seven, so it’s hard to imagine he could have a sixteen-year-old daughter. In fact, the household adopted her in secret. Desmond learned of this due to the nature of his work. Note that Lady Priscilla is a saint powerful enough that the whole populace knows her name.”

Desmond continued the explanation started by Cyril. “You see this kind of adoption all the time. It adds legitimacy to marriages. Common-born saints can marry into noble families, no problem, but to marry into *high-ranking* noble families, some other noble family must adopt them first. Usually, those families are earls at best. For someone like Duke Alcott to secretly adopt her must mean the king’s faction wants to either keep her far away from Commander Saviz or marry her off to Cyril.”

That last bit was just a bad joke, of course. He knew well what her future held, as did everyone else.

Cyril smiled slightly. “Worry not. My marriage will only ever be after Commander Saviz’s own. Besides, if I married Lloyd’s foster daughter, that would make him my father-in-law. I would very much rather avoid that.”

“Ahhh... Yeah, that would suck,” Desmond mused.

Cyril and Lloyd had attended knight school together. Their paths split when Lloyd had a change of heart and chose the path of a civil official instead, but the two had butted heads often enough as rivals in school.

Cyril cast his gaze down, as though to hide his expression. “House Alcott’s manor should be welcoming Saint Priscilla soon. I know Lloyd well enough, so I’ll bring Fia for a visit and gauge Saint Priscilla’s reaction to her, then decide whether to move forward with assigning Fia to her guard from there. Does that sound acceptable?”

“Sounds good to me!” Desmond said, eager to move on and keep himself far from this topic. “If things don’t work out, we can tell the church we planned to assign a red-haired knight to their head saint but ultimately chose not to in

accordance with the head saint's wishes, right?"

It seemed Desmond was already assuming the head saint wouldn't like Fia. Cyril considered him for a moment. "Desmond, you're chess buddies with Lloyd, aren't you? Why don't you come with us and visit the Alcott manor?"

"Oh, gee, how nice of you! I would love nothing more than to witness Saint Priscilla and Fia's meeting. Unfortunately I'm a little swamped with work, being a captain and all! *As of now*, I'm so very busy I won't even have time to sleep for the next three months!"

Cyril smiled. "Oh, Desmond, cramming your schedule full of work like that is no good. A man in your position will have urgent tasks spring up all the time. You need to keep yourself free enough to squeeze things into your schedule."

"Cyril, don't you dare..." Desmond said, cringing back in his chair.

Cyril offered him no mercy. "Come to think of it, you were the one who argued against assigning Fia to Saint Priscilla, weren't you? I dare say you have a duty to see the validity of your suggestion for yourself."

"Wh-what?" Desmond wanted to object, but Cyril rose and stepped close, a smile still frozen on his face.

"This is no ordinary visit, of course. This visit will influence the future head saint's personal guard. Please do prioritize it over your other work."

"U-urk!"

Despite his gentle appearance, Cyril pressed hard, bullying Desmond into the task. Desmond flopped onto the round table, utterly defeated.

And just like that, the long, long captains' meeting finally came to an end, but not before leaving every one of its attendees exhausted.

Chapter 44:

Visit to the Duke's Manor Part 1

“UHH, DUKE ALCOTT, would you mind releasing my arm?”

I was picking herbs in the royal castle garden when a man I had never met approached, acted overly familiar with me, and grabbed my arm. The man, Duke Alcott, smiled faintly but didn't let go. Instead, he ignored my request and began spouting nonsense.

“Again, please call me Lloyd,” he said. “Using a nickname for Cerulean but not for a man of my low standing could be considered an offense against the crown, you know.”

So he said, but *he'd* called the king “Cerulean” just now himself... No, wait, that wasn't what was important here.

My eyes fell to Duke Alcott's hand on my arm, and I blinked in disbelief. *That can't be. How is a full-fledged knight like me weaker than a pencil pusher like this guy?!* I tried once more to pry my arm out of his grip, but he just smiled and held fast.

I peered up at him. ...*Just who is this guy?* He was acting quite familiar, even though we'd just met. Maybe this was how he treated everyone?

Ignoring my confusion, he posed a question. “What were you doing here, Fia? Is picking weeds the new trend among knights or something?”

“Picking weeds...? Yeah, sure, something like that.” I was picking herbs, not weeds, but I wasn't about to explain the difference to him. Besides, agreeing might make him let go of me sooner.

“Ah, yes, I see,” he said. “Flowers are all beautiful in their own way, and that makes it a challenge to choose any particular one. But if one were to decorate with weeds, a close relative to flowers, then you wouldn't need to waste time

choosing the best one! Such novel thinking.”

Could this man be insane? I thought. What an absurd conclusion to draw. He was nothing like Cyril, even though both were dukes. Yeah, I definitely wanted nothing to do with this guy.

I smiled weakly, searching for something to say to get myself out of this, but then Charlotte, who’d been picking herbs nearby, called out.

“Fia, I found lots of raina leaves over there!” She trotted over, a smile on her face. When she noticed Duke Alcott holding my arm, she cocked her head. “Is this an acquaintance of yours?”

No, he’s a complete stranger, I wanted to say, but the duke replied before I could get a word in.

“An acquaintance? No! Fia and I are close friends. I hope to become *best* friends with her one day—or maybe we already are best friends, and I just haven’t realized it...?”

“That was just a joke nobles like to use, Charlotte,” I said. “Sadly, I’m not a noble, so the joke is completely lost on me.”

“Oh, I see! So that’s why I didn’t get it either,” Charlotte said, completely earnest.

Duke Alcott’s face sobered. From just behind him, his friend burst into laughter.

My sixth sense perked up. *Aha! This guy must be a commoner if he finds that funny!*

The two men introduced themselves to Charlotte.

“Hello, little saint. I am Lloyd, head of House Alcott.”

“I’m Noel, Duke of Balfour.”

“Guh?!” Well, so much for him being a commoner. Upon a second look, I noticed Duke Balfour’s expensive, fine clothing. ...*Yeah, he’s a noble all right.*

I should have known better than to trust my intuition, especially when I wasn't taking things seriously.

I hung my head, defeated, and made a last-ditch effort to get away from these men I wanted nothing to do with. "Welp, thanks for coming over and talking to me. Goodbye now."

But even at that, Duke Alcott didn't let go of my arm. I glared at him, but he brushed it off and changed the topic. "I gained a daughter just the other day. She's about the same age as you."

"Huh? Um, congratulations. But I'm fifteen, a little bit older than some newborn, so..."

This man really was insane if he thought a fifteen-year-old knight and a newborn baby were of similar age. Or maybe he just grouped everyone under fifteen into one big bunch. Could this be yet another unfunny joke nobles liked to make? I certainly wouldn't know.

He went on. "Oh, she's my adoptive daughter and already sixteen. She's a saint too, so Saint Charlotte might get along with her. Oh, I know! Why don't you two come over to my manor sometime? My Priscilla has lived in the north for most of her life, so she doesn't have many friends here in the capital. How about it?"

"Oh..." I twitched at the mention that his daughter was a saint. I glanced at Charlotte, who nodded to say she'd go if I wanted to. But just when I was about to accept the offer, a familiar voice piped up behind me.

"Is something the matter, Fia?"

I turned to find Cyril and Desmond walking toward us. They made for a strange pairing and moved with an intensity that left me gaping. Cyril strode right up to Duke Alcott and grabbed him by the arm, twisting until he released me.

"I-I'm free!" I exclaimed, then hid my hands behind my back. This time

though, it was Cyril who grabbed my arm. Confused, I blinked at him. “Captain Cyril?”

Duke Alcott scowled. “Are you not going to demand that he unhand you, Fia?”

With a smug look, Cyril said, “She won’t, as she considers me a friend she can trust—unlike you, whom she’s wary of.”

“What are you saying?!” Duke Alcott exclaimed. “Fia knows both my public self and my hidden self! She knows all there is to know about me. Hence, she has no reason to be wary of me!”

“It’s the opposite. It’s precisely because she knows you so well that she’s decided you’re untrustworthy.”

I wasn’t sure what was going on and could only swivel my head back and forth, watching them bicker around me. “Wow! You two sure are close!”

They both objected instantly.

“Fia, just what about this makes you think we’re close?” Cyril asked.

“We’re not close at all! Just standing next to Cyril dampens my spirits. The thought of getting along with him hasn’t occurred to me once.”

“Really? The way you two objected was kind of in sync though,” I said. They were like quarreling children. “Oh, that reminds me. Duke Alcott just invited me and Charlotte to his manor. Would it be all right if I went, Captain Cyril?”

I braced for a no, but instead, he said, “I do not mind, but I worry what might happen if I let you go alone. Desmond and I will join you.”

“Excuse me? My invitation was not extended to *you*, Cyril!” Duke Alcott said.

Cyril’s smile was a thin sliver. “I do believe noble society enforces a strict hierarchy. Surely you wouldn’t refuse my visit, would you, Lloyd?”

Duke Alcott grimaced. “I can’t believe you’d abuse your higher status like this! Fia, are you really okay with working under this tyrant?!”

I considered for a moment, then replied with the answer I thought would

cause me the least trouble. “I am more than happy to work under Captain Cyril.”

Duke Alcott’s scowl deepened, which only seemed to amuse Cyril.

“Oh my, you seem quite vexed,” Cyril said. “Perhaps I should show you how to appease Fia sooner rather than later. Do your best to learn from my example so you stop inconveniencing her.”

Duke Alcott narrowed his eyes and tilted his head in a mix of suspicion and confusion.

Cyril smiled brilliantly. “They do say to strike while the iron is hot. How about the five of us here visit the Alcott Manor tomorrow before noon? Actually, no... Let’s bring Fabian of House Wyner to make it six. Oh, and prepare some strawberry tarts as tea snacks, would you, Lloyd? Fia is quite fond of strawberries, you see.”

“Fabian, did you hear about our visit to the Alcott manor?” I questioned Fabian in a hushed voice as we sat around the same table in the cafeteria for the knight brigades. I hadn’t seen Fabian in a while, which was going to make this strange invitation even stranger, but I dared not talk about the incident with Duke Alcott too loudly. Even with the captains having their own dining room, I lowered my voice just in case one of them had decided to eat with us today.

Fabian covered his mouth and spoke in a hushed voice, imitating me. “I have. Captain Cyril informed me himself. It’s quite odd we’re making the visit tomorrow though. It’s so sudden. Did you perhaps do something to get in trouble?”

I raised my voice at this injustice. “Wh-what, no! I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Ha ha, I’m only joking. I think I know what this visit is about, but it seems like

no one told you. Which means Captain Cyril wants you to go in blind. Hmm, I wonder if I should keep my mouth shut..."

"Huh? What? What what?" How did he know something I didn't?

Fabian folded his arms and sat back. "Well... Saints are very territorial, and as the Alcott manor already has a saint, she might take offense to Lady Charlotte visiting. There's also the issue of your red hair..."

"Huh? Charlotte and I are only visiting for a short while. I doubt it'll be an issue. We're not invading her territory or anything, and it's not like we'll pick a fight. As for my red hair...well, I'm not a saint, so it shouldn't matter." I forced out the lie but couldn't meet his eyes.

He evidently took my evasion for sadness at the fact I wasn't a saint. "Sorry, I said too much. It's a good thing you're a knight, Fia. We wouldn't be able to talk as equals and eat together like this otherwise."

My irritation eased as he tried to cheer me up. Fabian was actually a really good guy. "Aw, you're so nice. You know what? If I ever do become a saint, I'll make sure to eat with you still!"

"Ha ha, how kind of you." He smiled, genuinely happy even though this was just a hypothetical. How cute. Then he sighed and said, "Since it was a direct order from Captain Cyril, it doesn't seem like I can refuse to go. But no matter how you look at it, I'm just being sent along as 'Fia Fallout Insurance'..."

Oh right. I'd forgotten, but talking to Fabian could be a real bumpy ride as his moods shifted without warning.

"H-hey, 'Fia Fallout Insurance'? Don't go making up whatever weird words you please!"

