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KABEDONDAIKOU

ILL. YUNOHITO

Fake
SAINT
of the YEAR

You Wanted the
Perfect Saint?
Too Bad!

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Chapter 21: The Past and the Future

A few days had gone by since the headmaster's faction had been taken care of.

Talk about a lousy opening sentence, right? I'm sure you're wondering why I've suddenly brought this up without any explanation, so let me go back in time a little.

I was currently living as Ellize, but in my previous life, I was a Japanese man named Fudou Niito. I'd been reincarnated into the body of a young girl in a place called Fiori, so you could say I was now the protagonist of a gender-bender story.

That was already a lot to take in, but that wasn't even the worst part! I'd transmigrated into a game I knew very very well: *Kuon no Sanka Fiore caduto eterna*, a dating sim from hell! Aside from the bad ending, Eterna—the main heroine—died in every single route.

The gist of the story was that an annoying witch terrorized the people until a saint defeated her. The player controlled a male protagonist—Verner, as per his default name—and had to raise the affection of the girls that hung around him. The game had two main goals: get yourself a girl and defeat the witch.

From the beginning to basically the middle of the game, there was a character that relentlessly stood in the player's way. She was a total piece of shit that the entire player base hated: Ellize, the fake saint.

Ellize had been born in the same village as Eterna, the real saint, and had been mistaken for her at birth. As a result, she'd lived her entire life as the saint. She was the worst piece of shit in the universe, though, and always abused her power and influence to stir up trouble.

Now, the problem was that I'd taken over the body of this very piece of shit.

I'd been taken aback at first, but I didn't have much to miss in my old world. I got used to my new life here fairly fast.

Since I was Ellize now, Eterna had one less enemy. Instead of acting like the original, I'd decided to do everything in my power to raise the saint's reputation and make sure that Eterna would be able to reclaim her position with the best conditions when the time came.

After I'd made up my mind, I played the part of the perfect saint and strove to reach a good ending—the one I'd always wanted to see in the game.

Fortunately, Ellize's one redeeming feature was her natural affinity for magic. I'd been training hard every day since I was a kid—well, in this world, I mean—and ended up becoming the strongest person in the world (probably). I sometimes felt like a walking cheat code.

I spent a lot of time killing off monsters—the witch's underlings—and making sure we still had plenty of people on our side. That included going around and healing people.

As a result, humanity ended up being much better off than it had been in the game. You know what they say—where there's a will, there's a way.

However, my efforts and strength also meant that I was a major threat to some people. In particular, Dias, the headmaster of the prestigious Training Institute for Magic Knights of Alfreia had become wary of me.

Dias was actually a double agent at the service of the witch, Alexia, who also happened to be the previous saint. He was worried that I might become the next witch.

This world's best-kept secret was the witch's real identity. After a saint defeated a witch, she'd take her place. This meant that, as the greatest saint in history, Ellize (me) also had the potential to become the strongest and most fearsome witch in history. Dias was worried no one would ever manage to stop me, so he'd resolved to do everything in his power to prevent me from getting in contact with Alexia.

How, you ask? By feeding the witch information about me.

Dias's worries were misguided, though. I wasn't the real saint! I was nothing but a fake, so there was no risk I'd ever turn into a witch.

Anyway, I'd purged the academy of the headmaster's faction. Now, there was

no one left to run to the witch and tattletale on me. As for the witch herself, she was still lurking in the basement of the academy and doing her best to avoid running into me.

And...yeah. That was pretty much everything that had happened up until now.

I won! Oh boy, I totally won! Or so I'd like to say, but I didn't intend to attack the witch right away.

I couldn't be sure we'd gotten rid of every single spy, so it was better to keep an eye out for a little longer.

Even if there weren't any more spies, I was pretty sure the witch would just teleport the moment she saw me. She had the ability to split her body apart and make all the particles fly away at the speed of light. It was a difficult ability to deal with, and I couldn't just attack her without a plan. If she managed to flee, finding her again would be *incredibly* difficult.

My hands were tied until I figured out a countermeasure.

Even though I kept thinking about it, I had yet to think of a good idea.

Is there even a sure-fire way to deal with that OP skill in this world?

I felt like I could've found a decent countermeasure in another fantasy world, but this one was based on a dating sim. There weren't that many cool spells or skills.

I guess I can always invent the magic spell I need if it doesn't exist. I'm that good, after all.

Anyway, I didn't have much to do in the meantime, so I'd started to busy myself with baking. I was making cakes and custard pudding—bribes—to send to the royal families of the surrounding countries.

This world was vaguely modeled off Medieval Europe, but it was very convenient in the way games often were. The streets weren't overflowing with filth, for one.

Baking wasn't really a big thing here, and they had yet to discover most of the cool recipes. It stood to reason—sugar had only become readily available during

the last few decades.

Only aristocrats, royalty, and the saint's church owned ovens, so enjoying baked treats was pretty much their prerogative. That was most likely part of the reason this field had been pretty stagnant. They only ever made some kind of bread sweetened with sugar or honey.

With my memories of the wonderful twenty-first century intact, I hadn't been able to bear that kind of life. I often made easy desserts, such as custard pudding or sponge cake, with a touch of whipped cream on top to satisfy my cravings. I'd even started to give some to the members of my guard from time to time—you know, to bribe them—and they all loved it. After a while, I'd started doing it for royalty too.

One of the first kings to try my cooking had struggled to hide the foolish smile that threatened to spread on his face in front of his court. "It's so soft! I feel like I'm eating a cloud! It's my first time eating a cloud!" he'd said.

A cloud...? C'mon... If you really wanna feel like you're eating a cloud, you might as well munch on some shaved ice.

Anyway, that idiot had proceeded to rename my cake "cloud" without consulting me. He'd spread the name far and wide too!

Talk about terrible naming sense. Cloud's supposed to be an emo guy who swings his enormous sword around all day, not a cake.

As for the pudding, it had been dubbed "mount" because it apparently looked like a little mountain.

I couldn't get over their awful naming conventions, but what could I do about it? Royalty and nobles alike were going around bragging that they could now eat "mounts and clouds" with huge grins on their faces. *Idiots.*

Anyway, my desserts were now renowned as the "saint's delicacies," and only privileged people got to have a taste.

Needless to say, I'd kept the recipes secret. I wasn't a nice guy, and I *certainly* wasn't about to go around sharing my knowledge with everyone for free like most isekai protagonists. *Monopolies are where it's at! I'm taking this to the grave.*

Naturally, there was a reason I was planning on sending out bribes to them.

In this world, the only people who knew about the saint's fate were royalty.

Even the castle I had grown up in—the saint's castle—had actually been built to imprison saints upon their return after they killed the witch. The gorgeous castle would transform into a prison with a single flip of a switch. They even kept monsters in the basement. Why? To kill the saint, obviously. Monsters could kill saints; that had been proven many times in the past.

In other words, the royal families of each country were all pretending to love me right now, but the second the witch was out of the way, they'd turn against me.

I was well aware of that fact, so I was on a mission to win their hearts for real through their stomachs.

If I simply died right after killing the witch, I wouldn't have to worry about that. But, in the event that my identity as the fake were to be found out before then, I wanted some insurance.

I needed to have some sort of value as a person even if I wasn't the saint anymore. If I ended up banished, maybe some king or noble would pick me up off the streets and protect me in secret for my culinary talents.

I didn't have much longer to live, but I didn't wanna spend my last days on the run or begging in the streets. *Doesn't everyone wish to live a nice life to the end?*

While I was baking, someone knocked on my door. I told them to enter. Layla Scott, the head of my guard, stepped into the room without a word.

Now this is unusual. She usually states why she's here immediately. Were you attracted by the smell, you little glutton? Fear not, I made some for you too. No, wait, I didn't. Oops! Let's just give her mine instead and pretend it was supposed to be for her all along.

"Lady Ellize... Can I ask you a question?"

What is it? Curious about my bust-waist-hip measurements?

I wouldn't even be able to tell her, actually. I'd never measured myself.

Huh? That's not it?

"Lady Ellize... Do you intend to kill the witch?"

Sure do.

Why was my little Scotterbrain suddenly asking the obvious? There wouldn't be a happy ending unless I got rid of the witch.

...Actually, that was kind of a lie. There was a way to reach a happy ending without the witch dying.

As I'd already stated before, the witch, Alexia, was also a dateable character and she had a route of her own. If you locked yourself on her route, it was possible to save her from her fate and make her happy. But, in that case, Eterna ended up being the final boss and she'd die. *My poor little Eterna...*

Anyway, getting on Alexia's route was super difficult, so it wasn't in my plans at all.

Dias had been irresponsible enough to ask me to save her, but truth be told, I didn't really want to.

"The headmaster said that...the saint is bound to turn into the witch after defeating the previous one. You seemed to know about this from the start, Lady Ellize...but no matter how much I think about it, it doesn't look like you have resolved yourself to the fact that you'll become a witch either. So please... Please answer me honestly! Lady Ellize...do you plan to take your own life after killing Lady Alexia?!"

I smiled at Layla's words.

So close! You almost had it, but it's still not quite right.

I wasn't going to kill myself, but I'd die all the same. The witch's dark powers would be too strong for me to handle.

And I totally intend to live (?) my best (after)life as a NEET thereafter.

You're probably thinking I wasn't attached enough to my life. Honestly, I was aware that my way of thinking was a little different compared to that of most people.

As far as I was concerned, I didn't really care whether I was dead or alive. What mattered to me was that I remained conscious. Disappearing forever and dying were two different things to me. While the former scared me, the latter didn't sound so terrible.

I'd lived a pretty good life while I was on Earth. Thinking back on it, all I'd really done was wait for my death while enjoying myself. I'd surfed the web, played games, and read light novels to my heart's content.

Maybe I had a screw loose, but that was just how I was.

"Please tell me the truth, Lady Ellize...am I—no, me and the rest of the members of your guard—are we just here to lead you to your death?" Layla said, her voice almost breaking. She sounded like she was about to cry.

I stopped to think for a moment. I didn't know what to answer.

It was a bit too early for me to come out. If I told her and it somehow leaked, I'd risk getting cast away. I couldn't have that. I considered Layla to be trustworthy, but I couldn't be completely sure she wouldn't talk.

When the time came, I was fully ready to give Eterna her rightful position back. In fact, I wanted nothing more than for her to bask in the glory she deserved! I was totally, *completely* convinced it was the right course of action.

Layla came from a family that had been serving the saints for generations, and she was very proud of that fact. It was her *raison d'être*, so it must've been difficult for her to accept the fact that she was protecting me only to send me to my death. No doubt she was feeling a bit lost.

I wiped her tears with my hand and tried to give her some peace of mind. "You don't need to worry about this, Layla. You only know a small part of the truth—a part that has been manipulated by kings and queens. I wasn't told anything about any of this either, so it's only natural you didn't know. I just happened to learn the truth by chance."

Yeah... I just happened to pick up the game by chance, so don't sweat it.

I guess I also know the entire meta of the game and all, which is helping me cheat my way through events, but yeah.

“Is there truly no way...to change the fate of the saint? Is every saint doomed...no matter what?”

“No, it can be changed. That’s the very reason I’m here,” I said.

Actually, I had absolutely no idea *why* I was here, but again, don’t sweat it. It made me feel much more motivated now that I felt like this was my divine calling.

That’s right, I’m here to give this game a happy ending!

“Everything will be all right, Layla,” I reassured her. “Your saint won’t die. I’ll make sure to break the cycle with this generation.”



“You’re not lying to me...right? There’s really a way for the saint to live without becoming a witch?”

“There is. I cannot tell you everything in detail, but...please trust me. Stay by my side, Layla.”

Layla’s face brightened, and she hurriedly wiped away her tears.

I didn’t lie, did I? The *saint* wouldn’t die, and she certainly wouldn’t become the witch.

Layla was quite the crybaby, so I was sure she’d mourn me for a while, but I knew she’d get over it quickly enough. After all, she’d have the real saint by her side. Unlike me, she truly was a good girl, not a rotten piece of shit with decent packaging.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel a bit guilty for deceiving her like that.

Layla was meant to serve Eterna, and she’d been training with all her might ever since she was basically a toddler for that reason. And yet, she’d ended up serving a fake—and not just any fake, but a man pretending to be the saint. *What kind of harassment is that, huh?*

My conscience was as tiny as a grain of rice, but it still hurt at the thought of having such a hardworking and outstanding girl work under me for so long.

That was why I really wanted Layla to return to her rightful master once this was all over.

“Everything will be all right,” I repeated. “I promise I’ll create a future where everyone can smile. A true happy ending.”