"Ha ha, at any rate, it looks like Captain Cyril expects something to happen on this visit. He could have gone alone with you, but he went out of his way to include Captain Desmond and me for extra fighting power."

"Fighting power? Oh, c'mon, we're not going off to battle or anything!"

“I sure hope not,” he said with a look tinged with exasperation. Doubt dripped off his every word.

How rude. It's not like I always cause problems for people. I actually try really hard not to muck things up, I'll have you know! Fabian, you don't understand a thing about me! I lamented his lack of perspective, turning instead to my meal and chomping down on a slab of meat.

I really wanted to talk to Fabian about my meeting with the king, but I held back. Nobody but me managed to figure out Cerulean was the real king, after all. It probably wasn't wise to go around revealing that to everyone.

I was gnawing my meat when, for better or worse, Fabian brought up the topic himself. “Oh, come to think of it, you finished your meeting with His Majesty, right? We weren't supposed to talk about our meetings until everyone finished, but it should be okay now seeing as you were last. Just what was all that about, I wonder?”

“Uh, oh, you guys weren't allowed to talk about it?” I tried to deflect with a question.

He nodded, his expression turning serious. “We weren't, and there's still a gag order in place preventing us from talking about it with non-First Knight Brigade members. But I fail to see how the meeting is so important that we have to keep it a brigade secret. Is it because the First Knight Brigade might recruit knights from other brigades who will have to go through that same meeting? I just don't understand. Fia, were you told not to talk about the meeting with those outside the First Knight Brigade as well?”

“Uh, o-of course, yeah!” I nodded vigorously. As I managed to figure out Cerulean's identity, I was told not to talk about what happened with *anyone*, but that was close enough to what Fabian asked.

“I see. But is there really a point in keeping the contents of the meetings a secret? In the first place, I don't understand why His Majesty wants to meet every knight who joins the First Knight Brigade when he's so busy.” He rested

his chin in his hand and narrowed his eyes in thought. “At the end, His Majesty went out of his way to say Cerulean was his favorite of the court jesters and that we were to protect him. Perhaps he holds these meetings to introduce his favorite jester to his would-be guards? But that doesn’t explain why the contents of the meetings have to be a secret. I just don’t understand.” He sighed, completely in the dark about Cerulean’s true identity. The meetings must have really seemed mysterious to those who didn’t figure it out.

The fact of the matter was, the whole point of the meeting was for Cerulean to gauge the knights entering his guard, but those who didn’t know that would think the meeting was just an opportunity for the court jesters to toy with them.

“Those court jesters were really strange though, huh?” Fabian said. “They had this peculiar, sluggish manner of speech I could barely understand, and the one who looked like a bird kept touching my cheek and commenting about how pretty my skin was... It was terrifying.”

“Oh no...” Fabian was quite handsome; he almost looked like a prince. I could see that effeminate court jester, Dolly, latching on to that and making a big deal about it. It went to show that being too good-looking wasn’t all fun and games—sometimes it drew more attention than was welcome.

“For some reason, the court jesters had their own table for playing card games right there in His Majesty’s office. I played a few games with them, but they were oddly weak despite supposedly playing regularly.”

“Oh?”

He cocked his head to one side. “The last hand they dealt me was way too strong for it to be mere luck though. Those court jesters dealt that hand to me intentionally, I’m sure of it, which means they were actually incredibly capable...”

“G-go on...” I held my breath as I awaited his next words.

“I thought maybe they were just being nice, but giving me a guaranteed win

like that was a bit over the top. What was it all for? I haven't been able to stop wondering ever since, which is why I'm curious how the meeting went for other people."

With a sigh, I deflated, all the tension leaving my body at once.

Thank goodness. Fabian hadn't figured out the truth. He was pretty smart, if he'd worked out that much, but it seemed figuring out the rest was the real hard part. Few would dare to consider that one of the court jesters might be the king, not to mention the fact that the power of the Spirit Lord had made him younger. Hearing Fabian get kind of close frayed my nerves to tatters.

Relief left me loose-lipped. "From what I can tell, my meeting went just about the same as yours! Oh, but Commander Saviz sat in on mine, since he'd just returned from his business trip. His Majesty's gold colors and the commander's black colors contrasted well with one another! It was like they drew out the best in each other!"

I beamed at the memory, and Fabian's stiff expression finally eased into a smile.

"I see..." he said. "Your impression of the meeting is certainly unique."

I could tell he wanted to know more from his expression, and racked my brain trying to think of something I could say that wouldn't reveal too much. Then I realized it: I had avenged my superiors like the good knight I was!

"Fabian! You remember the court jester who looked like a child, right? Well, that one was acting super rude to Commander Saviz and Captain Cyril, so I took it upon myself to chastise him like a mature adult!"

"You don't say? How'd you do it?"

"Heh heh heh, get this! I thoroughly and mercilessly beat him in the card game!" I spread my arms wide and flashed Fabian a toothy grin. *Ta-da! Get a load of that, Fabian.*

But when he responded, his voice was flat. "Oh, is that so?"

Oh, c'mon! I worked so hard against Cerulean! Don't I deserve some praise for defending the honor of my superiors?!

Oh well. We finished up our meal and left the cafeteria, heading our separate ways. Once I was alone, I wondered if maybe he hadn't quite understood what I tried to recount for him. Come to think of it, everyone who underwent the meeting with the king had played and won that rigged card game...

"Ah!" I exclaimed upon understanding where I went wrong. Luckily, I'd reached my dorm room by then, so only Zavilia heard me shout. He cocked his head at me, but I was too lost in my own thoughts to worry about him. I covered my face with my hands, replaying my conversation with Fabian.

Wait...no, no, no!

I failed to explain that I won that game in a way that put me first and Cerulean dead last. Fabian probably assumed I was bragging about a free win.

"No, no, no, no, that's not what happened!"

I waved my arms wildly and pleaded with the empty air as Zavilia watched, mystified.

Apologizing to the vacant space in my room helped calm me down. I cleared my throat, put on my best nonchalant expression, and met Zavilia's eyes.

It's worth mentioning that my roommate Olga had been working the late shift recently, so we hadn't seen each other in quite a while. As much as that sucked, it also gave me space to talk to Zavilia uninhibited.

Cheerfully, I said, "Hey, Zavilia? Can you do me a small favor?"

He lay curled up on my bed, and at my request he sank his head down to the mattress. **"I don't know... Your 'small favors' always end up being anything but."**

He was probably right. Not that that would make me back down.

I forced a smile and said, “Aw, don’t say that. It’s really just one small favor. Anyway, I’ll be leaving the royal castle grounds for a work thing tomorrow...”

“Business as usual then? This is the first time you’ve bothered to tell me beforehand though. What’s with that?”

I ignored Zavilia’s question and pushed on as pleasantly as I could. “Uhh, right, so, I’ll be visiting a duke’s manor. Dukes are the highest class of nobility, so there’s likely to be a bunch of arrogant, selfish people there. They might say something rude to me, but—”

Before I could go on, Zavilia finished my sentence. **“You want me to fly over and burn them to a crisp when that happens? Got it.”**

I vigorously shook my head. “N-no! Definitely not! If you burned them, there wouldn’t even be char left! I can’t heal the dead!”

He scowled. **“Fine. Then how about I leave them within a smidgen of their life instead? Not that I’ve ever tested such fine control. I can manage it though. Probably.”**

I waved my arms wildly. “No, no, no! I just want you to sit tight and be good even if somebody says something rude to me! Nobody knows you’re the Black Dragon, and we’ve gotta keep it that way.”

He lifted his head at that. **“Huh? Nobody knows I’m the Black Dragon? Just what makes you think that? Of course people know. Why else do you think they’re trying so hard to keep you in check?”**

“What are you talking about? You’re perfectly hidden. Nobody but Captain Quentin would ever think such a cute little creature was the Black Dragon.”

Cyril was too logical to think a tiny familiar like Zavilia was secretly the massive Black Dragon. Desmond was too busy, and Zackary and Enoch didn’t care about anything but muscles and magic respectively. Those three probably wouldn’t notice if Zavilia flew around the royal castle itself. Clarissa gave me a scare once when she spotted Zavilia and commented on how there shouldn’t be

any black birds left in the world, but she concluded he was colored by some sort of pigment and moved on.

Recalling my triumph over Clarissa, I threw my hands up and proudly exclaimed, "It's darkest under the candlestick! None would ever expect the Black Dragon to have snuck past our impregnable walls! Even if someone spots you, they'll try to come up with a more logical explanation than you being the Black Dragon!"

Zavilia squinted at me. **"I'm pretty sure they've figured me out, but sure, let's go with that. While we're at it, are you so sure your identity is safe? You've displayed your capabilities pretty brazenly a few times now. Maybe everyone's just pretending they haven't noticed you're a saint."**

My eyes grew wider with his every word. "St-stop trying to scare me! I've concealed myself perfectly! Not even the saint I'm visiting tomorrow will be able to pick up any saintliness from me with how careful I'll be!"

He looked straight at me, not saying a word. I guess he finally saw reason.

Still, tomorrow's visit began to weigh on me. Duke Alcott was an eccentric man, so he would certainly say some strange things. That in itself was worrisome, but not as worrisome as Zavilia barging in and engulfing the place in flames in response.

Of course, if it came to that, I'd earn myself a scolding from Cyril, which was not a happy prospect. I couldn't help recalling the scolding I'd earned at the meat festival with a shiver. Cyril interrogated us relentlessly while everyone else dug into their delicious meat without us. The horror. Worse, he had asked Duke Alcott to prepare some strawberry tarts for tomorrow's visit. Was he really planning to torment me again, this time while withholding dessert?

"...Zavilia, I need you to promise me that you won't split space apart and teleport over no matter what you hear, okay?"

He must have finally heard the gravity in my tone because he relented, raising a wing like a human waving a hand. **"Well...all right, since you asked so nicely."**

But you do realize you're visiting a saint that's such a big deal that two captains are tagging along to play chaperone, right? In the world of us monsters, you're done for the moment you let someone see you as weak. I suggest you head in there swinging tomorrow."

"What? I'm not swinging at anybody. I'm a friend of all saints everywhere!" I insisted.

"Oh...I see." Zavilia seemed to agree...or maybe he just wanted to get out of this conversation, fed up with my refusals.

I woke early the next morning and quickly got myself ready for the day. I made for the meeting place right away, but even though I got there ten minutes early, Desmond beat me to the punch.

"Good morning, Fia."

"Morning, Fia."

"Fia! Good morning!"

Two men in well-fitted knight uniforms and a girl in a white robe greeted me. I smiled back at them. "Good morning, Captain Cyril, Fabian, Charlotte."

I had assumed Cyril would dress like a noble, since he was using his rank to make this visit happen, but it seemed I was wrong. The knight uniform suited him well, of course, so I wasn't about to complain.

I glanced up at the sky. It was completely clear—cloudless and crystalline blue. That had to be a good omen for what awaited us at the Alcott manor.

"I hope our visit is a fun one!" I said with a bright smile. For some reason, the other three didn't reply, shooting awkward, tentative glances at each other.

Huh... They must not be morning people.

Side Story:

Fia and the Captains' Insani-tea Party

EVERYTHING WAS ENOCH'S FAULT. He was the one who insisted they hold a tea party using the Rose of the Great Saint. Naturally, Cyril and Desmond shot the idea down, but Enoch relentlessly insisted. The captains eventually folded, but not without stipulations. If the tea party was inevitable, they could at least disperse the damage instead of taking the brunt of it themselves. Thus, they invited more victims to share in their fate.

"Oooh, a tea party?"

An invitation card had arrived at my room. It bore Cyril's name. For the moment, it seemed innocent enough, but little did I know how wrong I'd be about that.

"A tea party is a bit too refined for a knight, isn't it? But if Captain Cyril's the one hosting it, there's sure to be some fancy snacks... Hm? What's this?"

Upon closer inspection, I found the envelope contained only the invitation itself and no reply card. Indeed, the invitation itself left no room for ambiguity. There was no "we hope you attend," just a blunt "we'll see you there."

"Wait, so my participation is *mandatory*? I have a bad feeling about this..."

It didn't help that the letter also mentioned recreating the tea parties the Great Saint held three hundred years ago.

"Yiiikes. This tea party is starting to look less and less like a good idea. Just what are they planning?"

I had a feeling Desmond would be there too. He always seemed to show up at nonsensical functions like this.

"Man, I *reeeeally* don't want to go!" I grumbled. I tried to shift my thinking

and focus on the positive. “Okay, wait. Let’s think about this rationally. Isn’t an invitation to a tea party from Captain Cyril actually a huge honor?”

I replied like someone other than myself had asked that question. “Why, yes, it is, Fia! It’s a super big honor! Oh boy, I so want to go to this tea party now! ... As if! Gah, I can’t trick myself into wanting to go! Which must mean I am *undeserving* of the honor of going! Aha, yes! I’ll give this invitation to someone else who actually deserves to go!”

I hurried from my room with the invitation card in hand. Only the envelope mentioned the recipient, so I could easily foist the invitation itself onto someone else.

Or so I thought.

“Pardon me, Captain Quentin!”

Donning my brightest smile, I opened the door to the Fourth Monster Tamer Knight Brigade captain’s room. I figured Quentin was the most likely to accept a tea party invitation out of all the captains.

The moment I stepped into the room, however, my smile evaporated. Quentin was not alone. Cyril sat on a sofa calmly sipping black tea like this was his room instead. Our eyes locked. “C-Captain Cyril?!”

When I yanked my gaze away, I spotted an envelope sitting on the table. It bore the same fancy rose illustration as the envelope I’d received.

“Oh? Is that my invitation I see in your hand there, Fia? Ha ha. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I’ve already invited Quentin as well. Perhaps you two should make arrangements to arrive together.”

“Eeek?!”

H-he already invited Captain Quentin?! How shrewd! Cyril’s ability to outmaneuver me left me speechless.

Quentin spoke up, his eyes gleaming. “Miss Fia! Like Cyril said, I was just

invited myself! I don't really care about tea, however, so I was planning on refusing the invitation, but I'd be thrilled to go if you're attending as well!"

"What?"

"I'll pick you up on the day of the party so we can travel together."

"Whaaaaat?!"

I swallowed down the urge to refuse. Quentin may have been eccentric, but he was still a captain and thus deserving of full respect from a rank-and-file knight. I forced a smile and said, "Okay."

Cyril chuckled. He *definitely* knew I didn't want to attend the tea party. "Well, isn't that nice," he said. "Now I can breathe easy knowing Fia won't get lost on her way to the party."

"Ah! So I could've done that?!" To think I'd had such a simple solution right in front of me. But now that Quentin was coming to pick me up, that option was off the table. I had no way out of this tea party anymore.

And so, the day of the tea party arrived. Thanks to Enoch's insistence, I wore a dress that flowed down to my knees rather than my usual knight uniform. Apparently, they wanted me to stand in for the Great Saint thanks to my red hair and all...

"Hmm... There's a lot of eccentric people among the captains... Could Captain Enoch be some Great Saint-obsessed nut?" I murmured to myself.

Quentin, who walked beside me on our way to the party, flung compliments at me the entire way. "Oh, that yellow dress suits you perfectly, Miss Fia! You look like the Great Saint of legend herself!"

My, what a coincidence. I was, in fact, the Great Saint of legend in my past life. But more importantly...

We headed not to the royal castle itself but rather the gardens. Our tea party would take place outside, just like a proper, elegant one would. A stylish set of

white tables and chairs sat under parasols, providing the perfect setting for taking in the flowers while enjoying some tea.

Familiar faces awaited me under those parasols: Cyril, Desmond, Clarissa, Zackary, Kurtis, and Enoch. While I wore a dress, everyone else was in their usual white captain uniforms—except for Enoch, who wore the white-and-blue knight uniform of three hundred years ago. He must have made it by hand by referencing historical records. How terrifying. Such abnormal zeal for a tea party was bad news; it set off warning bells inside my head.

Wait, wasn't everyone else here a captain? That left an ordinary knight like me super out of place.

"S-say, isn't this tea party for captains only? I should probably leave, right?" I said.

Zackary jumped up from his seat and took me by the shoulders to keep me from fleeing. "Heya, Fia. Man, your hair is red! You look just like the Great Saint in those clothes! Anyway, nah, this tea party isn't captain-exclusive or anything. All are welcome to experience this tea party, which is packed to the brim with Enoch's dreams, hopes, and far-fetched delusions... We're calling it the Absurdi-tea Party."

That name certainly didn't inspire hope. Dread flared up in me. I wanted to bolt, but my feet felt like they had rooted themselves to the ground.

Cyril rose to greet me with a frown digging into his face. "Zackary, could you refrain from coming up with such strange names? You'll scare poor Fia. Today's tea party is called no such thing."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, whew! Right, of course it wouldn't be called that! Of course not..."

The proud captains of our kingdom hosted this tea party. They wouldn't make it anything so strange. Or so I wanted to believe...

Unfortunately, Cyril crushed that hope.

“Officially, I am calling it the Autumn Insani-tea Party.”

Why, pray tell, did he look so darn proud of himself saying that? Absurdi-tea party, insani-tea party, what’s the difference? I didn’t want to be part of either!

I spun without a word, but Cyril grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. “Where are you going, Fia? Everyone’s been waiting for you two to arrive. Surely, you’re not going to leave now?”

His message was clear: *I won’t let you escape.*

Reluctantly, I accepted my fate. There was a slim chance I could flee if I ran with all I had, but that would only make my life in the knight brigades more difficult starting tomorrow.

I let him lead me to my seat, my hands balling into fists as I took in the rest of the attendees. *It really is all captains! I’m absolutely, definitely out of place! I felt like the butt of some kind of joke. Fine! Two can play at that game! I’ll make it so they never want to host another one of these tea parties ever again! I quickly volunteered to serve the tea. Ho ho ho. They want to recreate the Great Saint’s tea parties from three hundred years ago? That gives me an idea...*

I was busy hatching schemes when Enoch leaned toward me and said, “Her Holiness the Great Saint is serving the tea? What an honor!”

I knew they wanted me to stand in for the Great Saint, but having them call me that still came as a shock. I stared in blank amazement at Enoch as he blushed like a maiden.

Cyril smiled wryly. “Ah, sorry about that, Fia. Enoch was the one who wanted this tea party. Apparently, his favorite book since childhood was one about the Great Saint’s tea parties from three hundred years ago. Hence, he’s emotionally attached to this event to an irrational degree. He’s off in his own little world right about now.”

“Really...” Well that was...the opposite of great.

At my grimace, Cyril tried to clear the air by formally kicking off the tea party.

“Ahem. Since we’re all here, let’s begin. Everyone’s been working very hard lately, so I want to reward everyone’s efforts with a little tea party. Luckily, the weather has blessed us with a perfect day for the occasion. But we aren’t simply going to host any old tea party. Instead, we’ll imitate the tea parties of three hundred years ago, as I explained on your invitations.”

“By that do you mean the Great Saint’s tea parties? Don’t tell me you even have sweets from that era,” Clarissa said.

Cyril shook his head. “Although that would surely make for a wonderful tea party, I regret to admit I didn’t think of that. But rejoice! In recognition of all your achievements, Commander Saviz has granted us the right to make use of a Rose of the Great Saint! You’ll find the rose’s petals in your black tea today.”

The captains stared at Cyril with empty, dead eyes.

“I had a sneaking suspicion you might do this, but I still can’t believe you’d actually use us as your test subjects!” Desmond said. “Yeah, that’s right, Cyril! I knew something was up the moment I saw your invitation card! You should be getting on your knees and thanking me for still showing up at all!”

Clarissa drowned out some of Desmond’s complaints with her high-pitched shriek. “You’re kidding me! Cyril, if you’re going to do something this crazy, you need to write it on the invitation card! I would’ve done *anything* in my power to skip this if I knew you were planning such a thing!”

Cyril watched, bemused, as the captains squawked one after the other. Turning to me, he said, “Oh, Fia, my apologies. You’re a bit out of the loop here, aren’t you? You might remember you procured some roses for the commander the other day. Well, we’ve concluded that the likelihood those roses are Roses of the Great Saint is quite high.”

Wow, you don’t say? I thought.

“According to Kurtis, drinking tea with the flower’s petals floating in it will

manifest a few interesting effects, something we've been planning on testing. Originally, we intended to carefully select trial subjects for a controlled experiment, but Enoch kept insisting he wanted to recreate the tea parties of three hundred years ago."

Oh, so that's Enoch's fault too.

"Enoch's favorite book, *The Great Saint's Tea Parties of Disaster! As Seen by the Captains!*, tells us that the Great Saint used to regularly hold tea parties. Apparently, she'd nonchalantly invite the knight brigade captains and serve them tea containing petals from a Rose of the Great Saint. Enoch mocked me, saying I was too cowardly to drink the same tea as the captains of the past, so I took him up on his challenge, and here we are."

So everything is Enoch's fault?! The other captains and I glared at Enoch.

"Enoch, what the hell were you thinking?!" Desmond yelled. "Despite how he looks, Cyril is as confrontational as they come! If you pick a fight with him, he'll always take you up on it!"

"If you want to hold a tea party that badly, then just make it a one-man tea party for crying out loud!" Clarissa exclaimed. "Pour out as many different cups for yourself as you want, I don't care! You'll be able to experience the different effects of the Great Saint's tea firsthand! Wouldn't you prefer that?!"

I couldn't agree more. One thing nagged at me though: What was all this about my roses granting some kind of effect?

I looked to Kurtis, who said, "Three hundred years ago, the Great Saint served her tea with petals from the Rose of the Great Saint, claiming this was—in her own words—classy. Those who drank tea prepared this way experienced a variety of different effects, such as paralysis relief or stamina recovery. Each petal always produced a different effect."

"What?" *Just what in the world was Kurtis talking about? Such a nonsensical thing...might have happened now that I thought about it.*

Memories resurfaced at Kurtis's words—memories I'd have preferred to leave buried. A wave of dizziness washed over me. I put a hand to my head as a memory of a captain drinking my tea and suffering instant paralysis berated me.

"Ahhh, Your Holiness, could this be love? Just laying eyes on you makes my body go numb like it has been struck by lightning!"

The memory hit me like a club, and I collapsed to the ground...

"Fia?" Cyril called out as I clutched my head.

I recovered as best as I could and dragged myself up. "It's not what you think! That was all a random act of nature or something! I didn't *knowingly* do anything!"

"Fia?" he said, bewildered.

I gasped with realization. *Of course. How could I forget? Even if the petals did manifest some effects today, there's nothing to trace it back to me!* I forced a fake smile and shut my stupid mouth before I could say anything else incriminating. In my mind, however, the excuses kept flowing.

But this really isn't my fault, you know? I mean, it's not like I know why these roses cause these strange effects.

I guess I did think about stuff when I stimulated the roses' growth, but it's not like I could stop my mind from wandering while repeating the same task for days on end. I usually thought about magic or related things because, you know, I was actively using magic then. One time I thought about stuff like how paralysis works or if there's any magic to make that one grim-faced knight find everything he looks at hilarious. Then, would you believe it, by sheer coincidence, the rose petals induced paralysis or made everything seem funny. On one occasion, I thought about how nice it'd be if everyone was honest, and about how much it sucked that I didn't have even one single prospective suitor. Boy, it'd be nice if someone would just fall for me and all that. Lo and behold, one petal caused people to say whatever was on their minds and another made whoever they were drinking tea with seem attractive.

Hm... All right. So it seems like there's a chance that my thoughts influenced the petals. Maybe if I thought about healing people while pouring my magic into the roses they'd have healing effects. Not that I can see myself successfully thinking about nothing but healing the whole time unless someone was injured nearby or something...

But can anyone really say I'm at fault for how the petals turned out? I have a right to think whatever I want, don't I? Nobody can police my thoughts!

At any rate... I cast my gaze down like a humble maiden would. It works in my favor that everyone here already knows my petals have some effects.