My plan is perfect! I’m going to become the King of the Pirat— Wait, wrong series. I’m going to become the Purveyor of Happiness!

Chapter 22: The School Dance

These days, the academy was very lively.

Everyone was very excited to see the headmaster—whom everyone hated—banished at long last...oor not.

The position of headmaster had immediately been filled by someone new.

We risked ending up in a similar mess if a knight of the previous saint was picked, so the new headmaster had been chosen from my current guard.

And so, the new headmaster became Viscount Fox, the second most powerful member of my guard. He was in his late thirties, and up until Layla had shown up and defeated him, he'd been leading my guard.

Only skilled individuals who managed to survive a very difficult and selective training got to become knights, but there was still a hierarchy among them.

At the bottom of that hierarchy were the weakest knights. However, even the lowest of knights were more skilled than soldiers and enjoyed a much higher social standing.

While pretty much anyone—including peasants—could become soldiers so long as they wished to, knights had to receive a strict education and graduate with good grades. As a result, they had a much better foundation than soldiers, and besides a few cases of genius soldiers full to the brim with natural talents, knights were overwhelmingly stronger.

Among the knights, the most outstanding individuals—as well as the people who were directly nominated by the saint—got to join the prestigious saint's guard.

There was no real limitation to the number of members, but very few people satisfied the requirements, and the group tended to often lose members in battle. As a result, there usually weren't more than ten people in the group at once.

Joining this elite troop meant you were the cream of the crop. At the moment...my guard consisted of twelve members.

That's quite a lot of people, especially since I don't need them.

Once every year, the members of the saint's guard fought in front of the saint to rank themselves. The strongest of them got to claim the title of head of the guard, which also earned the respect and admiration of every other knight.

The current head was Layla, the one person who was always by my side. My little Scotterbrain was a little goofy at times, but she was still a brilliant young woman.

As for Viscount Fox, he had occupied this prestigious position for quite some time until Layla had come along.

He had also been in charge of my education ever since before I'd become, uh...me. This meant he used to know Ellize back when she'd been an annoying brat. Because of that, I felt a little indebted to him. I couldn't bring myself to act up in his presence.

He was at an age where his strength was starting to decline with the years, and remaining an active knight was starting to be difficult for him. He was aware of that fact as well. In that sense, becoming the headmaster of the academy—a place where he could foster successors—was the best post-retirement position for him.

With this, there were now two members of my guard at the academy.

No wait, since the old man is retiring, he doesn't count anymore. So that means... Layla's still the only one, right? Ummm... Let me get back on track.

Even without a headmaster, the academy had continued to operate in the same way it usually had, and it was particularly lively these days.

The (actual) reason was because of a special event that was set to take place in the great hall today: a dance party.

As explained previously, most of the students of this school were nobles, and for them, learning how to conduct themselves at such parties was a necessary skill. Even the commoners would be expected to attend parties if they became

knights, so basic dance skills were vital to them too. The saint was often invited to parties held by royals, and her guards couldn't embarrass her. They needed a certain command of etiquette.

Needless to say, even though I was a fake, I'd properly learned how to dance after I'd reincarnated in this body.

Anyway, putting aside concerns about rank and whatnot, dancing was one of the few forms of entertainment available in this world. Everyone was keen to participate, even if they weren't nobles.

In most cities, halls existed for the sole purpose of holding dance parties, and from what I'd heard, they were bustling with people every day.

In the past, before dancing had become so popular, people had sparred with each other to pass the time. They'd also organized fights between monsters, or gathered to watch the public executions of sinners. Dancing was a much healthier hobby if you asked me.

Anyway... In the game, this event had very little bearing over the course of the story.

However, there were individual scenes for each heroine, and the affection meter of the girl you invited to dance would go up by *a lot*. This was especially useful when you hadn't managed to raise your affection with the girl you were going for, or when you were trying to switch targets mid-game. I supposed it was the developers' way of giving the player a little push.

Besides the moment when you danced with your girl, another thing to watch out for during the original event was Ellize. She'd pester Verner to try to get him to notice her. Since I had no intention to hit on Verner, there wouldn't be any need to worry about this, though.

Layla called for me. "Lady Ellize, it's almost time to go."

I got up from my bed.

I was currently wearing a pristine white dress.

You could say this was pretty much my uniform as the saint. I'd been wearing my other uniform—the school one—all the time recently, so it felt strange to go

back to dresses like this one. While I wore dresses to play my role to perfection, I actually disliked them. I didn't enjoy the way they fluttered around while I was wearing them.

I mean, I'm a dude inside. Do you think I enjoy wearing frilly dresses? Huh? What's that? Some men do, you say? Like I care! More power to them, but they're the exception, not the rule!

Anyway, I disliked my school uniform way less than the dresses I wore as the saint.

When I arrived at the great hall, there were a ton of students already there. They all dropped whatever they were doing the moment I stepped into the room and turned to look at me.

Hm... Don't mind me, just do your thing, okay?

First, I walked up to the new headmaster.

Yo! Wassup, old man? Congrats on landing the job!

"Dear me, Lady Ellize. Your white dress suits you so well," he praised me.

That's an optical illusion, I promise.

I'd pretty much only ever worn white dresses, so people had been conditioned to think they suited me. Conversely, they'd probably think I looked weird if I suddenly showed up in anything else.

I told him something along those lines and continued to chat with him.

I didn't really like attending dance parties. I was only here because I kinda *had* to be, as a student myself. Well... I didn't *hate* them per se, but I wasn't even remotely interested in dancing.

Layla probably understood that, because she glared at anyone who tried to approach me to ask for a dance and got them to back off.

Speaking of Layla, she was currently wearing a purple dress that suited her very well.

"I heard my daughter caused you a lot of trouble... Thank you for stopping her. Let me apologize on her behalf."

Oh, right, Aina. It's all good, old man, no worries. Pretty girls stirring up a bit of trouble are no problem at all. Don't get me wrong, though—men don't get a pass.

Naturally, I didn't actually say that part about how I wouldn't treat men the same out loud, but, uh...for some reason, the old man was looking at me with such a gentle expression on his face.

What's going on?

"When we talk like this, I can't help but be reminded of all the time I spent with you when you were little."

Someone's feeling nostalgic.

I joked about how I used to be a mischievous little brat, but since I'd only taken control of this body at five, I didn't actually remember anything about it. Before I possessed (?) her body, Ellize had been the one in control, not me.

Even though I had no recollection of that time, I could still tell how things had been by everyone's reactions and the knowledge I had of the game. Ellize must've been a pain in the ass.

In the game, little Ellize never hesitated to bully servants she didn't like...and to make *other* servants bully them as well for good measure. She also liked to pretend people had been mean to her so her knights would punish them.

I don't know how they didn't abandon me before I turned five.

"Are you two talking about Lady Ellize's childhood?" Layla stepped in. "I'd love to know more about how she was as a child."

"She grew up into a fine young lady, but that wasn't always the case, you see," the Viscount started.

Uh, old man... You can stop here.

"She was incredibly selfish and...wild. Yes, wild would be a good way of describing her," he continued. "She'd never thank people, she'd lift the maids' skirts, she'd run around without listening to anybody...and then she'd suddenly stop moving and refuse to even get out of bed. She'd bring all of her things into her bed and claim she'd never need to take a step outside again. Whenever she

saw a male domestic worker, she'd cry and say she was scared of men, so we even had to replace the servants. Oh, and when we tried to get her to study, she'd scribble all over the material. Plus—”



Huh? What? Did she really used to be like that?

That wasn't quite what Ellize's childhood was supposed to have been like.

"She was very willful too. No matter what sort of dishes we brought her, she'd complain that it tasted bad, or that it was too bland. She once went to yell at the chef and told him that she refused to drink sheep milk. 'It has to come from a cow or I don't want it,' she'd said. She'd also refuse to eat bread because it was too hard. Whenever the maids tried to bathe her, she'd scream that she wanted to soak in hot water, so we had a tub especially made for her. We asked why she wanted to do that, but she simply answered that she didn't know, but she 'couldn't put up with this' unless things were done her way. She was quite stubborn—"

That's...weird. She didn't do anything evil, then?

From what the old man was saying, she sounded willful and selfish, but...her tantrums were all quite harmless compared to what I remembered Ellize doing. She was annoying all right, but like...not in the same way?

The original Ellize was supposed to be selfish, violent, and twisted. She was shrewd and always found new ways to torment people. On the other hand, the child that Viscount Fox was describing was just a little idiot. She sounded like a brat that simply whined and complained to get what she wanted without thinking.

The old man didn't notice how perplexed I was and continued his story, bringing a tissue to his eyes.

"On top of this, she had a strange manner of talking. Even when her words were polite, she spoke in a rough, almost masculine way. She was a little tomboy, really..."

"I can't imagine Lady Ellize acting like that at all..."

"It must be hard to picture when you see her today," he said. "But that's why I'm so proud of her. I'm happy she grew up into such a refined young lady..."

What the...? No, that doesn't make any sense.

The Ellize he'd just described was definitely still a brat and a piece of shit in

the making, but...she was nothing like the original.

If anything...she was a lot like me.

If I had been reincarnated into this world without my memories, I would most likely have acted like that. Those were totally the sort of stunts I'd pull.

Wait. Then...maybe...

Maybe the only difference between the "me" before and the "me" after I was five was...my memories?

Maybe I've been Ellize from the very start.



After Ellize had appeared in the great hall, the atmosphere of the party had completely changed. Everyone had been so taken by her the moment she'd stepped into the room that it had almost been as if time had stopped.

From that point onward, everyone had started keeping their neighbor in check. For those who strove to become knights, escorting the saint and dancing with her was considered the greatest honor. That meant the other people in the room were all rivals—*enemies*.

Everyone remained on the lookout, ready to strike down the competition while waiting for the perfect opportunity to make their own move.

The first challenger was Supple Ment, the academy's most renowned degenerate.

The second he'd tried to approach Ellize, the other teachers and students simultaneously had drop-kicked him, preventing him from acting like the savage he was. Even though he hadn't done anything, everyone knew what kind of pervert he was—*surely* he'd had a salacious goal in mind.

Thus, the first challenger was defeated.

The second challenger was John, a former soldier and first-year student. Although he'd recently entered the academy, he was already twenty years old.

Layla's glare had immediately deterred him, and he soon returned to his seat, his face sour.

Next, three students stood up all at once—Abun, Chof, and Ekkstraz. They glared at each other, each deciding it was best to stop the other before actually asking Ellize for a dance. They were oddly synchronized. So much so, in fact, that they punched each other out at the exact same time. Their friendship would most likely end after today.

After them, several other men tried their luck. Some were beaten up by fellow students or teachers, while others lost the will to fight after seeing Layla's icy expression.

However, one student rose among the fallen men. He stepped over the corpses of his rivals, masterfully dodged the rolling bodies on the floor, and easily faced the adversaries who'd come to stop him with his bulging muscles.

He completely ignored Layla and walked up to Ellize.

Who was this man, you ask? Verner, naturally.

"Lady Ellize, may I ask you for a dance?"

At that moment, Verner became a hero, respected by every other man in the room, as well as their common enemy, someone they swore to take down.

Chapter 23: A Little Talk between Me and I

Is he for real? He didn't hesitate to come to me at all.

Verner could've gone to Eterna, the main heroine; Marie, the most popular character in the game; Aina, the fiery tsundere; or Layla, the straight-laced older-sister character...and yet, he'd ignored them all to come straight to *me*.

Are you blind, boy?

In my "dreams," I'd learned that this world was following the most bullshit of all routes—the Ellize one.

But like...why? What kinda troll route is this?

I kind of understood why, as a matter of fact. Leaving aside my actual personality, I was doing a stellar job of pretending to be a perfect saint, and Ellize looked damn cute. While the inside was rotten to the core, I was using magic to keep myself looking artificially perfect.

In a way, the fact that people liked me meant that my efforts had all been worth it, and that I was doing great. However, at the end of the day, it was all still an act. Neither my personality nor my body were the real deal—I was a fake through and through.

Isn't the main character supposed to be able to, you know, see interior beauty and whatnot?

There were plenty of stories where the protagonist was the only one to see through the awful personality of a pretty villainous girl pretending to be nice.

You're supposed to spot strange things immediately! Like, hmm... People buying a single pack of cigarettes at the convenience store with a thousand yen bill! You know, like in that one detective anime! Look, Verner, you're making the worst possible choice! This event is your chance to get onto a better route!

This dance party had only been added to the game to help the player get enough affection from the girl of their choice.

It's your last chance to avoid this land mine, you hear me?! Are you sure you wanna confirm this choice? You'll regret it! Go pick someone else, all right?

"Lady Ellize, someone is asking you for a dance," the old man said cheerfully. He seemed to be very impressed with Verner, who'd dared to invite me in spite of the event's tense atmosphere.

Urgh... Continuing to ignore him wouldn't be good for my image, right? Should I just say no?

It was good manners for a lady to dance with the men who invited her for at least one song, but it didn't mean I couldn't refuse if I really didn't want to.

There were plenty of perfectly acceptable reasons to refuse an invitation to dance, like having to go to the toilet, having an injured ankle, feeling under the weather, or even feeling threatened because your prospective partner was too drunk, just to name a few.

The issue was that I felt fine, and Verner was neither threatening nor drunk. On top of that...if I refused him in front of all these people, he'd feel ashamed, wouldn't he...?

Guess I don't have a choice. Just one song, though! I'll show you how skilled someone who's taken part in the Bon Festival dance every year is! Bon dance isn't really a thing here, but oh well.

After I'd danced with Verner, I asked Layla to join me. I wanted to try doing the male part of the dance at least once, but she immediately took on the man's role.

I don't get it.

After I'd danced with Layla, I pretended to be tired and plopped down on a chair. No one dared to bother me in that state.

As the end of the night drew near, more and more couples got together and snuck out to watch the night sky.

They're so young. How nice. Who am I kidding? I hope you all die in an explosion.

I decided to go out as well and do the same thing.

The air was so clean in this world that I could see the stars very well. They were beautiful, but now that I was looking at them carefully, I noticed how different the constellations were.

While I was staring at the stars, Verner and Eterna stepped out together.

Oh? Yes! Good going, Verner! Does this mean there's still hope for you and Eterna? Let me help out a little, then!

I used light magic and tweaked a few things until... *Perfect, here's a meteor shower for you!*

"Wow!"

"Look, look!"

"A shooting star!"

"Amazing!"

The students who'd been watching the night sky started getting excited about the meteor shower and cheered.

It wasn't an actual meteor shower—I was just blasting light magic around, but it looked convincing enough. As long as I kept my mouth shut, they'd be able to enjoy this memory forever.

However, Verner seemed to notice immediately and turned to look at me.

Was I too obvious? Don't sweat it, Verner! Just pretend you didn't notice. It looks pretty good for a fake meteor shower.

"Yes... Truly...beautiful."

You have a good eye, dear sir. You made the right call. You should pretend you don't know anything and enjoy yourself at times like this.



The party came to an end, and I went back to my room to sleep.

However, right as I closed my eyes, I found myself in a familiar apartment once again.

I stood up and looked around until I spotted Fudou Niito (me). He was looking

at me.

“Yo, Ellize. You’re back. I was waiting for you.”

“Sup, me? This is really...the continuation of my previous dream, right?”

“I told you already, this isn’t a dream.”

It is and it isn’t, he’d said before I’d woken up last time.

I was inclined to believe him. It definitely wasn’t usual to see the same dream so often. It wasn’t even the “same” dream—it’d be more accurate to say that they were linked and I saw the next part each time.

“Let’s cut to the chase and continue our discussion. There’s no telling when you’ll wake up, when we’ll get to talk again...or even how many times we have left.”

“What d’ya mean—”

“Hang on. I’ll explain everything, so just listen... Actually, can I ask you something first? Please stop speaking like that. It feels so weird. Can’t you talk like you always do on the other side?”

Sheesh, he’s so demanding. Well, I guess he is me, so that makes sense, but still!

I kinda understood where he was coming from. It must’ve felt weird to hear me talk like a dude with that face. Plus, if I got used to talking like my old self again, I’d risk slipping in the other world too. Might as well do what he wanted.

“It would seem like I have no choice... Are you satisfied now?”

“Yup, perfect. I totally feel like I’m talking to the actual Ellize. If you weren’t me on the inside, I might’ve fallen for you.”

“You’re so damn gross. Forget it—where’s the fun in selfcest?”

“Meh, you’re not wrong.” He shrugged. “Don’t worry, I’m not actually interested. Personality’s just as important when it comes to pretty girls.”

It was refreshing to talk with my dumb other self, and I found myself laughing. I always had to act on the other side, and that got tiring at times. Being able to just be myself was a nice change of pace.

“So, where was I...? Oh right, we were talking about your identity. First of all, I don’t think you transmigrated into Ellize’s body at five. The version of the game where you’ve changed everything *does* say that Ellize suddenly turned a new leaf at five, but what we learn about her behavior before then makes it clear that she still wasn’t like the original at all. She was a selfish brat, so that much’s the same, but she wasn’t as twisted. To be honest, the stuff she used to do just sounds like what I would’ve most likely done if I’d been reincarnated into that world without any knowledge of the game.”

“I see we’re on the same page here... I also thought the same thing after hearing about my childhood from Fox.”

“Right. I think everything started on the night when I fell asleep after watching the ending of Eterna’s route. I think I died on that day. I’m not really sure how to explain it, but I felt myself falling into a deep, pitch-black abyss, and I just knew... I felt it in my gut. But then, somehow I started breathing again. I think that’s when my soul split into two. Part of it had already left this world to be reincarnated, but part of it remained in my body. Now...there’s two of us,” Niito (me) proudly declared, pushing up his blue light-blocking glasses with one finger.

He was talking about the whole thing like it made total sense, but the very premise was completely insane.

That being said, I was here; that much was a fact. We had no choice but to assume that reincarnation was indeed a realistic possibility. If we rejected that idea, we’d be stuck.

“In short, our soul was severed in two before it finished reincarnating. I think your spirit keeps coming here because it’s trying to recover what it lost,” he concluded.

“You think I’m here to recover the missing part of my soul? But then you—”

“Exactly. My understanding is that every time you appear here, you take back part of my soul. That means my death is growing closer with each of your visits. That’s why I told you I didn’t know how many times we had left. Eventually, my soul will fully integrate with yours, and this body will die,” Niito (me) said with a lighthearted tone.

He tapped his chest, right where his heart was located. It made him sound like he didn't care about dying. Well, that much was true. He was me, so I knew that for sure. Niito (me) had accepted his upcoming death from the very start.

After all...

"It doesn't really matter, though. I'll be dead within the year anyway, so having my soul go to you doesn't sound like a bad option. I'm being promised a new life in another world—that's as cool as it gets, right? Can't say I'm too thrilled about turning into a girl, though."

After all, his body wouldn't hold on for much longer. Fudou Niito had been waiting for his death from the start.

I'd been told I only had one year left. The only choice I'd been given was whether to spend that time at home, or in a hospital bed. I'd decided to stay home and go to the hospital when the end was truly near. At least I got to indulge in my hobbies that way—they were all I had left.

That might've been why I longed for happy endings so badly, even in games. Real life was trash, so I wanted to daydream and see happiness in fiction, at the very least.

I'm not scared of death in the slightest... Fudou Niito has no future anyway. I just don't want to disappear like this, with no comfort of any sort.

"But... The timeline doesn't make sense to me. I've spent several years in that world already," I said.

"The flow of time must be different. You've lived as Ellize for over ten years, but only a month has gone by here."

"You said that the game changed after I entered it. How come no one's shocked about it?"

"Everyone else seems to think that it was always like that. They don't know Ellize used to be a piece of shit, and they don't know the original plot of the game."

The answers Niito (me) gave me didn't surprise me in the slightest.

If time flowed at the same speed in both worlds, Niito (me) would've been

long dead. Plus, there would've been a huge uproar if people remembered the original contents of the game.

Since I'd personally confirmed that neither of these things had happened, I could only draw logical conclusions.

"How many times do you think we have left?" I asked.

"I can't say... But probably not more than five, at best. Every time you come here, I end up seeing your life in my dreams. At first, I felt like I was watching someone else's story unfold. Recently, though, it almost feels like I'm Ellize. Even after I wake up, this world doesn't quite feel real anymore. I'm slowly losing track of the distinction between dreams and reality..."

"I see..."

"All right, now that we're on the same page, let's move on to the actual important stuff," Niito (me) said, waking up his computer from sleep mode and opening a *Kuon no Sanka* fansite.

"Players have been looking for ways to deal with the witch's teleportation ability. Even before Ellize's route was discovered, there were heated arguments about it. Someone's got a pretty good idea," he said, typing on his keyboard until he found what he was looking for.

I took a look at the screen and let out a surprised noise.

602 Nameless Knight/ 10/25 (Sun.) / 00:20:14

Ok, so, I've been thinking about this a lot but, at the end of the day, teleport is a magic spell, right? Wouldn't removing all the mana around the witch solve the issue?

Lady El could put up a barrier that blocks mana all around the academy. Then she'd just need to absorb all the mana left within the barrier. Lady El can release her mana outside the barrier before she absorbs everything inside.

603 Nameless Knight/ 10/25 (Sun.) / 00:21:06

>602

That wouldn't work. Even if there's no mana left around her, the witch can use the mana inside her body to teleport.

She wouldn't be able to recover any mana, but that's about it. Getting rid of the witch's own mana is the first thing to do.

604 Nameless Knight/ 10/25 (Sun.) / 00:22:22

>603

What if someone else fights the witch first? They don't have to kill her, just tire her enough so that she doesn't have enough mana inside her to teleport. Then, >602's plan might work.

To give a telling example, they were pretty much asking me to suck in the air in the room until I filled my lungs to their max capacity.

What am I, Star Platinum?

When using a magic spell, you'd use the mana contained in your body. The amount you could hold inside you was different for everyone, and it would impact the power of your spells. In other words, the quantity of mana you could hold inside your body was very important.

To speak in game terms, the same spell could end up being much more destructive if you were able to use more MP when casting it. If a regular person had one MP, a knight would have around a hundred, and a member of my guard around two hundred. As for me...I'd have roughly five hundred thousand MP.

...My power level is 530,000. But fret not, I don't plan to fight you at my full capacity.

If I used around a thousand MP to blast out a magic spell, someone with a total capacity of less than a thousand wouldn't be able to block it, no matter what.

I estimated the witch probably had...about a thousand MP at worst and

around three thousand MP at best.

However, the witch was supposed to be very skilled at circulating her mana, so she was able to quickly absorb the surrounding mana to replenish her reserves.

Her maximum output for one spell would never exceed three thousand, but she could pretty much use magic indefinitely.

I was also pretty good at circulating my mana, so I could pretty much do the same thing without any limits.

With that plan, I'd be able to prevent the witch from replenishing her mana. Even if she was good at it, she wouldn't be able to absorb any mana if there wasn't any around.

Figuring out the perfect timing would be a bit tricky, but having someone else fight her first was a great idea. They'd have to force her to use as much mana as possible so that she wouldn't have enough left to teleport. Then, if I succeeded in putting up a barrier and absorbing all of the mana contained within, she'd be left unable to escape.

I had a big enough mana reserve that it was doable. I could drain the entire area around the witch if I tried.

This...might work... No, it definitely will!

Chapter 24: Hidden from View

“Y’know, I’ve been thinking...why don’t we just watch videos that show the end of Ellize’s route? Then we’d know everything. Boy, am I ever smart,” I suggested after we’d finished discussing our anti-teleportation plan.

It was still subject to change, but we’d decided to go with the magic vacuum strategy for now. Still, I was convinced we’d be better armed to handle the situation if we watched Ellize’s route until the end instead of speaking in hypothetical terms. Wouldn’t it be easier to plan for the future if we actually *knew* the future?

Niito (me) sneered at my genius idea. “Do you *really* think I wouldn’t have already done that if it was possible? How much dumber can you get?”

“Hey! You wanna fight?!” I snapped.

“Just look at this,” he said, opening the usual video platform we used in a new window.

He typed “Ellize,” and a video titled “【SHOCKING】Ellize Route Let’s Play LAST PART” appeared at the top of the list.

That was *exactly* the kinda video I was talking about! Watching that would help us know what to expect.

Niito (me) clicked on the link.

Obviously, an ad started playing before we could start watching. *Boring*. After the ad ended, the loading mark kept going round and round. The video wouldn’t load no matter how long we waited. The comments were in the same state—I couldn’t read any of them.

“That site’s always been super laggy. Just check another video platform.”

“A sound argument,” he agreed, opening another site and trying to load a similar video.

Just like on the previous website, the video didn’t start, and we couldn’t read

the comments either. He pulled out his smartphone, but the exact same thing happened. No matter what he tried, the videos wouldn't load.

That wasn't the most disturbing part—even the websites where people usually posted spoilers wouldn't work. Most pages were completely empty, and we couldn't even get the bulletin boards to open.