Earlier, I'd thought about how badly I wanted the captains to give up ever holding another one of these silly tea parties. My plan was to use the fact that Enoch wanted me to stand in for the Great Saint to make myself the tea server, then serve really strong, gross tea, but I needed to switch up my tactics. Instead, I would pour even more magic into my rose petals and heighten their existing effects!

Mwah ha ha ha ha! You'll all reap what you sow for inviting me to this stupid tea party!

Donning the most angelic look I could, I poured out eight cups of black tea, all topped off with extra magic.

"Here you are, everyone. Please, take your pick." I presented the cups with a beaming smile, but nobody made any move to take one. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just...man, I keep finding myself stunned by how red your hair is," Desmond said. "I wonder if the captains of the past felt this nervous when they were about to drink the Great Saint's tea. Anyway, it's a great enough coincidence that the Roses of the Great Saint have reappeared at all, so I doubt they'll also have strange effects like they did in the past. Even supposing they did, those effects will probably be slight at best...but it's still quite intimidating to try something unknown." He reached for the closest teacup.

"Miss Fia, I accept your tea with gratitude!" Cheerfully, Quentin took a cup as

well.

Clarissa, Zackary, Kurtis, Cyril, and lastly Enoch took their cups too.

“I am nothing short of delighted to be granted the honor of drinking tea prepared by Your Holiness herself!” Enoch said.

He really needed to lay off those weird books he liked.

After I took the last cup, Cyril smiled and said, “Now then, let us partake in this precious tea. Oh, and if any of you feel any illness coming on, please do speak up quickly.”

And so, whether fearfully, with ecstasy, or all at once—everyone drank their tea.

“Ha, ha ha. Well, I guess it only makes sense that even the rumored Rose of the Great Saint would lose its effects after three hundred years of neglect.” Desmond beamed as he pushed forward his empty teacup. “Fia, pour me another, would ya? I was too nervous to taste anything.”

“Sure thing.” I chose a new petal and poured tea over it, releasing my magic into it as I did. Desmond accepted this fresh cup and downed it all in one go.

Kurtis watched him closely, muttering to himself. “Greed invites ruin. Not a single person in the past was so disrespectful as to request a second helping from Her Holiness...”

“Ha ha, oh, Kurtis, are you joining Enoch in pretending this is a tea party from the good old times?” Desmond said cheerfully. “Speaking of, hey, Enoch! Cheer up, man! Sure, nothing’s happening, but you should be happy you could experience the vibe of the tea party you’ve always dreamed of! Most legends are exaggerated anyway, you know? All that nonsense you’ve read in your books about the Great Saint’s tea parties is just...” He trailed off, resting a hand on his chest. “...Huh. It’s gotten kind of hot. Like, really hot.”

“Captain Desmond, are you all right?” I asked. Could one of the petals have

caused him to break into a fever?

His eyes widened with panic for a moment, but then they clouded over, glazed and dreamy.

“Captain Desmond? Hello?” I called.

“Fia... Now that I get another look at you, your face is actually quite charming. Your physique isn’t very feminine, and you’re simpleminded and frank. You have none of the usual womanliness that I dislike.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me, Captain Desmond?!” I said, enraged. What a rude and terrible thing to say! “Well, if it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get!”

I shot up to my feet, but Cyril halted me. “Fia, wait. Desmond would never say such things. This might be the effects of the Rose of the Great Saint.”

“That’s impossible!” I said. “The Great Saint was a pacifist! There’s no way her roses would cause someone to pick a fight like this!”

Cyril spoke slowly and carefully, choosing each word deliberately. “Actually, I believe this is him trying his hardest to compliment you. I suspect he lacks experience praising others and is thus terrible at it.”

“Oh, please! What about what he said sounded like praise?! He said I don’t look feminine, for crying out loud!”

A loud bark of laughter erupted behind me. I spun to find Quentin doubled over and clutching his stomach. “Aha ha ha ha! Miss Fia? Not feminine? Bwa ha ha ha ha ha! How can she be unfeminine when she’s so much smaller than me, ha ha ha ha! I can’t stop laughing!”

“There’s nothing funny in the slightest about this!” I exclaimed angrily. “And why are you bringing my height into this? Wait, are you trying to make an enemy out of me too, Captain Quentin?!”

Cyril hurriedly cut in. “Wait, wait, Fia, listen! Quentin would never antagonize you like this! This has to be the effect of the rose!”

“Like I said, that’s impossible! The Great Saint was a pacifist! There’s no way her roses would cause someone to pick a fight like this, *you hear me?!?*”

From beside me, Clarissa giggled. “Ehe heh, lucky me! I’ve been wearing gloves this whole time to hide the fact that I burned my hand cooking the other day, but my hand is healed now!”

Huh? Her burn healed? Then maybe my magic really did something...? Could Cyril be right? Could this all be the effect of the roses?

I caught motion from the corner of my eye and suddenly found Zackary stripping off his knight uniform top. “C-Captain Zackary, just what do you think you’re doing?!” I exclaimed.

He undid the buttons marching up the chest of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. “Look, Fia! My muscles are awakening! And not just my abs—all of my muscles are twitching like crazy!”

He posed dramatically to show off said muscles. Sure enough, they bulged under his clothes.

“Oh, no, that’s just a paralysis status ailment,” I said calmly. “It’s honestly amazing you can still move despite it. Captain Cyril, it would seem I owe you an apology. You were right, this is all the effects of... Captain Cyril?”

I turned toward him to find him dumbfounded, shards of shattered teacup resting in his palms. “What happened to me, Fia? I was holding my teacup like normal when it suddenly crumbled in my hands.”

He grabbed at the chair he sat in to steady himself, but that, too, crumbled to dust in his grip.

Ah... The rose petal gave him a strength buff.

“Cyril, I’ve always thought your skill with the sword was abnormal, but perhaps it was you who was abnormal all along!” Enoch exclaimed. “You must have gorilla mixed into your bloodline somewhere! Or maybe bear! Or even dragon!”

Enoch had to have been suffering effects that caused him to blurt out whatever was on his mind, though some said he was always kind of like this.

Amid the chaos, Kurtis gracefully sipped his tea. In contrast to many of the others, he seemed refreshed and relaxed. “Lady Fi, all my accumulated fatigue has completely vanished. Thank you very much. It would seem I received a full heal.”

“Oh my. Good for you!”

Perhaps because he was always so uptight, Kurtis got exactly what he needed from the tea. Could it be karma? It did seem like those who had been good received favorable effects from their tea, and those who had been bad received negative effects. Yes, that had to be it.

I met Kurtis’s gaze and sipped my tea in comfort. Cyril had prepared an assortment of sweets, including things like cake, cookies, and jelly. Everyone else ignored it, too busy contending with the effects of their tea, so I dug in with abandon. *Heh heh heh. I’m a saint, so I won’t experience any bad effects from this tea. It can’t affect me like it affects the others. Plus, I can eat as many sweets as I want without repercussions!*

“Aaaaaaah! My head is like pins and needles! My body goes all hot and prickly when I look at Fia! What is going on?! What is happening to me?!” Desmond squawked behind me.

I simply ignored him. It was probably just his second cup hitting him. The first cup had made whoever drank tea with him look more attractive to him, and the second cup was apparently hitting him with a paralysis status ailment.

Speaking of effects...

Quentin’s cup of tea made everything seem funny to him.

Clarissa’s cup healed her wounds.

Zackary’s cup gave him a paralysis status ailment (the same as Desmond’s second cup).

Cyril's cup buffed his strength.

Enoch's cup made him blurt out whatever was on his mind.

Kurtis's cup fully healed him.

As my gaze swept around the tea party, I found the captains trembling, laughing, or lying collapsed on the ground. I cocked my head to one side. "... Was this really the kind of tea party everyone wanted to experience?"

Kurtis, sitting right in front of me, nodded without hesitation. "But of course! Participating in the Great Saint's tea party is nothing short of an honor."

"Is that so?" I said, not truly convinced. I got the feeling it wasn't really worth arguing about, however, so I accepted his assertion and continued to enjoy the tea party with my ex-personal knight.

Post-experiment report: Neither Captain Cyril nor Captain Desmond could definitively confirm whether Fia Ruud's presence managed to disperse the damage, or whether her presence exacerbated the damage the experiment caused. The two lacked a full picture of the truth, leaving them at a loss.

Perhaps that was for the best. After all, there are some things in this world that are better left unknown.

Interlude:

The Jesters Hold a Review Session

“HOW DID THINGS go so wrong?!”

Deep within the royal castle’s most heavily guarded room, the king’s personal chamber, Cerulean grumbled. He’d already ushered the guards outside, leaving only the three jesters within the lavish space.

When no one responded, Cerulean glared at his companions. “It must be because of your names! They’re too short!”

The effeminate jester in birdlike garb pouted. “But what are we supposed to do about that? Our real names are short! No matter how I rearrange ‘Lloyd’ it’s going to stay the same length! I thought *reaaaaal* hard to come up with ‘Dolly,’ I’ll have you know.” That was only half-true. He’d thought really hard—for all of ten seconds. Dolly wasn’t the type to waste brainpower on things he deemed frivolous. “Leon had it even worse than me, having only *four* letters in his name. ‘Leon’ was the only name he could make from rearranging ‘Noel’!”

“Wait, why are we even talking about our names?” Leon said. “Fia didn’t care about me and Dolly’s names at all. Isn’t it something else that gave Cerulean away?”

“Oh. Fair point.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Cerulean rested his chin on his arm, looking introspective. “Maybe I got too carried away? I could have dropped too many hints between the whole Lua thing, the name anagrams, and modeling my jester outfit after the national flag from three hundred years ago.”

Dolly quickly consoled him, saying, “I doubt any of that is our problem. Nobody’s managed to figure it out until now, and I’m the one who designed

your outfit. Fia is just special. No matter how many times I think back on what happened, it's still baffling that she noticed so much in such a short span of time. Even our sharp-witted military police commandant wouldn't have noticed all that!"

Cerulean nodded deeply. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

"She even noticed the curse afflicting your left arm and knew about the Spirit Lord being an ancestor of the royal family. It's absurd."

Cerulean narrowed his eyes. "...I had dismissed all that as a coincidence, but now that I really think about it, there's no way it could be, huh? She had no solid reasons for her logic, which means she drew her conclusion from haphazard bits of information."

"Oh, you think so too?" Dolly exclaimed. "But it's strange, though. She doesn't seem that sharp all the time. Afterward, I met her as a duke, and she didn't seem to recognize me as Dolly the court jester."

"What? You're kidding me." Cerulean scowled.

Dolly cocked his head to the side, thinking. "I couldn't believe it myself. Fia's coming over to my place to play tomorrow, so I'll make sure to observe her carefully then."

"Wait, wait, what?! Why is Fia going to your place when she refused my invitation not so long ago?!" Cerulean complained.

"Hmm, I dunno. Maybe she prefers me?"

Cerulean was about to argue, but Leon jumped in. "Cut it out, both of you! You're both interested in Fia! Big deal."

"What? I'm not interested in Fia..." Cerulean muttered.

"Oh, you're not, are you?" Dolly teased cheerfully. "I'm quite fond of her. I find her quite marvelous indeed. She was the first to ever corner you, and, goodness, was that refreshing to see! Though I do hope that airheadedness of hers is only an act..."

Cerulean gaped at Dolly's boldness in insulting him, the king, right to his face. "You really don't have a filter on that mouth of yours, huh? You're right, she left my pride in tatters. But...it doesn't feel bad. In fact, I feel refreshed. I don't think Fia had any ulterior motives, so I can't hold what she did against her. She's probably rather discerning deep down, but she can't keep herself sharp all the time and has to balance things out by spending most of her time dull."

Dolly agreed with Cerulean's appraisal. "That's probably it. Her focus is likely something incredible when she wants it to be. It must take her a month of winding down to balance out ten minutes of concentration."

"A month is a bit of a long estimate... But yeah. Fia is really something else," Cerulean said.

It was rare for him to praise someone else like this. Hence, his companions sensed his deep interest in Fia, despite his earlier denial. Cerulean gazed out the window, feigning indifference as he said, "I've accepted the fact that I have no future anymore...but it would be nice if Fia could inspire a change, now, before it all ends."

"It would be."