However, when it came to threads that discussed events I was already aware of—the dance party, for instance—the comments showed up without any issues.

"The whole internet's like this. I've tried everything, but I just can't access any spoilers. Even when I play the game myself, it'll automatically shut itself down when I reach a certain point. I only recently became able to access information about the dance party as well," he explained.

"What the hell?!"

"You're back to speaking like a dude," he pointed out. "Anyway, the point is that we can't look up the future. My best guess is that it's because nothing is set in stone yet... Probably."

"But we could watch Eterna's route, right?"

Niito (me) had just told me we couldn't look up the future, but last time we hadn't had any problems watching videos of Eterna's route. The ending hadn't been very positive—to say the least—but it still counted in a way, didn't it?

"Eterna's route'll never come to pass in your world. That's probably why we can watch it. While it *is* a potential future, it hasn't been chosen in the world where you're Ellize. We're most likely looking at a parallel universe that, uh...developed differently. Since Eterna's route wasn't chosen, it only exists as a scenario that *could* have been. That one's already set in stone, but you're still in the middle of creating Ellize's path. It doesn't have a set ending yet, so we can't see it. Got it?"

"Sorry, but no. Huh?"

Niito (me) sighed. "All right, just get one thing through your head—Ellize's route is a work in progress." He paused before adding, "Aren't you a little slow on the uptake, though? Maybe it's because our soul got split into two..."

He played a video showing the dance party. Obviously, everything was shown through Verner's eyes. The player got to pick who to dance with, and they selected Ellize's name.

The dance scene was a CG, which was quickly followed by the meteor shower scene. While I had no way of knowing what he'd been thinking while the event had happened, the player got to read Verner's thoughts.

Verner: (Shooting stars... They're beautiful. I can't help but think the timing is a little too perfect, though... Wait! Could Lady Ellize have something to do with it...?)

Ellize: Oh my. Did you see through me? I did use a tiny bit of magic but please keep it a secret, all right?

Ellize: It might only be a party trick, but the night sky is beautiful with all these stars decorating it. Wouldn't you agree, Verner?

Verner: (Lady Ellize looked up at the night sky. I could see her profile, lit up by the starlight. She looked right out of a fairytale, almost ethereal. She's truly...)

Verner: Yes... Truly...beautiful.

Verner: (I couldn't stop my heart from losing itself in her beauty.)

YIIIIIIIIKES!!! WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THIS?! URGH! DO YOU WANT ME TO DIE OF EMBARRASSMENT?! My mental state takes 9999 damage! It's super effective! STAHP! My sanity meter'll never recover!

Niito (me) looked at me rolling on the futon and cringing with a grin on his face.

"Look at you, acting like a proper waifu!" He laughed. "This is a riot! Little Verner's gonna be all over you, y'know?"

“Shut uuuuuuuuuup!!!”

No way. There was just no way! I couldn't accept that Verner had been thinking...*THAT*...while we'd talked.



Ellize

ht only be a party trick, but the night sky is beautiful with
ese stars decorating it. Wouldn't you agree, Verner?

Niito (me) stopped paying attention to me—I was still trying to recover from the blow I'd just taken—and settled into his chair before opening another page. It was part of a guide that displayed the characters' stat sheets. It also listed all their skills—Verner, Eterna, what's-his-face, Fiora, Marie, Aina, and Four-eyed Pervert. The whole gang.

"So, which one should we get to fight the witch?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"What do you mean, 'Huh?' Did you forget our entire conversation already? We need someone other than Ellize to fight the witch first so she uses up as much MP as possible. That's the only way to stop her from teleporting away. Which means...we need to figure out who should do that. If we just send some random character in without giving it any thought, we'll just end up with more dead bodies," he explained. "What, did you really think you could go back without a plan?"

I was sitting on the futon in the traditional way, with my legs tucked beneath me, as I listened to him.

To be fully honest, I was pretty damn worried at the idea of letting *any* of them fight the witch.

That wasn't to say they had no hope of winning. In the original game, Ellize never took part in that battle, but Verner's party had managed to take the witch down all the same. On top of that, I wouldn't be asking them to kill the witch. They'd just need to tire her out—a fairly simple mission.

However, there was still a good chance one of them would die during the fight. In most routes, Alexia was the final boss. She couldn't be underestimated.

"How about sending a large force of knights?" I suggested.

"You'd just be announcing to the witch that you know exactly where she is. She'll flee. The witch is scared shitless of you. Did you forget? If she thinks there's a chance you might attack her, she'll run away immediately."

"Isn't the witch being a little too wimpy?"

"You're just too damn strong. Your stats are a joke. I couldn't stop laughing

when I played you during the fight against Farah. Anyone would run away.”

Was Alexia even still the final boss? I was starting to doubt it. *What kind of final boss acts like a wuss? If even sending a bunch of knights freaks her out, what am I supposed to do, huh?*

“The witch is so scared of you that she almost disappeared from the game too,” Niito (me) added.

“What do you mean?”

“You know how Alexia is supposed to return to her senses from time to time and appear in certain places so you can get her route? Well, she doesn’t do that anymore.”

I was dumbfounded.

Girl, you’re that scared?!

As Niito (me) had just pointed out, the witch was supposed to come out of the basement a few times over the course of the game. There’d be no way to romance her if she didn’t.

The only way to get on Alexia’s route was to one, make sure not to miss said rare chances—you needed to use them to raise her affection level—and two, make sure her affection level remained the highest until the moment when the routes split into different storylines.

The biggest obstacle to successfully hopping onto the Alexia route was Eterna. Even if you didn’t do anything to raise Eterna’s affection, her base parameter was still higher than the maximum you could get with Alexia by answering her perfectly every time you saw her. That meant you had to actively lower Eterna’s affection level by being cold to her.

My poor darling...

Anyway, I’d seen quite a few players turn Verner into a monster who gifted Eterna fossilized dragon shit on her birthday to achieve this.

Then wouldn’t it be easier to do Alexia’s route on your first run, you ask? After all, Eterna’s route only existed from the second run onward, so she wouldn’t be an obstacle the first time around. Well, the thing was...you only

unlocked Alexia's route from the second run onward as well.

You could *technically* talk to Alexia during your first run, but you couldn't get on her route even if you satisfied the conditions. Instead, her dialogue slightly changed right before you fought her, so you'd think, *Maybe I could've saved Alexia if I'd done better.*

Now that I was Ellize, though, Alexia had stopped coming out of the basement. That, in turn, had erased her route from the game.

"Speaking of which, could you tell me what happens after I rush in and make the witch flee? In the other routes, I mean. I know about Eterna's," I asked.

"The witch goes into hiding somewhere else and starts gathering monsters again. She sends one of them to kill Eterna's parents. Eterna gets mad, awakens her powers as the saint, and uses her new abilities to track down the witch. She kills her and ends up becoming the final boss herself, just like in the version of the game you know."

"Can't my poor little Eterna stop suffering? The whole world's against her."

"The worst part is that the witch's hiding place isn't revealed in the game, so be careful not to let her slip away."

Misfortune still followed Eterna, no matter what.

I should take Eterna's parents under my protection, and... Actually, making sure to kill the witch while she's still in the academy would be the best option. But I'll still try to pay a little more attention to Eterna's parents and make sure they're okay.

"One last thing—you'll need to be wary of the witch's dark powers. They'll come out after she dies. If you mess up and let the powers escape, everything will come to naught."

"There are two ways to permanently seal them off in the game. The first is to have someone other than the saint deal the finishing blow," I stated.

"Yeah. That only happens in the bad ending, but it should work. Only you or Verner can accomplish that, but...the one who does will die."

Niito (me) had finally brought up the crux of the issue. If we let the curse of

the witch reach Eterna, everything would be ruined. She'd turn into the final boss...and follow her tragic fate.

"By the way, did anyone ever figure out what that laugh meant? The one from the bad ending," I asked.

"No. It's still a complete mystery. I think it was just there for show, but...who knows? The official website doesn't mention it at all."

The bad ending—in which Verner killed the witch and broke the cycle before dying—actually ended on an unsettling note. After Verner died and his party members had shed their tears, the ending credits rolled...until they were suddenly interrupted. The screen would turn black, a strange laugh with a lot of voice effects applied to it would echo, and a cacophony would follow—sounds of an explosion, buildings crashing, people screaming, and all that. Finally, you ended up on the title screen again.

No one knew whose laugh it was, nor what the short scene was supposed to mean.

"The second option is...the witch's suicide," Niito (me) said.

"Yeah, Eterna did that..."

As I'd mentioned time and time again, the witch couldn't normally kill herself. Her dark powers kept her from doing so.

However, Eterna had succeeded. She'd done it after having been possessed by the curse for a very short time—which I assumed meant it hadn't fully merged with her—and after a long, strenuous fight with Verner that had exhausted most of her powers. As a result, Eterna couldn't pass on the curse to a new saint. She'd broken the cycle.

This ending was one of the only ways to keep the heroine you'd picked alive until the very end. Usually, your waifu would die before the end, but thanks to Eterna's suicide, you could obtain a happy ending with a handful of the girls.

That was out of the question for me, though. My goal was a true happy ending. I absolutely refused to let Eterna take her own life!

"Monsters are able to kill the saint, so how about we get a monster to finish

the witch?” Niito (me) proposed.

“I don’t think that would work,” I shot him down. “The monsters are on the witch’s side. On top of that, some of them are quite tough *and* have an affinity for dark magic. If they ended up surviving the witch’s curse, they might evolve into something unthinkable. I’m fairly sure they’d still be weaker than me, but still...”

Monsters were completely under the witch’s control. They wouldn’t attack her, that was crazy.

“Speaking of which, didn’t Dias ask you to save Alexia? What are you gonna do about that?” he asked.

“What do you want me to do? You know it’s not that easy... It wouldn’t be completely impossible if I was able to follow Alexia’s route, but...”

“After Alexia’s dark powers went into Eterna’s body, Verner used mouth-to-mouth to give his own dark powers to Alexia, right?”

“Exactly. Verner’s powers came from Alexia’s soul, after all—the part she cut off along with what remained of her conscience. Alexia was able to revive thanks to that, and she went back to being herself... Sadly, Eterna dies on that route too. What’s worse, she has to watch Verner and Alexia flirting before she passes on...” I lamented with a sigh.

“She’s really suffered way too much...”

The witch route was the one that had left me with the worst aftertaste. Alexia got to leave her traumatic experience as the witch behind and live as a human again, but just thinking about how Eterna must’ve felt broke my heart.

Why are you pretending like nothing’s your fault and flirting with Verner, huh?! I know nothing’s actually your fault...but still!

If you looked at things from Eterna’s perspective, the villainous MILF—who’d destroyed a good chunk of the world—suddenly pushed all the burdens onto her lap before stealing her boyfriend. On top of that, she had to take the other woman’s position as humanity’s common enemy while Alexia got her happily-ever-after ending.

Eterna, feel free to cry, my dear.

Anyway, that was why I wasn't fond of Alexia's route. I *had* completed it once for the sake of CG collection, though.

"Then I guess there's no choice..."

"I'll have to be the one to kill the witch," I added.

"Are you sure you're okay with that? You've been reincarnated into a healthy body. Don't you want to live?"

"I've never been the type who clings to his life. Plus, continuing to live as the perfect saint would be tiring. It's better for me to exit stage left before blowing my cover. My body doesn't have very long to live anyway. Plus, that world and the people in it..." The faces of Layla, Verner, and the others I'd met during the past decade started popping into my mind. I smiled. "I've started to like them a lot, you know? If my death can help them obtain happiness then... I don't mind. I won't have any regrets."

I was a hopeless case, but even trash like me felt inspired to do something good before the end. I wanted them to have a bright future. And I owed them an apology for messing with their destinies, didn't I?

I was supposed to have died already, so I'd give them whatever I had left. My batteries were almost dead, anyway. There was no point holding on to life now. If anything, I'd gotten more than I had bargained for. I'd only been supposed to live for one more year, but I'd gotten over *twelve*. What was there to regret?

Right after I'd asserted my intention to kill the witch myself, my vision started going white.

I guess that's it for today. Time to go back to my perfect saint persona, then. I'll do my best till the end.

Chapter 25: Royalty on the Move

Time to shake things up and start preparing to fight the witch! Yeah!

Thanks to my dream, I now had a plan to prevent the witch from teleporting: the yes-I'm-relying-on-others-super-duper-vacuum plan!

The first step would be to send someone to the basement to fight the witch and get her to waste her MP.

I couldn't ask Layla...or any other knight, for that matter. If the witch understood that I knew where she was hiding, she'd flee.