"Yeah."

All three sobered, lamenting Cerulean's narrowing future prospects. His destiny was a heavy burden, and one he could not escape. Thus, they all prayed: Let Fia blow away the stagnant, fetid air clinging to the royal family.

Of course, Fia herself remained blissfully unaware of the hopes and expectations they'd just set upon her shoulders.

Interlude:

The Second Captains' Meeting

“THANK YOU FOR GATHERING despite your busy schedules. Let us begin the captains' meeting at once.”

Cyril opened the meeting by thanking them all for making time to attend, even though everyone knew he was the busiest of them all. He'd returned from Sutherland just the day prior. Most of the other knights on the trip had taken some leave to recuperate, but Cyril was one of the few exceptions. Instead of taking some time to recover, he summoned all the captains for a meeting early in the morning. He'd even had to brief Saviz on the meeting's intended topics beforehand in order to get permission to hold a captains' meeting. Thus, to hold this meeting at all, Cyril must have prepared the necessary documents the very same day he returned from his trip, then briefed Saviz first thing in the morning.

The other captains regarded this dauntless work ethic with a mixture of awe and wariness. Just what could warrant such urgency? The mere fact Cyril was holding a meeting at all was cause for concern. The other captains silently prayed for a peaceful meeting, even though they were certain those prayers would not be answered.

Normally, a captains' meeting only consisted of the captains stationed in the royal capital, their attendants, and Saviz. This time, however, Cyril made an exception.

“First, allow me to introduce an old comrade you'll likely recognize,” Cyril said. “This is Kurtis, captain of the Thirteenth Knight Brigade. He was stationed in the vicinity of Sutherland, but since he has expressed an interest in working in the royal capital, he has been relocated while retaining his position as captain.”

All the captains gaped at Kurtis, unable to utter a single word. The same thought ran through all their minds: *Wait...what? Is that allowed?* Even all the vice-captains, standing behind their respective captains, gawked in shock.

Desmond, a long-time acquaintance of Kurtis, was the one to finally break the silence. “Something happened in Sutherland, so they made a special exception for you, huh? Yo, Kurtis! It’s been a while!”

The other captains snapped out of their stupors.

“Hey, Kurtis. Long time no see!” Clarissa said.

“Ha ha, wow! You tanned and put on some muscle since I last saw you!” Zackary said.

Having once been part of the First Knight Brigade, Kurtis was by no means an unfamiliar face to the captains of the capital.

Cyril picked up his explanation after the greetings petered out. “I decided to hold this meeting due to some urgent information I needed to report to you all,” he said. “Before getting into that, however, allow me to present a bit of context. First, until yesterday, I was on a trip to Sutherland. Second, the people of Sutherland are extremely devout worshipers of the Great Saint. Lastly, the Great Saint had red hair and gold eyes.”

Everyone already knew all this and therefore cocked their heads in confusion as Cyril laid out these facts.

Cyril continued. “Incidentally, Fia Ruud of my First Knight Brigade also has red hair and gold eyes. She joined me on my trip to Sutherland.”

Everyone tensed at the mention of Fia. Many remained confounded, but a few pieced together that she must have gotten tangled up in something serious.

Unfortunately, Clarissa did not catch on and blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. “Oh, Fia’s that girl that was here for our last meeting, right? Yeah, now that you mention it, her hair and eyes are the same color as the Great Saint’s, aren’t they? Ha ha, did the people of Sutherland remark on how

similar she looks to the Great Saint and shower her with presents or something? Sounds like she made some nice memories.”

The other captains, having sensed something foreboding, waited on Cyril’s response with bated breath.

“I’m...not so certain they were nice memories, but I do believe Fia won’t forget her time in Sutherland,” Cyril said. “Not after its people have officially recognized her as the Great Saint’s reincarnation.”

“Huh?”

“What now?”

“Whaaaat?!”

Everyone’s eyes shot wide at this truly absurd revelation.

Desmond, who already knew what had happened, recovered first and spoke up. “I know it sounds outrageous, but what Cyril is saying is true. The people of Sutherland recognize Fia as the Great Saint’s reincarnation. It’s all a simple misunderstanding, of course!” He scratched at the back of his head. “If you want my theory, I’m guessing Fia fell on someone who was supposedly dead and dislodged a bit of food stuck in their throat, thus ‘bringing them back to life.’ Ha, ha ha, a miracle only the sacred Great Saint could perform! Incredible! It’s thanks to her that I haven’t been able to do so much as set foot outside my office for the past two and a half days! And what do I find when I finally escape? A whole meeting about her! I am *done*!” He took off his sash and slammed it onto the table, then added his uniform jacket as well. “I’ve been wearing this uniform for three days straight, all because people think Fia is something she’s obviously not! I’m sick of it!”

The other captains watched Desmond’s display solemnly.

After a long silence, Zackary said what was on everyone’s mind. “So...what exactly was it that made the people of Sutherland think Fia is the Great Saint?”

He and the other captains shook their heads, baffled by this development, but

Cyril responded calmly. “Apparently, mistaking a jellyfish dance for a dolphin dance was what did it.”

“What?”

“I’m afraid no matter how much I try to explain, it’ll never make sense, so let’s not sweat the details. In short, a number of coincidences occurred, which, combined with Sutherland’s fervent faith and long-held devotion, led to Fia being mistakenly acknowledged as the Great Saint. The strength of their faith has made them all the more staunchly convinced of this.”

“Such a thing can happen?” Clarissa said.

Cyril nodded gravely. “It can and it did. It sounds illogical, but Fia has somehow done it. As a result, the people of Sutherland have accepted Fia, and myself and her fellow knights by extension.”

“What?!” the captains exclaimed together. They all knew about the tragedy that took place ten years ago and how the people of Sutherland didn’t accept Cyril despite him being their territorial lord. Of course, they also knew how deeply that hurt him.

“For real? Congrats, Cyril!” Zackary exclaimed.

“Congrats, Mr. Duke of Sutherland!” Clarissa said.

“So the people of Sutherland have finally accepted you, huh? Good for you!” Desmond said.

The captains all cheerfully congratulated Cyril.

“Wow, so that’s why...” Zackary said. “I knew she must have done something special in Sutherland to earn the ‘Lost Treasures,’ but I never would have guessed it’d be being mistaken for the Great Saint!”

Cyril looked at Zachary with a touch of surprise. “You’re sharp. That topic is, in fact, the main reason why I’ve decided to hold this urgent meeting,” Cyril said. “Fia has received holy stones from the people of Sutherland. I’m surprised you already knew about that, Zackary.”

“Well, yeah! Fia gave them to a bunch of us as gifts! She probably has no clue what they’re worth!”

Indeed, a few captains—that is, Desmond, Enoch, Quentin, and Zackary—had received holy stones from Fia last night.

Cyril shook his head at himself and touched his forehead as if warding off a headache. “How...very like her, I suppose. If handled properly, she could sell a single holy stone for an outrageous fortune. She really should be more prudent in the future... But I suppose it’s some consolation that the recipients were all virtuous captains of the knight brigades. Surely the kingdom’s proud captains understand the true value of holy stones and will reciprocate with something of equal value.” Cyril spoke softly through a charming smile, but every captain in the room heard the threat lingering beneath his pleasant tone.

The four recipients of Fia’s gift swallowed hard as they began to fret.

“Huh? You’re kidding me... Something of equal value would be like...all the money I make from now until I retire, right?” Zackary said.

Quentin immediately shot the idea down. “No, that wouldn’t work. I tried giving Miss Fia my whole salary before and she vehemently refused it. Hmm... Maybe I could have all the familiars in my brigade swear loyalty to Miss Fia in addition to their current masters?”

This was just as worthless a suggestion as Zackary’s.

Enoch disregarded both ideas, then took the conversation somewhere far more morbid. “What could possibly equal stones of such value?! All the blood in my body wouldn’t come close. What if I included my heart—no, all my organs? No, that still wouldn’t be enough...”

Desmond grimaced, clutching his head in his hands. “Hey, wait, I’m an earl! I can just give my title to her! That should do it, right?”

After watching all four of them spout such nonsense, Cyril sighed with exasperation. Unbeknownst to him, each of the holy stones Fia had distributed

contained healing magic. Thus, he'd underestimated their true value and thought his four captains were going a bit far with their gift ideas. In Cyril's mind, this was just Fia's strange influence addling his normally levelheaded captains once again.

"You're all blowing things out of proportion," he said, "but this is, in fact, big news. As you all know, holy stones are immensely valuable in battle—and Fia holds the rights to all these valuable stones indefinitely."

"Wait, they went *that* far?!" Zackary exclaimed.

"Aren't holy stones basically a substitute for saints? Wow! Fia's amazing! And she gets them indefinitely?" Clarissa exclaimed.

"You're kidding me! That's frickin' incredible!" Desmond said.

While all the captains cried out in shock, Cyril sat back and waited. Once they'd calmed down, he continued. "Yes indeed, it is amazing. However, we still don't know how the saints themselves will react to the news of holy stones, given those stones could replace them. Of course, the holy stones are useless as they are. It won't be easy, but...we must request that the saints supply the holy stones with healing magic."

The four recipients of Fia's holy stones shared bewildered glances.

"Is something wrong?" Cyril said.

"No, it's just... The holy stones are already filled with some unbelievably powerful healing magic, you know?" Zackary said.

"Yeah, I doubt you'd be able to cram in any more magic than what they already contain!" Quentin said.

Cyril furrowed his brows. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's just what it sounds like!" Zackary said. "Sutherland's excellent saints filled the stones over decades, maybe longer! And we hit the jackpot with the ones we got! They can heal fatal wounds and even regenerate missing limbs!"

Cyril's eyes flew wide, then he cast his gaze downward in thought. "Oh,

really...? I've never seen or even heard of holy stones like that. I see, I see... So the people of Sutherland gave Fia healing stones full of magic without my knowledge, and Fia gave them away without a second thought."

When Cyril lifted his gaze, his expression sent shivers down every captain's spine. Far too late, they realized they had said too much.

It was clear Cyril was hurt. He probably thought he had grown closer to Fia after they journeyed to Sutherland together and therefore couldn't work out why she hadn't given him one of those valuable stones as well. Rumors suggested Cyril had even gone as far as to swear the knight's vow to Fia. It wasn't clear what he thought of her, but nevertheless, the captains understood that they couldn't risk saying anything that would aggravate him even further. They clamped their mouths shut, but the damage was already done.

Cyril smiled stiffly. "I must say, Fia is quite generous. Holy stones of such power will save the lives of many knights. They're sure to prove invaluable. I had no idea she approved of you all so much. Or rather, I had no idea she was on such *friendly* terms with you all that she'd give away such a valuable item as a gift."

The events of the previous night flashed through Enoch, Quentin, and Zackary's minds. The captains had insisted that the holy stones were too valuable for Fia to simply give away as gifts, but Fia had drunkenly replied, *"Don't be a stranger. A gift like this is just right between good friends like us!"*

Without another word, the captains realized that Cyril must never learn she'd said such a thing.

"C-Cyril, you're overthinking this! This is Fia we're talking about here! Fia!" Desmond said.

"Yeah, c'mon! There's no way *that* Fia was thinking deeply about any of this!" Zackary said.

Irritated, Cyril said, "My, my, it sounds like you two *really* know Fia well. Even better than I, her captain." He spoke softly, but the darkness clouding his eyes

betrayed the danger encroaching on the captains. Cyril's aura turned dark and fearsome, like he was engaged in battle, and a couple of the meeting's attendees shrieked.

"Cyril, stop! This isn't the battlefield!" Zackary shouted.

In a panic, Desmond said, "C-calm down, Cyril! Fia was just passing out travel souvenirs! You didn't get a holy stone because you joined her on her trip, that's all! She really wasn't thinking deeply about it!"

"Y-yeah, what Desmond said!" Zackary followed up. "Besides, we just happened to be drinking in the recreation room that day when Fia randomly showed up and gave us holy stones! She could have just as easily missed us! We only got them by chance, I tell you! By chance!"

At those words, Cyril's expression finally softened. "Hmm... I suppose this *is* Fia we're talking about..."

The captains breathed a sigh of relief.

Things could have ended there, but Desmond had to foolishly open his mouth to try and calm Cyril down further. "Yeah, you get it now! Commander Saviz went to Sutherland too, so he probably didn't get a holy stone either!"

Desmond was completely guessing about this, but confident in his logic, nonetheless. Unfortunately, that confidence was misplaced.

Saviz shifted uncomfortably as all eyes turned to him. "...Actually, I happened to run into Fia in the corridor earlier. She gave me a holy stone, claiming it would serve me well as commander of the knight brigades."

"Huh?"

"W-wait, really?!"

After the initial shock, the captains peeked cautiously at Cyril.

"Oh really?" Cyril said. "It must be an exceptionally powerful holy stone if she bothered to say that."

“Indeed.” Saviz’s short reply was worth a thousand words.

Thereafter, no one yearned to be in that meeting, nor even remembered it existed. The captains agreed to pretend it had never happened, mainly to avoid a repeat of Cyril’s wrath.

And so, two hours after it had begun, the meeting came to a close. Needless to say, everyone left bone-tired.

The next morning, Cyril gloomily dragged himself to his office desk. Despite the buffer of a full day, Fia’s not giving him a holy stone still stung.

He went about his work diligently, only allowing himself a sigh now and then. Eventually someone knocked at his door, and Fia stepped inside.

“Hey, Captain Cyril. Do you have a moment?” she asked, as cheerful as ever.

Her bubbly attitude coaxed a smile out of Cyril. The moment she arrived, his mood lifted, forcing him to reflect on his recent behavior. Why had he fretted over something so insignificant when Fia always treated him well? His spirits lifted, he said, “I’m happy to have you, Fia. What do you need?”

“Oh, thanks. So, I want to give all these here to you.” She held up a small bag. When she passed it to him, he noticed its strangely heavy weight.

“It’s quite hefty for its size. Just what could be...” His voice trailed off as he peered inside the bag and glimpsed a dozen glistening holy stones.

“They’re holy stones!” Fia said cheerfully.

“Yes... Yes, indeed they are... But for them to weigh this much...”

“You guessed it! They’re full of healing magic!” She seemed oblivious to his bewilderment.

“...I see. And what did you want to do with these?”

“I figured you’d know how to best utilize them, seeing as you’re in charge of

so many knights, so I'm giving them all to you."

He stared blankly at her for several seconds. "...Come again?"

"The folks in Sutherland said they'll send more over right away, so I'll pass those on to you too!"

When she beamed at him without a hint of artifice or ill intention, shame knotted in his gut. "Fia, I must apologize!"

"Huh? Why?" she said, bewildered.

He dragged the confession from his chest. "I've been jealous of the fact that you gave holy stones to the others. I thought I could convince myself you were only giving them out to those who didn't go to Sutherland, but finding out Commander Saviz received one despite going to Sutherland saddened me greatly."

"What?!" Her eyes shot open wide.

He grabbed her hand. "Fia, I thank you for trusting me enough to come to me for this. However, I have nothing of equal value I can exchange for stones that you could easily sell for a fortune. The people of Sutherland entrusted these holy stones to you; it should be you who keeps them."

"B-but, Captain Cyril! Even if I did keep them, I wouldn't know how to put them to good use." More quietly, she mumbled, "...Or rather, I just flat-out don't need them at all."

His eyes softened. "I see... Then would it be all right if I kept just one? I swear to use it in a manner that will allow me to save the lives of many knights."

"Just take them all! Please!" she insisted.

"But..."

At his hesitation, she pushed harder. "I know you'll be able to use them better than I ever could! I came to you because you have the noble spirit and the rank to put these stones to their proper use. And since I'm the one being so insistent, you *really* don't need to give me anything in exchange!"

He narrowed his eyes to contemplate her, this being so utterly free of greed that she was almost difficult to look at. "...Fia, I am proud to know I have a knight like you under my wing." Softly, he added, "Thank you, truly. Would you mind if I took three holy stones then? Three is enough for me to save plenty of knights. Please, hold onto the rest to keep yourself safe."

"Huh? But I *really* don't need them..."

Cyril took three holy stones for himself, more than satisfied with that amount. Fia seemed unsure that that was enough and completely missed the depth of Cyril's gratitude. She fidgeted, holding the bag with the rest of the holy stones in it. Witnessing her virtuous character, Cyril's heart warmed.

Several days later, Cyril summoned Fia to the First Knight Brigade captain's office and presented her with a dazzling golden statue of a dragon.

"Please, accept this gift as a meager token of my appreciation, Fia," Cyril said.

"Wh-whoa. This thing looks expensive..."

Its absurd value was evident at a glance, so, naturally, Fia tried to refuse it. It bore a striking resemblance to Zavilia though, so she couldn't help but want to hold it.

"H-hey, wait a second. Th-this thing's heavy! Is this *real* gold?!"

Cyril furrowed his brow. "It is, but the holy stones you gave me are worth millions of times more."

"Wh-what? No way, the people of Sutherland used to throw those stones back in the ocean whenever they found them... (And they can only hold a tiny, tiny amount of magic anyway)," she muttered.

Cyril flashed a dazzling smile. "Oh, but Fia, for me to return this piece of art would be a grave insult to its creator."

"O-oh no!"

“But if you’d like, I could commission a different piece. Is there something else you’d like?”

“No, no, no, I can’t accept *any* of these expensive-looking things! I live in the knight dormitory! My door doesn’t even lock. I can’t keep any of these!”

Cyril smiled calmly. “Ha ha ha. There isn’t a single member of the knight brigades who would steal from one as virtuous as you. But even if there was, I would ensure they regret ever being born.”

“Oh... I see.”

Fia could refuse no further. Her silence was not true acceptance, however. She squabbled with Cyril regularly over this, always trying to make him take the golden statue back.

Side Story:
Serafina Makes a Poem About Sirius
(Three Hundred Years Ago)

“YOU WANT TO MAKE a poem about *me*?!”

I gaped in disbelief at Serafina sitting before me.

I was doing paperwork in my office when Serafina barged in like she always did. I glanced up just as she plopped onto my sofa and appraised the place with a bored look. Clearly, she wanted to talk, so I set aside my work and rose to approach the sofa. Sure enough, she launched into her spiel the instant I sat across from her.

Serafina said her older sister, Shaula, the Duchess of Barbizet, was visiting the royal castle in a few days and would host a poetry gathering. She’d invited Serafina to not only attend but to share a poem of her own.

“My sister says the subject you base your poem on is everything. The actual content isn’t as important as having an eye-grabbing subject. It doesn’t matter if you make a masterpiece if nobody notices, after all.”

“I see,” I said with a nod. There was logic to Shaula’s words.

At my agreement, a wicked grin curled Serafina’s mouth. “Eheh heh heh...”

That was when I realized I should have rejected the notion. Her laughing was an omen of trouble to come.

“Yay! I just knew you’d be okay with it!”

“Okay with *what*? What on earth are you talking about?” I said. By my recollection, I hadn’t agreed to anything.

“Huh? Why, you’re going to be my subject, of course. You’re super popular,

don't you know that? You're the great Duke Ulysses, the kingdom's strongest knight, the captain of my Royal Red Shield! You're the best poem subject there is!"

"You want to make a poem about *me*?!" I exclaimed. "Serafina, I'm not some spectacle to put on display!"

"Oh, relax. It's not going to be anything bad! I just want to share all the good things only I know about you."

"There's no need for that whatsoever. I'm fine with you being the only one who truly knows me." I sincerely meant those words, but Serafina cracked up like they were a hilarious joke.

"Oh, Sirius. You can be so modest."

This was hopeless. She was dead set on ignoring whatever I said.

Suddenly, I recalled a certain incident from ten years ago. A young Serafina had presented a poem she was proud of, one that left every listener dumbfounded. To put it *gently*, her poem was god-awful. But then again, she was six years old at the time. Being sixteen now, she should have improved. Surely. Hopefully.

I crossed my legs and rested my hands on my knee, hiding my discomfort. "Very well, Serafina. You may use me as the subject for your poem if that is what you wish—although I suspect you've already finished the poem and came here to show it to me."

It appeared I had guessed correctly. She stood and said, "You got it. I figured I should show it to you beforehand since it's about you, you know?"

She walked to the center of the room and curtsied, then put her hands on her chest and slowly began to recite her poem.

"Now, now, who could that be?"

Our strongest knight, who sends enemies scattering? The greatest noble of

our kingdom?

No, no, it's Sirius Ulysses, an envoy of love sent from the heavens!

La la la! The man with gray hair and silver eyes has come to give everyone his love!

When he tells you he's too busy, he's really saying you're pretty.

When he walks past and ignores you, he's really expressing his love.

Oh, beautiful envoy of love! Send the women of the world your affection, la la la!"

Deep down, I knew it would turn out like this.

My thoughts ground to a halt. It was like I couldn't even process the words of my own language. My mind went blank. My jaw clenched, and my teeth clamped shut. I could not form even a single word in the face of what I'd just heard.

What in the world was that? Was she really singing a poem about me? No. No, it cannot be. Surely not...

While I sat there dumbfounded, Serafina watched me with expectant eyes. Having known her for so long, I understood what she wanted.

She's waiting for me to praise her.

Somehow, despite the debacle she'd just presented, she was *proud* of her work.

"Oh... That was...wond..." I hesitated. I couldn't bring myself to call her "poem" wonderful. But even more urgently, I could not allow her to release that mess into the world.

Think. Think, Sirius! You're the captain of the Royal Red Shield, aren't you? You've overcome numerous obstacles others declared insurmountable, haven't you?

I racked my brain. That was when I noticed Canopus standing in wait behind Serafina.

“Ah!” I exclaimed. It wasn’t the best plan, but it was the best I could cobble together in the moment. I had to start by praising her, however. “Wonderful! That was wonderful, Serafina! ...However, I couldn’t help but notice there’s not much in it about me being a knight.”

In fact, the poem outright declared I was not a knight at all. And in that case, just what the heck was I?

“I knew you’d notice, Sirius! My sister actually gave me some advice for the poem! She told me that noblewomen don’t really care about fighting and are mainly interested in your pretty face. She also said they want you to whisper sweet nothings to them and that if I could capture that, I’d have a masterpiece on my hands!”

“I see. So I have her to blame for all this...” I muttered. It seemed Shaula was pulling the strings all along.

Completely oblivious to my feelings, Serafina grinned. “Ehe heh heh. The real you is so cold to all the noblewomen, though, so I had a hard time making a poem. That’s why I tried leaning a bit into fiction writing!”

Face stiff, I marched steadfastly toward the next stage of my plan. “I see. So that’s why the Sirius in your poem is so different from me. ...Incidentally, Serafina, I recall you’ve always been quite...talented at poetry ever since you were young. But in the past you would compare two things in your poems, like with ‘Squid and Octopus,’ and ‘Dolphins and Jellyfish.’ Come to think of it, comparing two things is a technique you can use to better highlight the good aspects of both, isn’t it?”

I didn’t actually know whether this was a true poetic technique, but it caught her interest regardless, and that was all that mattered.

“Oooh, I was using such a high-level technique as a kid, huh? Wow!” she said.

“Anyway, I was thinking it might be good for you to employ that technique here as well,” I said, nudging her toward the crux of my plan.

She tilted her head in confusion. “Huh? You mean I should make the poem about you and someone else?”

“Exactly! And who better to pick than the Blue Knight, who is always by your side?!”

Something clattered to the floor behind Serafina. Then Canopus, who always tried to blend into the background while on guard duty, uttered a noise I’d never heard from him before. “Hwuh?”

No, wait... I had heard him make that sound once before, only once. It happened ten years ago when he listened to Serafina’s poem. Perhaps he was remembering that event, because he gaped at me with wide eyes.

I cast my gaze down, unable to meet his stare. *Canopus, you must throw yourself into harm’s way and change the course of Serafina’s poem! Tribulations are what make you grow as a knight. Take this opportunity to become an even more excellent knight.*

Canopus kept staring before finally giving up and realizing I was not going to sweep in to save him. He faced Serafina, who peered at him with eyes shining with unbridled joy.