This damn scaredy-cat!

We had to make her think that a student or teacher had lost their way and ended up in the basement by chance. She'd be afraid that they'd blabber to me after escaping, so naturally she'd try to dispose of them right there and then.

The only issue was that, while she was a freaking wuss, she was still the final boss. Pitting a regular student against her was akin to sending them to their death.

Verner and his party could take her on in the game—Verner could even defeat her on his own from the second run onward—but it was still best to remain cautious. The witch *was* strong.

What to do then, you ask? There was only one answer—train Verner and the others and make them even stronger.

To achieve that, I'd asked the old man and Layla to coach them in secret when they had time.

If you're wondering why it had to remain secret, it was because I didn't want the other students whining that Verner and his friends were getting preferential treatment.

I was also wondering if there were other students who, like Marie, were already as strong as some knights.

I should look into the second and third-year students who did well in the tournament.

Oh, and since we'd taken over Dias's contact network, we also had to think of a way to use it to our advantage. The witch still had no idea we'd arrested Dias and his allies, so she was still using the Stil's birds to communicate with them. Naturally, the person answering her wasn't Dias anymore—it was Four-Eyed Pervert. Thanks to him, I knew exactly what the witch was thinking.

Leaving such an important task to someone like him made me a little uneasy, but I was pretty sure he wouldn't leak my information to the witch even though he was a pervert.

H-He wouldn't, right?

The witch was currently scheming to find a way to force me to leave the academy. Her newest idea was to have one of her subordinates pretend to be her and go on a rampage somewhere far away.

If we played our cards well, we could use that against her. That was why, for the time being, I'd asked Four-Eyed Pervert to play along and help the witch think of a good plan to draw me out. I'd also instructed him to feed her false intel. He'd told her I had yet to notice anything shady about the basement.

And, hm... That was pretty much it, actually.

For now, we were waiting for Verner and his friends to get stronger and keeping an eye out for other promising students. Then, we'd be able to carry out the plan.

We had all the time in the world. The second part of the game—from the end of the summer holiday to the winter holiday—was pretty much dedicated to Ellize and all the problems she'd caused in the original game. As long as I didn't bother Verner myself, everything should remain peaceful enough.

After the winter holiday, though, the real challenge would begin. At that point in the original game, the witch would start going all out in order to kill the newly established saint—Eterna. She'd send tons of assassins after her, and if you made the wrong choices, some of the heroines would die.

That said, I intended to remain in the position of the saint, so I expected the

plot would be changing a lot.

The rocking of the carriage jolted me out of my reverie. I was currently on the way back to my castle.

I hadn't wanted to return in the slightest, but the royal families of several countries were getting together for a ceremonial dinner in order to "reinforce their connections" or something. The saint's castle didn't belong to any one country—or rather, it had ties with every single country—which made it the ideal place for such talks.

Anyway, I'd been summoned too and had to attend.

Why do I have to be "invited" to my own castle?

It was kind of ridiculous. Imagine someone asking you to attend their party before telling you, "Oh, by the way, we're throwing it at your place."

Who's inviting who, huh? I'm the host, all right?!

As far as I was concerned, I would've preferred it if they'd thrown their party in some faraway country and left me alone.

Urgh... I don't wannaaaaa...

I'd told Verner and the others I'd be back soon, but I really wished that "soon" was now. I'd have to spend hours sitting at the dinner table smiling at old men while pretending to be having the time of my life. Plus, I had to be even more careful than usual with my perfect saint persona when I was around big shots; it was exhausting.

As soon as I reached my castle, I ordered my servants to prepare for the royal families' arrivals and to get some food ready. Then, I headed to the kitchen myself. I'd received a request, so I was going to bake a large cake and cover it with whipped cream. I could use magic to make the process shorter, but it was still a pain. Since I was keeping the recipe secret, I couldn't even get anyone to help me.

I did what I could to get the castle ready. Before long, the royals started arriving.

"It's been a long time, Lady Ellize. You're beautiful as always," King Aiz of the

Bilberry Kingdom greeted me.

While his name made him sound cool, he was just a muscular old man with gray hair. I could never tell what the old geezer was thinking, so I didn't like him much.

The academy was actually located in the Bilberry Kingdom. It was the most powerful and influential country around here. My birth village—in other words, the village in which Eterna had also been born and raised in—was also part of the Bilberry Kingdom. Most of the main characters, including Verner, Eterna, and I, were Bilberrian. Layla wasn't, though—she'd come from abroad to attend the academy.

While the saint was supposed to remain neutral to avoid tipping the balance of power, the knights who were in charge of her protection technically belonged to the Bilberry Kingdom, which went to show how shaky that neutrality was. To give a telling example in modern terms, the Bilberry Kingdom was pretty much the United States of America of this world.

Anyway... Behind him were his sons, the princes. They were all pretty different; one was fat, the second looked like a pretty boy, and the third was all jacked and manly. While their appearances were widely different, they all looked at me in the same disgusting way. I could see the lust in their eyes.

I couldn't say anything, though. These people were royalty.

"Thank you for welcoming us, O holy saint. Please accept this magical blue rose. We grew it carefully for you. As I thought, beautiful roses can only suit someone as gorgeous as yourself."

The guy who'd just given me the weird-colored flower in the most pompous manner possible was the king of...somewhere. The previous king had recently passed away from an illness, and this guy had succeeded him...or something like that. I didn't really care, to be honest.

"Oho ho ho! I see you haven't changed at all, Lady Ellize," another king commented, laughing cheerfully. His expression was friendly, but I could see his good humor didn't extend to his eyes.

"Leooooon, I want to eat some cloud!"

“Ha ha ha, worry not! You shall have some, my lovely Elly!”

The two idiots who’d come in flirting with each other were the king and queen of God-knows-where. They’d only recently gotten married. The queen had been born in a minor noble house, but she’d risen to power because the king had fallen madly in love with her. The king’s former fiancée—some villainess or something?—had been kicked out after their engagement had fallen through. Honestly, it all sounded like the plot of some drama.

At any rate, the two of them felt very out of place.

Guys, we’re in a dating sim targeted at men, not in some otome game, okay?!

Leaving that aside, I’d heard their country was on the brink of collapse because of a dire economic crisis.

I mean, that’s what you get for putting a queen who’s never been educated for the job on the throne.

“Oh my! I’d heard rumors but you’re even more beautiful than they say! How about a drink with me tonight?” an old man with a topknot asked, flirting with me even though it was the very first time we’d met.

His clothes were somewhat reminiscent of Japanese-style clothes...

No, actually, they’re totally Japanese-style clothes.

He seemed to be from a small archipelago called Giappon located in the east, beyond the sea.

Why’s there always a pseudo-Japan if you go east in 99% of fantasy worlds?

The last king to greet me was the one from the Lutein Kingdom. “Lady Ellize... Once again, please let me thank you for what you did for us.”

Yo! You look a little down bro. What’s wrong? Constipation?

“Lady Ellize, this gathering is... No, never mind.”

He seemed to have something to tell me, but he ended up walking away without saying anything, a gloomy expression on his face.

What’s uuuup?! I’m super curious now! It’s not nice to leave me hanging like this!



The gathering proceeded in an amicable atmosphere. Well, the countries that were currently seeking help because of their struggles with economic difficulties were brushed aside curtly, but it was still amicable, I suppose.

After a while, when the atmosphere was at its best, King Aiz suddenly spoke up. "This brings to mind... Lady Ellize, you decided to enroll in the academy to look for the witch. Have you had any success?"

"I'm afraid I cannot say for sure. I've been able to find circumstantial evidence, but nothing conclusive yet. The only thing I can say for now is that the probability of her lurking in the academy is rather high," I said.

I actually had proof already, but I had no intention of telling them. I had no way of knowing where the witch's spies were hiding, after all. Even if all the people here were trustworthy, I had no insurance they wouldn't tell someone else... That someone could, in turn, tattle to the witch.

"I see. This means you have yet to defeat the witch... What good news."

What do you mean, "good news"? Are you dumb or what?

"Lady Ellize, I'd like to ask you something... Would you be open to the idea of giving up on defeating the witch?"

What the hell was wrong with this old geezer?! If I gave up on killing the witch, I could kiss my happy ending goodbye.

He has to be an idiot, there's no other explanation.

Was there even such an event in the game? No way. I didn't remember Ellize being invited to a gathering and leaving the academy at all. I was a pretty far cry from the original Ellize, so it made sense for things to be a little different, but still...

The atmosphere is starting to feel quite oppressive...

"May I ask you to elaborate?" I asked after a pause.

"Even with the witch alive, your presence is enough to let this world bask in light. The people do not live in fear anymore, monsters have been confined to narrow areas, and the witch hides in fear. People used to have to put their lives

on the line to travel along the roads, but they're now completely safe. All of this...everything is thanks to you."

Praise me more!

I had put in extra effort to make people believe I was the real deal since I was, you know, me.

So yeah, I did a good job, but what's your point?

"And so, we've reached the conclusion that this status quo should be maintained as long as possible," he concluded.

"Do you not hope for the situation to improve further?" I asked. "The world won't fully be rid of the darkness until I defeat the witch."

"It would be preferable, of course... Erasing the darkness from this world would be the most desirable. However, that peace wouldn't last longer than five years. And I do worry we will never see your match again should you pass. That is why I cannot help but think the people would profit more from an imperfect, but durable peace, rather than one that is perfect, yet short-lived..."

What is this old man saying? You want me to let the witch be and maintain the status quo? Are you okay in the head?

"I'm afraid I cannot go into detail, but...saints do not survive for long after they defeat the witch. Even though you're the most outstanding saint in history, you will be no exception. In the past, saints have only succeeded in bringing us peace for five short years at most. But you're different, Lady Ellize. You've already maintained the peace for over seven years...and you will surely continue to do so as long as you breathe. We cannot afford to lose you. I'm afraid humanity would not withstand the trials to come without you..." He exhaled before asking once more, "So, would you agree to leave the witch alone?"

Oh jeez, he's really going all out with the bullshit.

How could a king, someone meant to protect his people, ask me to ignore the greatest threat to humanity?

To be fair, I do get where he's coming from. These geezers are all convinced I'll

turn into the next witch.

It stood to reason that they were afraid of the birth of the strongest witch of all.

“Are you aware that the Lutein Kingdom was almost destroyed a few weeks ago?” I asked instead of answering his question. “If the witch is left alone, tragedy will eventually catch up with us.”

“You were there to prevent that tragedy, were you not? That’s what convinced me that you were more than qualified to protect the peace...even with the witch still alive,” King Aiz said. He grinned before adding, “If I am to be fully honest, I must say this imperfect peace is the best option for humanity. It’s true that after a witch dies, we get five years of peace and no monsters threatening our lands. However, people start fighting among themselves when they don’t have a common enemy. The unity between us weakens. Lady Ellize, were you aware that every war fought between humans—each one in our entire history—was fought during a period without a witch? A period of perfect peace will inevitably be rendered imperfect by humans. Think of it this way—if we are currently experiencing an era of relative peacefulness with the witch, would that not be better than an era of strife among neighbors?”

I have to say, that old geezer’s good at giving speeches! Just what you’d expect from a king.

He raised both arms triumphantly and continued, “Even with the witch alive, I’ve never lived through more glorious days than the past seven years. A common enemy makes us stronger and keeps us united. The people will be able to rally under you, Lady Ellize! They’ll be able to keep moving forward!”

He managed to make every word he said sound like the truth, and I’d even found myself thinking, *Oh, that makes sense* a few times.

“The relative tranquility we have now is enough— No! I’d go even further and say it is *necessary*! A perfect peace isn’t desirable. When people have no goals to strive for, they become lazy. They need to constantly strive for a realistic, yet challenging goal. Let the world bask in your light without erasing all traces of darkness! Shadows shy away from the blazing sun, but they never cease to exist, do they? I insist! What this world needs isn’t the death of the witch. We

need *you*, our saint! As long as you're here, peace shall endure for the next ten or even twenty years— No! You do not age, so we may even have a hundred years ahead of us!"

All right... I'm starting to get it. This guy totally has the wrong idea.

I hadn't really explained my situation to them or told them I was a fake, obviously, so it made sense, but still... For some reason, he'd started assuming that I'd live forever just because my body didn't age.

You got it all wrong. It's the reverse! I'm gonna die much sooner than you think!

I only had one year left at best. To put it bluntly, my batteries were running out, and fast.