“Come to think of it, Canopus is also really popular with noblewomen!” she said. “If I write a poem about *both* of you, everyone is sure to take notice! Thanks for the great idea, Sirius! Canopus, would you mind if I made a poem about you?”

Canopus swallowed, despair shadowing his face. “Not...at all... Please...do as you wish...Lady Serafina...”

“Thank you, Canopus! Eheh heh heh, you two are the best!”

Neither Canopus nor I could muster the energy to dissuade her after this. We held our silence as she happily chatted away.

Three days later, the poem gathering commenced. I received a transcript of Serafina's poem from an official who attended.

I read through it baffled. I thought she would devote half the poem to Canopus, thereby halving the part about me, but instead she just doubled the poem's length.

Perhaps I was wrong to be so optimistic, I thought with a sigh. I continued through the transcript, then found a note about the gathering itself. Dread settled heavy in my chest as I read on to learn that the poem gathering sparked an unprecedented commotion after Serafina's presentation. Noblewomen collapsed one after another, and the poem gathering had to be canceled—an unheard-of occurrence.

"...Hmph. They should've canceled it *before* Serafina presented if they were going to cancel it at all." Despite my grumbling, I knew the gathering couldn't be canceled before she presented, for she was the very cause of the cancellation.

A grand sigh blew out of me. I stood with the transcript still in hand and swept my gaze over the walls of my room. The poem Serafina had written when she was six sat tacked to one of those walls. I resolved to place her new poem beside it.

"Content aside, you wrote this one about me. There's no way I wouldn't hang it up." With a wry grin, I framed the poem and placed it neatly on my wall. Seeing the two poems side by side, I smiled to myself. "Heh. Her poems are awful on their own, but you can tell she's come a long way if you put them together like this!"

Her new poem far outperformed her one from ten years ago, "Snakes and Lizards." It was just the word "snake" repeated over and over again...

For some time, I stood there admiring both poems. All in all, it was another peaceful day for the kingdom.

Side Story:
Serafina Swears Off Sweets
(Three Hundred Years Ago)

“S-SIRIUS, I CAN’T take it anymore! I need sweets! I can’t memorize anything like this!”

Sirius watched me complain as I lay sprawled out atop the table. “That’s strange. Weren’t you the one who boldly declared you’d swear off sweets until after the end-of-year greetings?” he said flatly.

“W-well...” I did remember saying that, and Sirius had a great memory. He wouldn’t forget something like that. But why did he have to phrase it like a question?! So obnoxious!

As my sugar-deprived brain flailed in frustration, I gave Sirius my best pleading look.

At the end of the year, tradition dictated that we open a section of the royal castle’s garden to the public for one day. The royal family would come to the balcony, waving to the populace. I’d yet to take part in the event, but this year my father, the king, invited me to participate for the very first time. Instantly, I knew this was meant to serve as my public debut as princess.

My excitement was plain when I addressed Sirius at my side. “Did you hear? I’m finally making my debut as princess! I guess I’ll have to get serious for this, huh?”

He gave me a funny look as he said, “Is that right? Personally, I fail to see the point of a debut when you already wander the royal capital as you please, to the chagrin of me and your guard, I might add.”

“G-gah. Th-that’s different, Sirius! You see—”

I was about to protest further, but he cut me off. “It’s the same thing. You may not have made many *official* appearances, but you’ve shown yourself to the public countless times over the years. ...Or do you actually believe you can make this your first public appearance if you simply wish for it hard enough? One can only be so delusional, Serafina.”

“Wh-what’s with you, Sirius?! Aren’t you supposed to be the expressionless, taciturn type? Why do you only ever become talkative when you’re complaining?!”

“Hmph. I suppose it’s my sense of duty. I am a man of few words, but I go against my nature and become talkative when I feel I must amend your behavior.” He spoke with utter seriousness, his lips a hard line. I knew right away that he was on the verge of laughter.

“Sirius!” I snapped.

As predicted, he burst into laughter. “Ha ha ha ha! Sorry, I couldn’t help it. It’s your fault I laughed though.”

“Jeez, Sirius... Heh heh heh. How is that my fault?!” His laughter swept me along with it, but this wasn’t unusual for us.

In truth, I knew Sirius laughed and smiled a lot; however, he hardly ever spoke and absolutely never laughed when he was with people other than me. That was why only I knew this side of him.

The two of us shared many special rules that we had made up when we were younger, one of which had come into play only moments ago. If I ever found him near laughter and pretended to be angry about it, he had to laugh out loud. It was a harmless rule of ours, more a game than a rule. But I enjoyed it and had since we were kids.

Just when we were having our usual fun, I carelessly made a foolish declaration. “Despite what you say, this will, in fact, be my first official appearance *as princess* in a long time. Most of my appearances so far have been as the Great Saint. Since it’s such a special occasion, I want to wear that

extra-special dress I've been saving! I need to slim down just a smidge, though, so I'll be swearing off sweets until after I greet everyone from the castle balcony at the end of the year!"

Honestly, what was I thinking? What made me believe I, of all people, could go without sweets? Maybe my father's invitation put me in a weird mood.

Sirius just shrugged, as though to say, "Well, good luck."

I really should have been more careful. Despite his non-committal reply, he would remember what I said and make sure I stood by it.

Which brings us back to the present.

With a pathetic expression on my face, I looked up at Sirius. We stood in a well-lit sunroom beside a table covered in open books. Before the end-of-year greetings, I had to attend a party held by the king. That meant I would have to interact with many nobles.

I lacked a lot of the education a princess would normally receive, but that had been my choice, and I didn't regret it one bit. It did, however, pose a problem for me now.

"I can't do it! I can't cram all this into my head!"

"Serafina..."

"Do you have any idea how many nobles are in the kingdom?! There's no way I can remember all their family structures, faces, and names! And you have the gall to claim remembering all that is *just the beginning*?! I can't do it!"

"Is that so?"

"We've been at this for six hours already! *Six hours* of going over names from the instant I woke up! Marquess Saus Sunroad, Marchioness Colette Sunroad, viscount and heir Robert Rezard... Aaaaaah! I've memorized three hundred names today alone! But I'm at my limit!" I collapsed onto the table in a dramatic flop.

“Serafina, Marquess Sunroad’s name is Zaus, not Saus,” Sirius said calmly. “Additionally, Colette is their daughter; the Marchioness is Illya. Seeing as you got two out of three wrong, I’d estimate you’ve successfully memorized one hundred names, not three hundred.”

“*Guuaaafugh?!*” I let out a death cry while still sprawled out on the table. “S-Sirius, I can’t take it anymore! I need sweets! I can’t memorize anything like this!”

My Royal Guard captain, a man who believed people must stand by their words, flatly said, “That’s strange. Weren’t you the one who boldly declared you’d swear off sweets until after the end-of-year greetings?”

“W-well...” I did say that, but I’m only human, and humans can have a change of heart! I had to try to change Sirius’s heart too. “Look, I may have said that, but I’ve reconsidered! Try to understand! Don’t you also have something you wouldn’t give up for the world, something that would make life too dull to be worth living?”

His eyes shot wide for a moment, before narrowing thoughtfully on me. He nodded. “I do. I doubt I could so much as breathe without it.”

“Huh? Th-that bad?! A-anyway, yeah, you get me, right? That’s how important sweets are to me.”

“I see. I suppose I shouldn’t withhold sweets from you then.” He signaled the maids, and they hurried over with a tray of sweets.

“S-so cute!” I exclaimed.

Light pink flower-shaped cookies, round cookies topped with nuts, soft macarons, and more sat arrayed on a white tray. They were absolutely adorable...but also about a quarter the size of my usual sweets.

“They’re a bit small, but that just makes them all the cuter! And if they look four times smaller than my usual sweets, then they must be four times less volume as well, so I won’t gain any weight! It should be okay for me to eat

some, right, Sirius? Right? Right?!" I looked at him with hope.

He laughed. "Even I can't say no to that face. If I did, the expression you'd make would haunt my dreams for a full month."

"Very funny. As if a brave, accomplished knight like you could be scared of me!" I didn't take his words seriously in the slightest.

He regarded me thoughtfully. "I'm weaker to you than you know." He smiled as he added, "Feel free to eat as much as you wish. Like you said, they're smaller than usual, so they have less sugar. I'll track what you eat and add the equivalent in exercise to your dance lessons starting tomorrow. So, please, eat without reservation."

"Guuaaafugh?!"

He would do it too. He was the type of guy to stand by what he said.

But...he said starting tomorrow, so... I reached toward the tray. I couldn't just throw away the opportunity to gobble up all these sweets now that I had permission.

I dug into the sweets he'd prepared, exclaiming about how good they were after every bite. With my hands on my cheeks and a smile on my face, I said, "Mmm, delicious, delicious! I must be the happiest girl in the world right now!"

Sirius smiled softly. "I see."

His faint smile sent a stab of guilt into my gut. He hadn't had a single cookie yet. "I'm sorry, it's not right that I'm the only one eating. Go ahead and eat that thing you talked about earlier. It's your favorite, right?"

"No, I... Thank you, but I'm happy just keeping watch so others don't come near my favorite treat. It's quite delicate, you see. Though I may want to eat it, I mustn't."

That was weird. Just what could his favorite treat be? Maybe it was some kind of meat from a high-ranking monster living deep in the wild. If it was something even the strongest knight in the kingdom hesitated to hunt, no one else would

ever manage to take it down. Ha! What a worrywart, imagining anyone else could even attempt to bring down such a strong beast.

“Ha ha, I’m pretty sure there’s nobody but you who would seriously go after that treat of yours. So relax and go for it whenever you feel like it.”

He held my eyes for a beat, then nodded solemnly. “I’ll take care to remember your advice.”

From behind us, the maids murmured to each other.

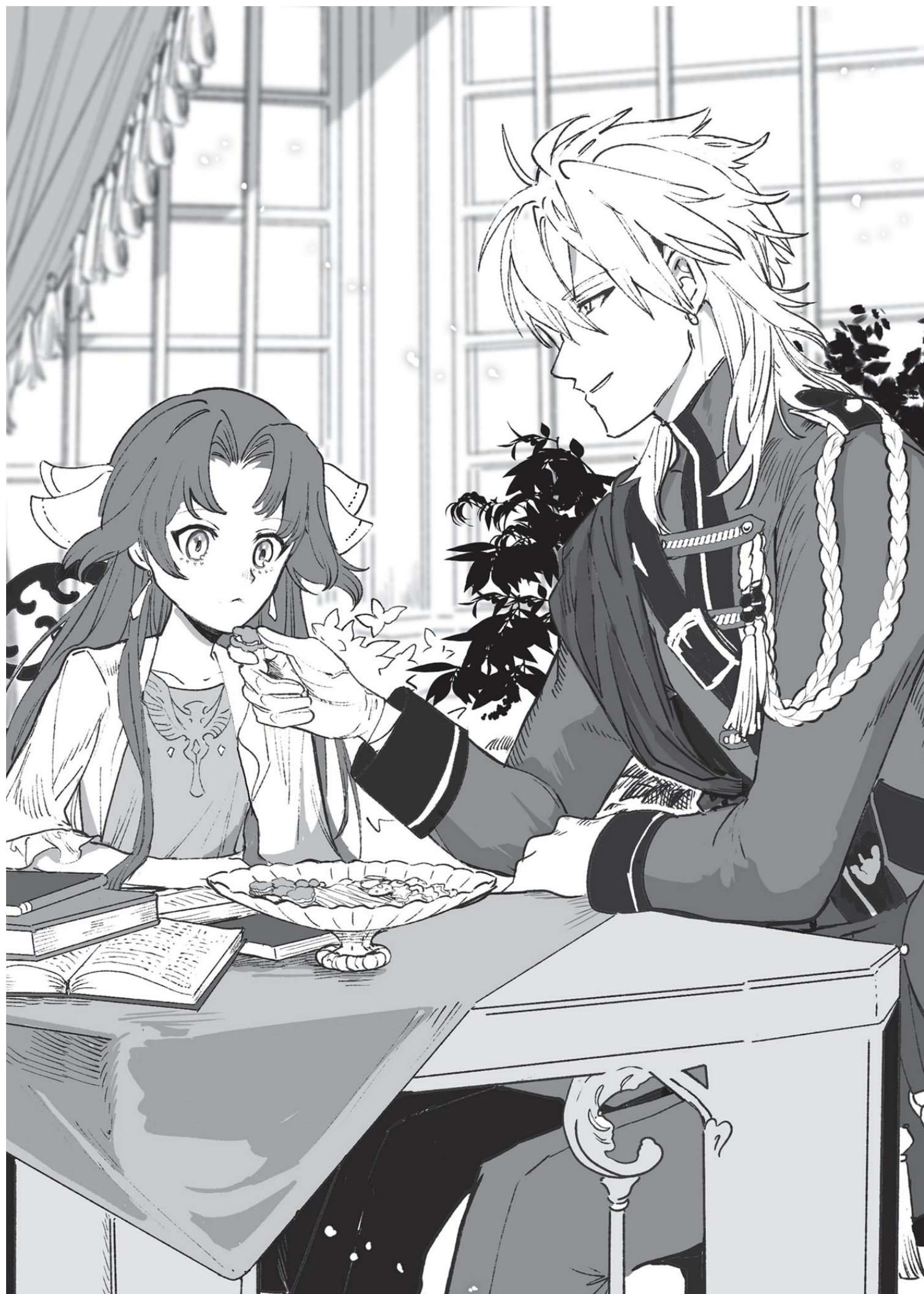
“No way!”