Life expectancy was already fairly short in this world. It was a mere twenty years if you took into account external causes of death—such as monsters and the like—or thirty with monsters out of the equation. After all, starvation, malnutrition, epidemics, and even the *cold* still killed over half of the babies. Naturally, people who lived in a good environment—like royalty, nobles, and knights—often got to celebrate their fiftieth, or even sixtieth birthdays, but the average was still pretty brutal. Ever since I'd started helping around, the survival rate of children had risen quite a bit, but it was still a far cry from modern-day Japan.

As for me...since I'd absorbed Verner's dark powers, I was much worse off than your average person.

Anyway, I probably shouldn't agitate him for no reason. Let's just give a noncommittal answer and call it a day.

"I understand... I will take note of your advice."

"Take note? I'm afraid that's not enough," he replied.

I wanted to avoid kicking up a fuss, but King Aiz wasn't having it. He snapped his fingers. Suddenly, a bunch of soldiers stormed into the room and surrounded me.

Are you for reaaaaal?!

“Lady Ellize! You *will* remain as the symbol of justice until your death, and you *will not* be allowed to slay the witch! We have already reached this conclusion, and it is nonnegotiable!”

Would you look at this...

Their plan was to keep me trapped, like a bird in a cage, until the day I died. Now that I thought about it, the geezer had also been the one to order my confinement on Eterna’s route.

Well, this is a pain.

Chapter 26: Captive

So, what do I do now?

I was entirely surrounded, but I sipped at my tea all the same, thinking of the best course of action.

Wait! What if they spiked the tea with sleeping drugs or something?! Oh well, it wouldn't really matter anyway...

I'd used magic to make sure status effects couldn't affect me. The second poison entered my body, it'd be taken apart and detoxified. On top of those precautions, the dark powers that were still lurking in my body would do anything to make sure I stayed alive. Toxins or viruses didn't stand a chance against me.

Actually, maybe some bioengineered super virus—y'know, like the kinds we sometimes see in movies—would work. Who knows?

"What is going on?" I asked, my tone even.

I pretended to be calm as I took a good look around. Soldiers from every country were surrounding me. I spotted knights and even most members of my guard among them. Actually, apart from Layla and Fox, every single member of my guard was standing there.

You guys all turned into traitors? I'm shocked. I thought y'all liked me more than this. What a joke.

"We're so sorry, Lady Ellize! But..." One of the members of my guard spoke up after I glared at them, showing my irritation. "You may not forgive us for this but we... We don't want to lose you!"

So *that* was their excuse?! They'd signed up for the job knowing full well that saints always died after defeating the witch—although I doubted they knew what *truly* happened—and now they were backing off?

Whatever, I'll scold them later. For the time being, I need to find a way out of

this mess.

Ten members of my guard, twenty-some knights, and a bunch of random soldiers were facing me.

Meh, I probably won't need more than ten seconds to make them all pass out.

Killing them all would have taken me less than a second, but there was no need to be that extreme.

"King Aiz," I started. "You just said that as long as I was here, peace would endure. Do you truly think someone who can make that happen can be restrained by a few knights and soldiers?"

For crying out loud, I'd need one spell to destroy this entire room and the people in it.

I was done putting my defenses up. No matter what they tried, they wouldn't land a scratch on me. That being said, I doubted they'd try in the first place. They thought I was the real saint, so they were likely convinced I couldn't get hurt.

King Aiz seemed a little intimidated, but his smile didn't falter. "Naturally, I'm aware we cannot restrain you, but the same cannot be said of your followers."

I immediately looked for Layla in the crowd. A sword was pressed against the back of her neck. It didn't look like she'd tried to resist.

SCOTTERBRAIN!!! Why are you letting them catch you so easily?!

"I hope you'll behave," King Aiz said. "We don't want to antagonize you, Lady Ellize. We'd just like you to...take care of yourself a little better."

King Aiz's tone was gentle, but he clearly had no intention to take my opinion into account.

You don't want to antagonize me, huh? As far as I'm concerned, you've been plenty hostile already.

"We're not asking for the impossible, are we? We just want you to remain in your position for your entire life. It's for your own good. Wouldn't you agree that living a long peaceful life is better than throwing it away in a meaningless fight? Just allow people to revere you and live out your days basking in might

and glory. That doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

He wasn't wrong. It wouldn't be such a bad life...*for me*. However, it was another story altogether if you thought of the next saint. I'd be pushing everything onto her lap. King Aiz's plan wouldn't solve anything in the long run. We'd just be delaying the issue for a few years by maintaining a superficial peace.

I'd much rather deal with the crux of the issue and ensure that another witch would never be born. Besides, I didn't actually believe King Aiz meant any of what he said about me basking in might and glory or whatever. He probably intended to use my image while he kept me trapped in this castle until the day I died. Case in point: he hadn't even tried to convince me before he started threatening me.

"Please take your time to think about my proposal, Lady Ellize," he said with a smile before addressing the soldiers and knights. "Show the saint to her room! And don't forget to be courteous!"

"Y-Yes! Lady Ellize... Please follow us," one of the members of my guard said, gesturing for me to get up.

Beating them all up and fleeing was an option, but...they had Scotterbrain. It was probably best not to aggravate them for the time being. Then again, maybe I could beat them all up until they passed out—Scotterbrain included—then pick her up and make a run for it...

Was there really a need for that, though? If I pretended to listen to them and lay low for a while, there'd be plenty of opportunities to escape later.

Guess I'll be good for once.

"I don't need anyone to escort me. I know where my room is," I stated, getting up and walking toward my room—um, prison cell, I mean.

As soon as I stepped in, the door closed and I heard the lock click.

I expected as much. The windows were also locked, and just to be extra sure, they'd been secured by sturdy bars. I looked outside and saw guards wandering around under my windows. If I tried to break the bars to escape, they'd notice immediately.

I took a step back and looked at the rest of the room.

My room had been cleaned *thoroughly*. It was immaculate. The sheets of my canopy bed had obviously been changed very recently, and an expensive-looking table had been set in the middle of the room. That meant I could have tea whenever I wished.

I always knew that this castle could turn into a prison, but I'd never expected that to happen while I was still the saint.

If the door and the windows were out of the question, then the fireplace was the next best escape route, right? I didn't even need to check to know that the chimney would be too narrow for anyone to squeeze through. Well, any adult, that is—I was pretty sure a small kid would go through just fine.

I used my mana to craft a little fairy, sent it into the fireplace, and had it escape the castle. My first goal was to rescue Scotterbrain. As long as she was safe, I'd manage the rest somehow.

Sorry to disappoint, King Aiz, but I'm no damsel in distress.

I was pretty sure the others also knew that if I got my hands on Scotterbrain, I'd be able to escape in a heartbeat. They were most likely guarding her very tightly.

I guess we're in for a war of attrition.

Thankfully, I didn't have to worry about anything big happening at the academy for the time being. No one would die, even if I was away for a while.

Guess I'll just make myself at home, then.



A week had passed since Ellize had disappeared from the academy. She'd said she was going to attend a party with several royal families from different countries, but it had been too long since anyone had heard from her.

The location of the party had been at the saint's castle, which was a mere three hours away from the academy by carriage. The Training Institute for Magic Knights of Alfreia existed to train knights who'd go on to serve the saint. Thus, the academy had been built close to the castle, at the border of the

Bilberry Kingdom.

This only made Ellize's disappearance more worrisome. What in the world could have happened for her to fail to come back for an entire week? Verner wondered whether Ellize had decided to give up on her studies altogether. Maybe she'd returned to her castle for good. It wouldn't be so strange—in fact, Ellize attending the academy was much stranger.

If Ellize hadn't assured him she'd be back soon, he simply would've believed that.

Maybe something came up and she had to stay, Verner thought. But she'd at least send word if that were the case, right?

"Something's definitely wrong," Verner said.

Verner, Eterna, John, Fiora, Marie, Aina, as well as Supple—who was already experiencing withdrawal symptoms after a week without seeing Ellize—had gathered in an empty classroom after class to discuss the saint's absence.

"What if monsters or bandits attacked her carriage?" Eterna wondered, worried.

"Lady Ellize would have easily turned the table on them. Miss Layla's with her as well... I don't think monsters or petty thieves could hurt the two of them. Even if they had, we would have heard of it," John said.

If the saint had been abducted by monsters, the entire world—let alone the school—would be in uproar. Every country would have sent a search party and no stone would have been left unturned. However, none of that had happened. Things were quiet—unnervingly so.

The strangest thing, as far as Verner and his friends were concerned, was that there had been no comment on the academy's side either. While the school officials didn't seem all that worried, the students definitely were. Everyone was talking about Ellize's disappearance. Even so, there had been no attempts to explain the situation. Something was off.

"Mr. Supple, what does the headmaster make of this?"

"He continues to repeat that everything's fine like a broken record. We

teachers haven't heard much either. Apparently, the king's office let the academy know that Lady Ellize wouldn't be returning."

"The king's office?"

"Yes. After the ceremonial dinner, we received word that Lady Ellize had decided to stop attending the academy. This has to mean that the Bilberry Kingdom—or perhaps even all the royal families who were in attendance—have a hand in this," Supple said.

The royals turning on the saint? If someone had told Verner such a thing a few weeks ago, he would've laughed it off. However, he wasn't so sure anymore now that he'd learned the secret behind the witch's identity while fighting Dias. He knew everything now, knew that the saint's castle was nothing more than a prison...and that Lady Alexia, the previous saint, had almost been killed in that very castle.

He couldn't stop his mind from going to terrible places.

"So you think the royal families could have locked up Lady Ellize?" Fiora asked. "But what for? She hasn't killed the witch yet, so she won't be turning into one anytime soon... Why would they want to imprison her?"

Marie looked like she'd suddenly understood something. "Isn't it...*because* she hasn't killed the witch yet...?" she suggested. "The world is already at peace, even with the witch alive. The witch is too scared of the saint to really do much, so maybe they thought that it'd be better if the two didn't fight at all..."

"In other words, the royals decided that maintaining the status quo was better and locked Lady Ellize up to make sure she'd listen to them?"

"It's only a theory..." Marie added in a hurry.

No one rebutted her; it made sense. It was much better to let the witch live than to allow Lady Ellize to become the next witch.

As long as the witch lived, the world wouldn't know true peace. However, such periods of perfect peace never lasted more than a few years. On the other hand, the relative tranquility they were currently enjoying could last until Lady Ellize passed. They couldn't find a single good reason why they should give that up just to kill the witch.

“Even if it makes sense, I still can’t agree with what they’re doing,” Verner said. “Lady Ellize has a will of her own. She’s not some doll to be used however they like to further their own agendas!”

Would keeping Lady Ellize locked up be for the best? No way! Verner couldn’t accept that. He didn’t know whether Lady Ellize *ought* to defeat the witch or not, but he refused to leave things like this.

Aina stood up. “There’s no point in us discussing this. We’re just speculating... We need to go talk to someone who knows what is really going on. Let’s go speak to my father.”

The new headmaster—who’d replaced Dias—was Aina’s father. If she were the one asking, he might tell her the truth.

“You’re right. There’s no point in discussing theories. We need to find out the truth,” Verner agreed. “Let’s go.”

Verner hoped that they were simply reading too deep into the situation. He truly hoped they were mistaken.

If they weren’t... If the royals had stolen Ellize’s freedom and were truly using her... Well, he couldn’t speak for the others, but he’d already made up his mind. He wouldn’t simply stand by—he’d fight against the rest of the world if he had to.

Chapter 27: Justification

Verner and his group immediately headed to the headmaster's office to question him.

Under normal circumstances, students weren't allowed to barge into the headmaster's office without having been summoned. It certainly wasn't a good look for anyone to try the stunt the group had just pulled. Good grades weren't everything, after all—rude students often wouldn't be allowed to join the saint's side after they graduated, because they'd risk behaving in inappropriate ways around her.

While some offenses could be forgiven if the students remained on good behavior for the rest of their education, barging into the headmaster's office out of the blue and demanding to speak to him certainly wouldn't be. Doing such a thing meant kissing any chances of becoming a knight goodbye. Most would agree that such punishment was perfectly reasonable. If students were rude enough to intrude on their superior in the academy, who was to say they wouldn't try the same thing with their next superior—the saint—after they graduated? Such behavior was simply unbecoming of a knight.

Verner and his friends were well aware of the fact, but that did nothing to deter them. They wanted to get to the bottom of things, and fast.

"Father! We'd like to ask you something!" Aina exclaimed as soon she opened the door.

The headmaster was surprisingly calm. He didn't seem upset or mad in the least, as though he'd expected them to show up all along.

He looked at each of them before saying, "Very well. Come in and close the door."

"What? Um... Yes, of course."

Aina was a bit thrown off by his reaction—she hadn't expected him to take their intrusion so well. Still, she closed the door, just like her father had asked.

Fox let out a sigh, then smiled before speaking again. “It would seem the only people worthy of becoming knights are the seven of you.”

Instead of getting mad and scolding them for their terrible manners, the headmaster had praised them. Verner and his friends were frozen in place, their brains unable to keep up with his unexpected reaction.

“Why are you so surprised? It’s true that manners are important—very much so. Under normal circumstances, I would have expelled all of you for barging into my office unannounced. I wouldn’t want anyone with such rude habits anywhere near our dear saint. However, people who refuse to act when the saint is in trouble are even less suited to become knights. It would seem most have forgotten why the knights even exist,” he lamented, setting his elbows on the table and resting his chin in his hands. His piercing eyes regarded the seven people in front of him once more. “I have a pretty good idea what you’d like to ask, but I’ll hear you out anyway. What is it you wish to know?”

“Why hasn’t Lady Ellize come back? What’s going on? That’s what we want to know,” Verner immediately replied.

Fox’s eyes turned softer at Verner’s decisiveness. He’d long lost this sort of youthful ardor, but he respected it. Verner was still wet behind the ears, but he had the right mindset. Fox was of the firm belief that knights ought to worry only about the saint—they shouldn’t allow themselves to be distracted by less important things. It made him want to put this young generation of knights-to-be to the test. He wanted to know what answer they’d come up with.

“Lady Ellize is fine. She’s currently at the saint’s castle. The only issue, if any, is that she’s not allowed out.”

“Then—”

“Let us call it ‘house arrest.’ No, perhaps ‘confinement’ would be better suited. The royals have come to the conclusion that Lady Ellize should not be allowed to roam freely. They decided that it was better for her to survive instead of giving her life to defeat the witch,” the headmaster explained.

This was the very conclusion Verner and the others had reached earlier. They couldn’t confidently condemn the royal families’ decision, though. After all, deep inside their hearts, they’d all thought that maybe, just maybe, the families

had been in the right...

After they'd heard from Dias what sort of fate awaited Ellize, they couldn't help but think that maybe it was better if she didn't fight the witch. They wanted nothing more than to give up and let the next generation deal with everything. Yes, the next saint could take on that duty...

"I'll be honest with you—I couldn't bring myself to oppose this decision. I wasn't the only one either... The remaining members of the saint's guard were the same. We were so scared of losing Lady Ellize that we betrayed her instead..." Fox wore a sad smile as he spoke, as if he thought what he was saying was ridiculous.

While Ellize would be confined inside the castle for the rest of her life, the royals had no intention of treating her badly. They'd do everything in their power to accommodate her wishes and allow her to lead the most comfortable life in the world. They'd given their word to the knights who'd proceeded to convince themselves that surely, Ellize would be happier like that...even if *she* didn't know it yet.

"I didn't know what the right choice was," the headmaster continued. "We trapped her like a bird in a cage with no regard for her feelings. However...birds are safe in the comfort of their cage, are they not? They're doted upon. As long as they give up on their freedom, they can obtain peace... Is that truly so terrible? Are birds truly happier when they're free to soar in the sky even though they risk dying at any point? I don't know."

He shook his head at his own question, then looked at Verner, John, Fiora, Supple, and Eterna once more. His expression shifted to one of envy.

"No... I suppose I'm only finding excuses for myself..." he said after a pause. "It's not that we refused to oppose the royalty—it's that we *couldn't*. The commoners among you might not understand, but I'm not only a knight. I'm also a nobleman, and I carry the fate of my people, my family, and my servants on my shoulders. So do the other knights. The five of you are exceptions."

Everyone in the room was fully aware of that fact. They'd entered the academy based on their exceptional personal abilities, but most of the students hailed from noble houses. While nobles were given the best possible learning

environment from birth, commoners struggled to survive. As a result, all of the current knights were either nobles or blood relatives of noblemen. Thus, they'd been unable to defy the king.

"The saint is supposed to have a higher authority than the royals, but as I'm sure you've guessed already, that is only true on paper," Fox explained.

"In practice, the royal families hold the power while the saint serves as a symbol...right?"

"Exactly, John. You're sharp."

While no one usually dared to voice it out loud, everyone knew that the royals had never relinquished their authority to the saint. How else could they have declared the previous saint a criminal and hunted her down? How else could they have locked Ellize up?

Saints were nothing more than symbols. They stood at the top, but they didn't rule over anything at all, nor did they have any subjects. Thus, in the case of an emergency, the words of the monarchs and nobles—the ones who truly held all the political power—carried greater weight than those of the saint. They only pretended to revere the saint as the realm's greatest figure to avoid criticism.

If anything, Ellize, the current saint, had already taken up *too* much space. As far as the royals were concerned, her voice was too influential. There was a world of difference between her and the previous saints that had been nothing more than mere puppets, sacrificial pawns meant to deal with the witch.

"I have a fancy title as the previous head of the saint's guard, but at the end of the day, I'm nothing more than a viscount—the lord of a small territory. If the king wanted to destroy my house, it'd only take him a few days. If that happened, my people, all the servants who work at my estate, and my family... They'd be left to fend for themselves. I-I couldn't choose Lady Ellize over my own interests..." he finally admitted. His arms were crossed, his nails dug into his skin, as if to punish himself. It was plain to see how guilty he felt, how deeply he regretted making such a choice.

If the royals' actions had truly been deplorable, if they'd tried to hurt citizens and Ellize, Fox and the others surely would've found it in themselves to oppose

them, even if it meant that their houses would be destroyed.

However, the royals had anticipated that and had given them a way out—a justification. Everything they were doing was for the good of the saint! If she was left alone, she'd just get herself killed! She had to be stopped and protected. If it were put that way, Fox and the others could hardly oppose the monarchs' actions. The royals had prepared the perfect justification. Deep down, though, they all knew it was nothing but an excuse, a lie they could tell themselves to cope with the guilt. Still, it was exactly what their wounded hearts needed.

They didn't want Ellize to die. They'd seen how hard she fought every day to make their world a better place. The idea that the only thing that awaited her at the end of her path was death was unacceptable. It was even harder for those who knew she was fated to turn into a hateful witch and subsequently destroy her own legacy.

The knights wrestled with their guilt and loathed the fact that deep down, they thought this solution was for the best. Verner was just as confused; his thoughts were a mess.

After a while, he finally asked, "What about Miss Layla?"

Even though he'd just asked the question, he felt like he already knew the answer. He'd seen how she'd reacted when Dias had told them the truth.

"I told you the remaining members of the saint's guard were just like me," he confirmed. "Layla's pretending to be a hostage. No one could ever hope to hold Lady Ellize against her will, so we needed to create a situation where she'd accept her confinement..."

Layla had used Ellize's concern for her against her. It was the greatest betrayal of all—something Layla was all too aware of. However, Ellize was just that important to her. She was ready to commit the greatest of offenses if it meant her saint would live.

She's lost all reason, Verner thought.

The battle between her loyalty and her fear of losing Ellize had made her irrational. King Aiz's proposition had come at the perfect time.

“What do you think the right choice is?” Fox asked, looking right into Verner’s eyes.

He’d made his decision and had acted accordingly to trap Ellize. Even though she’d lost her freedom, she’d still live a comfortable life within the walls of the castle. There was no need to have her fight anymore. He’d convinced himself that this was the best path for the world and Ellize alike.

Supple—Ellize’s most devoted believer—was the first to speak up. His face was ghastly pale because of his Ellize deficiency, but his voice was steady and lacked any hesitation. “A Stil’s bird will live five years in the wild, but twenty in captivity. They always live longer in curated environments and under supervision. I believe you’re in the right, headmaster. Losing our glorious saint is out of the question. If confining her is what it takes...then surely, it is for the best. If she dies...this world would be worthless to me.”

Verner got the impression that Supple might’ve considered the possibility of locking Ellize up ever since he’d learned the truth. He didn’t care about the world, only about Ellize. Thus, he’d naturally reached that conclusion. Even if thousands of people were to die as a result, Supple wouldn’t bat an eye. They were only alive because saints had been sacrificing their lives up until now, so it was only right that they died for Ellize. As far as he was concerned, the life of one special person was worth more than those of everyone else combined.

“I think you’re both wrong!” Eterna exclaimed. “You’re ignoring what Lady Ellize wants! She should be the one to decide what’s best for herself!”

Her opinion was sensible. Regardless of what they all thought, one thing was certain: they were completely ignoring Ellize’s will.

Verner nodded and took a step forward. “I’ll go save Lady Ellize,” he declared. “However, we’re up against the king. If we do this, we won’t be able to become knights—hell, we’ll become wanted criminals. That’s why I won’t ask any of you to accompany me. Make that decision for yourselves.”

He couldn’t bring himself to ask his friends for help. He’d be essentially telling them to give up on their dream *and* to break the law. Despite that, Verner didn’t hesitate for one second. He’d been saved by Ellize, and he’d long resolved to repay his debt. He didn’t care who he had to turn into his enemy to

achieve that.

“I-I’m sorry... I don’t know...” Marie said weakly.

She was frozen in place, unable to follow Verner. Aina, John, and Fiora were the same. They wanted to take a step forward, but their legs wouldn’t listen.

It was only natural. They were ready to fight the witch, not their king. Marie and Aina were especially lost—they were nobles, after all. Even if they were to make up their minds and decide to walk down the path Verner had offered, they wouldn’t be the only ones to suffer. As they thought of their families and their people, their bodies froze.

In the end, only one other person stepped toward Verner.

“I’ll come with you,” Eterna said. “I’ll worry if you’re alone.”

Eterna had decided to accompany Verner out of concern for him, rather than for Ellize. Her friend was hot-headed, and if she didn’t follow him, he’d get himself in trouble. She felt frustrated that he was ready to give up on everything for another girl, when he never paid her any attention...but she still couldn’t leave him alone. His stubbornness was one of the things she liked about him, after all.

“As for myself, I will head to the saint’s castle and offer my cooperation to the royals,” Supple said. “It looks like we’ll be enemies this time.”

He wanted Ellize to live, and he was ready to do anything to achieve his goal. Thus, he would not be on Verner’s side this time. Verner nodded quietly, then the three of them left the academy without saying another word to each other.





Okay, so I've been thinking this for a while, but...isn't this exactly the life I wanted?

I'd been placed under house arrest for a week now, and I was currently laying on my bed.

I don't have to move a finger and people take super good care of me!

While the royals had strictly prohibited me from going out, they wanted me to keep my status as the saint. As such, we'd remained on friendly terms, and they made sure to grant my every desire.

I wasn't forced to work. I could spend every day lazing around however I liked. It was the most perfect life a NEET could ask for. I even had a perfectly good excuse: I was being kept here against my will!

Yup! Not my fault at all! Gee, I really, really wish I could be an active member of society, but I can't go up against kings now, can I? I'm being forced to take it easy in bed! How horrible! I sure wish I could give it my all for the good of the people! Seriously, I want to work as hard as a corporate slave, I truly do! Alas, I cannot! Woe is me! Yeah, right!

NEETs only ever had one worry: people urging them to work. Thankfully, everyone around me wanted me to stay quietly cooped up in my room.

I pretended to be heartbroken, though, just for the sake of it. I'd often gaze at the horizon, standing pitifully in front of my barred windows with a melancholic expression on my face. Naturally, my thoughts usually didn't quite match my expression. I mostly wondered about the menu, to be honest.

I often asked random-traitorous-knight-1 if the world was still at peace or whether people were suffering because of the monsters.

Truth be told...being a captive princess really wasn't all that bad. It was *great*, even. I loved having a good excuse to be a lazy NEET.

In games, princesses usually stayed put in their cells until the hero came to rescue them, even if they were super strong themselves, right? Even if they weren't bound by collars or shackles, they always quietly waited for the hero in

their luxurious room—um, I mean cell—right?

What do you mean, there aren't any heroines like that? Of course there are! How about that blonde princess with a pink dress who keeps getting kidnapped in every game? She can use magic and destroy her enemies with a frying pan! She just chooses not to!

She was even proficient at healing magic, so she was technically much more suited to fighting alone than the hero! Whenever she was playable, she was always fully capable of rolling her sleeves up and doing all that action stuff. Hell, I even remembered an entire game where *she* was the one rescuing the mustached hero!

Girl, if you're that strong, just deal with the villain on your own! You can totally win!

Not to mention the villain in those games was an absolute idiot! He was stupid enough to build bridges over lava, then wait until the hero showed up to break them with an axe.

Who does that?! Is he looking for an original way to kill himself?