“After all he’s said, *that’s* how she replies?! Does she really not realize...?”

Sirius paid them little mind. I tilted my head to the side. What were they all worked up about? But Sirius silenced my thoughts by plucking up one of the sweets and holding it to my mouth.

“Here, you should eat while you can,” he said. “There’s no telling when I’ll let you eat sweets again.”

He had a point. Starting tomorrow, if I botched my dance lessons, there was no way he’d let me see a single sweet again for a good while. With fear trembling through my chest, I stuffed sweets into my mouth, savoring them while I still could.



Side Story:

Fia's Meeting with the King, as Seen by the Knights

ON THAT DAY, the king had two dozen knights assigned to his guard. All of them sympathized with the new recruit coming to meet him. After all, they themselves had undergone this very same meeting once. They knew well the pitfalls awaiting this poor soul.

During these meetings, the king would always ask the recruit two, maybe three questions, then lose interest and talk with Cyril instead. From there, the recruit would have to entertain the court jesters, of all people. All the while, the jesters would goad and antagonize them. Winning the card game would lift the recruit's spirit, but once they cooled down they would realize the jesters dealt them a stacked hand. The fact that the court jesters had let them win—and the fact that they had been happy about it—would leave them feeling foolish and embarrassed, only adding to their frustrations.

In the knights' opinions, not a single good thing came of these meetings. They weren't even sure what they were supposed to be doing during them. Perhaps that was about to change, however.

Fia's meeting with the king left all two dozen knights awed.

She didn't display any nerves. She declared the jesters' speech an homage to the root language of Návian. Of course, she had to be messing around. She couldn't possibly know something like that. But the court jesters played along, even pretending she'd shocked them into speechlessness.

Then again, why did the court jesters go to such lengths for her? Were they just happy to receive praise instead of mockery for once, even if the praise wasn't genuine? They had to know Fia was making it all up. It left the knights mystified until suddenly Saviz fell into a fit of laughter. That only added to their

confusion. They cocked their heads and wondered if Fia's joke had really been *that* funny.

Fia continued, getting a bit carried away with her jokes. "Knowing Lua is nothing special at all. It's child's play, really," she said mockingly.

This time, Cyril was the one to burst into laughter.

Later on, she even performed the knight salute to a court jester and addressed him as "Your Majesty."

The same thought flashed through all the knights' heads: *This girl's crazy! She's just doing whatever she pleases!*

Awe left them so dazed they barely realized Saviz had asked the king to clear the room. Shockingly enough, the king obliged—and left the room himself with his aides and knights in tow!

"Y-you're kidding me?!" a knight whispered frantically, no longer able to hold back their surprise.

The other knights joined in, bewildered whispers flying between them.

"Now even *His Majesty* is playing along with Fia's jokes?!"

"I can't believe he counted himself among those who needed to clear the room! Maybe it was because he saw the commander playing along too?"

Of course, they understood that the king probably had other items on his schedule to address, so the timing was fortuitous, but it was still baffling to see the king himself playing along with such a ridiculous joke.

"Fia is incredible! I can't believe she even got His Majesty in on it!"

All at once, a single thought occurred to all the knights, and they exclaimed, "Oh! Was *that* what we should have done?!"

Perhaps they should have gone about their own meetings with the king in a similar carefree manner, messing around with the court jesters and doing silly things like calling one of them the king with total seriousness. That would've

been more fun for everyone, surely. At the very least, the knights would have been spared the frustration they felt afterward. That being said...

“What Fia did might have been the best way to go about it, but I don’t think I could ever emulate her...” one knight muttered.

Everyone else nodded in agreement. They simply had too much self-respect to act in such a humiliating way. “Man... Fia really is something else!”

Later, the court jesters acknowledged Fia as their favorite. She even earned the right to enter the king’s office whenever she pleased.

Upon learning of this, the knights expressed no confusion or envy, instead remarking, “Oh. Yeah, that makes sense.”

Fia had astonished them all by earning the king and the court jesters’ favor in the span of an afternoon, all while displaying a skill none of them could hope to emulate. Unbeknownst to her, the knights that had witnessed her meeting with the king held her in higher regard than ever afterward.

Side Story:
Serafina's Poem Becomes Legendary
(Three Hundred Years Ago)

“O H NO, this is terrible!”

I paced in my chambers. Just moments ago, I'd been at a poetry gathering hosted by my sister, Shaula. But she canceled the event midway through, an absolutely unheard-of eventuality. Even worse, I got the impression my poem was the problem. As I presented it, the noblewomen around me fainted one after another.

“M-my poem wasn't *bad*, was it...?”

Shaula called it a masterpiece when I showed it to her before the event, so I went in feeling pretty confident. But perhaps she was biased, being my sister and all. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed and the more depressed I became. I sank on my sofa, defeated and disheartened. That was when a sharp knock rapped on my door, and someone entered my room.

Incapable of lifting my head, I keep my gaze to the floor. The sofa creaked as someone sat next to me. I attempted to drag my eyes up to them, but then they lifted me and placed me right on their lap.

“Huh?”

Who would dare treat a classy, mature lady like me as though she were a stuffed animal? I finally regained my composure...and looked up to find Sirius sitting there with me on his lap.

Of course. When I thought about it, he was the only one who freely walked into my room like this. Jeez. How bad had I looked for him to try and comfort me like this?

“Sirius, do I really look so down that you need to comfort me like a child?”

“Not at all. I saw a copy of your poem and was reminded of how you made one when you were six. I’m treating you like this out of nostalgia. That’s all.”

“I’m a full-grown woman, I’ll have you know,” I grumbled.

“...I know,” he said softly. “But let me indulge myself a little anyway.”

Wasn’t he the one indulging me by trying to cheer me up? He must have heard about my poem shutting down the whole poetry gathering.

I leaned against his chest, murmuring, “Oh, Sirius, the noblewomen started passing out when I presented my poem. Was there something wrong with it?”

He thought for a moment, then said, “There’s nothing wrong with your poem. Learning about the good parts of me that only you know probably overwhelmed them is all. My greatness is just that sublime.”

I supposed that made sense. I’d described the poem that way myself not too long ago. But this shameless praise of himself, something he never did, was likely also an effort to make me laugh.

You’re always so kind to me, Sirius, I thought. Already, he’d managed to lift my spirits. “Thank you. I’m feeling a little better now.”

“I see.”

“But...I could use a little more cheering up. Can I stay like this for a while?” I nuzzled against his chest.

After a slight pause, he said, “This is something I started, so I have no right to refuse you... Very well, Serafina. I’ll pretend you’re a six-year-old child for the time being, as hard as that might be.”

“Oh? Are you unwilling to indulge me otherwise?” I teased.

Without delay, he said, “Ah, perfect. Seeing you act so childish has completed my mental image.”

I didn’t mind being called childish when he said it in such a gentle tone. Thus, I remained like that for a time, comfortable there in his lap.

Over time, my poem's infamy only grew. It became a sort of folk tale, the poem that had brought a whole gathering to an abrupt end when women swooned and fell unconscious. In due time, it became legend.

Afterword

HELLO, EVERYONE, and thank you for buying this book.

We've finally reached Volume 7 of *A Tale of the Secret Saint* and are now entering the main part of the story. I've been wanting to share this part with you all for a while now, so I'm pretty excited! However, Fia is the type to make a lot of pit stops along her journey, so you can expect things to go at about the same pace they've been going so far. I understand many of you are eager to see what happens next, but I would be happy if you joined Fia for her whole journey, pit stops and all.

Chibi provided wonderful illustrations for the series once again! The cover illustration in particular—featuring Saviz, Fia, and Cyril—is something I've wanted to have drawn for a long time, and it turned out so much more breathtaking than what I had in my mind! The color spread page of the three court jesters was wonderful as well! The costume designs took me aback with how well done they were! It amazes me no matter how many times I look at it. As always, thank you for your illustrations, Chibi!

I'm proud to announce that *A Tale of the Secret Saint* has reached one million copies in circulation! I'm happy to have so many readers! Every single one of you has helped play a part in achieving this goal. I cannot thank you all enough. (That said, we're certainly not stopping at one million! I'll continue to write, so please continue to read!) To commemorate one million copies in circulation, we are releasing a spin-off series, *A Tale of the Secret Saint: ZERO*, which follows Serafina as the protagonist. You can read the spin-off on its own, but it serves to supplement the main series, so please read them in tandem if you have the time.

Also, to commemorate one million copies in circulation, we will be releasing stamps for the social media app LINE! Funny story, my managing editor actually came to me beforehand with a number of different ideas to commemorate our

milestone, but...

“We’ve come up with ‘Plan A’ and ‘Plan B’ to commemorate the series reaching one million copies. Which do you like more?”

“I want LINE stamps!”

“I...do not believe that was one of the options I gave...?”

“It wasn’t! But I want LINE stamps!”

“...How badly do you want them?”

“Like, twelve out of ten badly!”

“...LINE stamps it is.”

As you can see, I live true to my own desires. Much gratitude to everyone who helped make these LINE stamps possible. They will be released on the same day this book goes on sale, so I’ll be counting the days until release with even more excitement than usual. You can find the details on the publisher’s special page for the series: <https://www.es-novel.jp/special/daiseijo/>

Incidentally, there was mention in this volume of Fia’s dorm room not having a lock on its door. Writing about that reminded me of the time I used to be the dorm manager for a company dormitory. Part of my job was to meet regularly with residents and make sure they didn’t have any problems. One time, however, I had someone come to me a bit awkwardly with a complaint.

“Umm, hey... The door to my room doesn’t lock right.”

“Huh? Is the lock broken?”

“U-uhhh, not quite... The door won’t close.”

“The door won’t close?!”

I hurriedly went to check, and, sure enough, the door frame had warped with age, making it impossible to close no matter how hard you pressed. Even worse, the same could be said for half of the other doors.

“Th-this is terrible! What if a burglar gets in?!”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that! Everyone packs their valuables with them every day when we head to work.”

Just...wow. People can be awfully tenacious, huh? More importantly, why hadn’t anyone before me tried to fix the place?

I tried talking to a few of the people who were the dorm managers before me, but they all just said something like, “Ha ha ha! Yeah, that building’s old!” as though that served as some kind of explanation at all.

Anyway, the whole thing bothered me too much to ignore, so I had the doors repaired right away, got thanked, and we all lived happily ever after at the company dorm. The end.

I want to wrap things up here by thanking everyone who helped make this book possible, as well as all my readers. Thank you so very much. Writing got a bit hectic with two books releasing back-to-back, but I had fun. I hope you enjoyed Volume 7 of *A Tale of the Secret Saint*.



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