All the princess really needed to do was sneak up from behind, then collapse the bridge while he was still on it. Problem solved!

I was pretty sure I wasn't the only one who'd wondered about that while playing those games. However, now that I found myself in her shoes, I totally got it. Being a captive princess was amazing. You were basically served the best justification for being a lazy bum on a silver tray!

I was living in NEET paradise! It was such a good time that a week had passed in the blink of an eye. There was no need for me to hurry—nothing major would happen at the academy until after the winter holiday, so I could laze around until then.

Now that that's settled, let's relax some more!

I intended to make the most out of my long-awaited NEET era.

Oh, wait! I should pretend to pray for a while to drive the point home that I absolutely do not want to be here! O God, O Buddha, please bestow upon me

some nice chicken for dinner...



Okay, enough praying, time to roll in bed! I'll rest for another week or two before I start thinking of escaping. WHAT?! Someone's here to save me?! NOOOOOO! Gimme a break!

Chapter 28: The Knights' Hesitation

A week had passed since Ellize had been confined.

Rex, one of the members of the saint's guard, stood in front of her door, deep in thought. Had they really made the right choice? He asked himself that question every single day, and he wasn't the only one—all of the knights spent hours in a vicious cycle of self-loathing and attempted justification day after day.

After defeating the witch, the saint would die... They still didn't know why, but they knew that much was true. Never had a saint survived after slaying the witch in the past. That was what had motivated them to work with King Aiz—*surely he was right*, they'd convinced themselves—and betray Ellize.

They'd convinced themselves that dirtying their honor was a small price to pay if it meant Ellize would live. However, they couldn't help but wonder if they were simply fooling themselves. Perhaps they hadn't betrayed Ellize for her sake... Perhaps they'd betrayed her for *their own* sakes. They told themselves that they were ready to do anything to avoid losing her, even if it meant turning into a traitor...but those were only petty excuses. At the end of the day, weren't they just living in a lie?

Ever since she'd been trapped, Ellize hadn't blamed Rex a single time. However, this was much harder for him to handle than her ire. He'd expected to hear Ellize call him a traitor, to be on the receiving end of curses, but he hadn't prepared himself for the very opposite.

In fact, Ellize hadn't said a word of reproach to any of them. She simply gazed at the outside world through the window with a sad face. Every time he and the other knights saw her do that, they suffered terrible pangs to their conscience.

He knew that sometimes, in the quiet of her room, she prayed. She must have been praying for the souls of the innocent people who were bound to suffer. Now that she couldn't save them with her own two hands, she could only resort to prayers. Even in such a situation, Ellize's thoughts were still of the people.

Ellize's purity forced Rex to reflect on his actions. He couldn't help but think what he'd done was immoral—that he'd sinned.

"Rex, tell me, have people been hurt by the witch or her monsters today?" Ellize asked through the door.

"No, Lady Ellize. The witch has yet to show herself... As for the monsters, the soldiers and vigilantes are taking care of them without issue. We haven't received any worrisome reports."

"I see. That's good to hear."

Ellize was truly always thinking of the people. She didn't spend any of her time on self-pity. Instead, she only cared about others. No matter the circumstances, she was the perfect saint.

What in the world am I doing? Rex wondered. He felt tears well up in his eyes. He'd betrayed his master, forced her into confinement to protect some makeshift peace... How could he call himself a knight?

"Emergency! Intruders have entered the castle!" a runner yelled at Rex.

Intruders?

Even though he'd betrayed her, Rex was still determined to protect the saint with everything he had. He and the other guard member that had been stationed in front of Ellize's door exchanged a look, their expressions grave.

"The intruders appear to be students of the Training Institute for Magic Knights! Their goal might be to help the saint escape! They're skilled—the guards haven't been able to subdue them yet!"

"Got it. I'll head there myself immediately," Rex said.

As it turned out, the intruders weren't monsters. They were simply students that wanted to rescue Ellize.

How childish...and yet, how courageous. At the very least, they deserve to be knights much more than I do, Rex thought, letting out a sigh in despair.



Verner and Eterna were spotted five minutes after they'd broken into the

castle. They didn't know the first thing about infiltration, but even if they *had* been trained assassins, they would've had a hard time sneaking into such a heavily protected facility.

The royal family of the Bilberry Kingdom had moved into the saint's castle to monitor Ellize. On top of the ten members of her guard and several knights, they'd brought along plenty of soldiers. Although their main goal was to ensure Ellize wouldn't escape—not to fend off outside threats—they were all on edge.

Verner and Eterna were talented students, but they were students nonetheless. There was no way they could've entered the castle undetected. And so, the two were currently on the run, dashing through the castle's corridors and trying their hardest to avoid capture by the soldiers.

"You're such an idiot! Why don't you ever use your brain, Verner?!" Eterna's voice echoed through the castle.

Her indignation was very justified. She'd thought that Verner had a plan since he'd approached the castle so confidently. As it turned out, though, his idea of discretion had been beating up the first guards he'd seen with the sword he'd received from Ellize and barging in through the front door.

Needless to say, their approach hadn't cut it. They'd been immediately surrounded by soldiers just like that.

The word "musclehead" must've been invented for him, Eterna thought. He'd worked out so much that even his useless cerebellum subscribed to the idea of brawn over brain.

"Damn..." Verner uttered, looking for a gap between the soldiers.

He wanted to rescue Ellize. His plan hadn't been to fight soldiers, much less wound or kill them. Although the soldiers couldn't compare to knights, they were still much stronger than the average conscript—Verner couldn't just ignore them. There was a reason they'd been entrusted with the security of the castle.

Just as Verner wondered what to do, two blasts of magic flew in—one ice, one fire—and forced the soldiers to scatter. The quick shift in temperature shattered their weapons into pieces, and everyone's attention shifted toward

the point of origin of the attacks.

A most incongruous team—Aina and Marie—had arrived to save the day.

“We’ll hold them off so you can go ahead! Hurry!”

“Sorry... We’re late.”

“Why are you two here?!” Verner exclaimed. He was astonished—he never would’ve thought they’d come after their earlier reaction.

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re here to take our saint back! I spent a long time thinking about what I *ought* to be doing, but screw it! The right answer doesn’t matter! For now, the only thing that *does* matter is paying back my debt to Lady Ellize! The rest can wait!” Aina declared.

“I...agree. I’ll focus on...helping my friends...for now.”

They’d both decided to discard any anxiety they held for the future and focus on the present instead.

Aina’s benefactor had been thrown in jail. For the time being, her only priority was to get her out of there. As for Marie, her friends were ready to give up everything to save Ellize. She’d do everything she could to help them. That was all there was to it.

They were only able to choose such a path because of their naive youthfulness, but their strategy—or lack thereof—was as valid a choice as any. If you were too focused on finding the right answer before acting, you’d risk being unable to take a step forward when it mattered most. And so, Aina and Marie had decided to act first and worry about the consequences later.

“Verner, Eterna, go!” Aina exclaimed, creating a tunnel of fire to open up a path for her friends.

Verner and Eterna did as they were told, dashing through the tunnel. As soon as they’d reached the other side, Aina closed off the tunnel and created a wall of flames in its stead. The soldiers couldn’t follow them.

Although Aina and Marie had helped them out of one sticky situation, Verner and Eterna found their path blocked again once they reached the stairs. The man standing in front of them was on another level altogether; they could feel

it.

“You kids sure are courageous,” he commended, drawing his sword. “If you turn back right now, I’ll pretend I haven’t seen anything.”

There wasn’t a single weak point in his stance.

A knight. No, he’s not any knight—he’s like Miss Layla... Verner understood immediately. “Are you a member of Lady Ellize’s guard?”

The man was the cream of the crop—an elite knight who was allowed to serve at the saint’s side. Verner was a mere student—a first-year, at that. He couldn’t hope to compare. Still, he wasn’t willing to back down. If he did, he knew that he would never be able to become the sort of knight he aspired toward.

Instead, Verner drew his sword and took a step forward, ready to fight it out. Suddenly, an arrow cut through the air right next to him and flew straight at the knight.

The man easily blocked it with his sword before looking past Verner. John and Fiora were standing there. They walked up to Verner, weapons in hand.

“John, Fiora... You guys came too...”

“You go ahead, Verner. We’ll handle things here,” John said, looking at the knight fiercely. For some reason, he knew deep inside that Verner *had* to be the one to get to Ellize. His job was to open up a path for him.

Verner stared at them, looking incredibly confused.

“I lost my way,” John explained with a faint self-depreciatory smile. “I was scared of facing the entire country and I froze. I’m so ashamed, you have no idea... Lady Ellize, she...she never hesitated to dive into danger for the sake of her people.”

He closed his eyes and images flowed through his mind. Ellize had saved him. She’d taken on an army of monsters all by herself to protect him and his comrades. She hadn’t given up because her opponent was too strong, too big, or too numerous. She’d simply given it her all and protected everyone—protected *him*. And yet, when the time to repay his debt had come, he’d gotten

cold feet. What a joke. He was the worst.

Fiora spoke up next. “I’m the same. I started pondering over trivial matters, wondering if saving her was the right thing to do... I started thinking that maybe the world would be better off with her locked up...and that maybe *she* would be happier too. It’s stupid, isn’t it? Lady Ellize is nothing like that. She saved me without stopping to wonder whether she should or shouldn’t, so why did I end up freezing and overanalyzing everything when she needed me?”

After Ellize had saved Fiora, she’d told her something. She’d said she wanted to help the people she could reach. Ellize never worried about what she could gain from helping people—she simply did it.

Fiora had made a vow back then. She’d sworn that she’d stop wasting her time, and above all, she’d dedicate her life to her savior. And yet, she hadn’t been able to make up her mind immediately like Verner had. That was why she was certain of one thing—that Verner, the only one who hadn’t wavered, *had* to be the one who rescued Ellize.

“Go!” Fiora and John screamed at the same time.

John dashed forward, crossing swords with the knight. As for Fiora, she supported him from behind with her arrows. The knight was distracted for a second as he cut down one of her arrows. John made use of the opportunity to kick him in the chest, sending him flying.

Thanks to them, the stairway was free. Verner immediately started running up the stairs, followed by Eterna, who’d needed a few seconds to react.

John smiled, watching them disappear, before turning to face the knight.

“I remember your face. John, isn’t it?” the knight asked. “As I recall, you quit your position as a soldier to enter the academy.”

“I’m honored, Lord Rex. To think a member of the saint’s guard would remember a lowly soldier...”

“Of course I remember you. I wouldn’t forget the face of a man destined to join our ranks.”

The two of them crossed swords a few times before retreating, creating some

distance. Before long, they both jumped forward and their swords clashed again, sending sparks scattering in the air at the impact. They looked into each other's eyes.

"I always thought we'd find ourselves fighting side by side, yet, here we are," Rex, the knight, said with a sigh. "How regrettable..."

"What's truly regrettable is what you've become," John replied. "You look like you have no idea why you're fighting anymore. I can see it in your eyes."

Rex let out another sigh. "You sure know how to hit where it hurts..."

John and Rex continued to trade blows. It wasn't so much a fight as a conversation, and they were letting their swords do the talking for them. They seemed to be trying to convey their thoughts to the other *and* convince themselves that they were in the right at the same time... Or at least, that was the feeling Fiora got as she watched them.

Verner and Eterna could hear the clashing noise of their blades, but they continued to make their way up regardless.

Ellize's room was on the fifth floor—the highest location in the castle. However, Verner and Eterna had barely reached the second floor when they ran into the one person they'd least wanted to see.

The figure in front of them stood at 167 centimeters—a whopping two centimeters taller than the average man. Her imposing figure didn't seem to have any vulnerable points. Her black, glossy hair was tightly bound in a neat ponytail. She donned a full set of silver armor—proof of her status as a member of the saint's guard—and clutched her treasured sword, which she'd received when she'd stepped up as the new head of the guard.

Even though she was a woman, she'd defeated Fox and had taken his position. At barely twenty years of age, she stood at the very top of the echelon and was the closest confidant of the saint. However, while she usually carried herself with the utmost dignity and confidence, she currently looked like a puppy scared of being scolded by her master.

"Miss Layla..." Verner called the name of the pitiful traitor quietly.

Chapter 29: Conflicting Thoughts

Verner sheathed his sword in its scabbard.

Layla's expression grew fierce. How did he dare put down his sword like she wasn't worth fighting?

Verner didn't let her glare bother him; he simply stepped forward.

"Miss Layla, please let me through," he requested calmly.

"Do you think I'm a joke, Verner? Do you think I'm the kind of weakling who'd stand aside just because you asked?"

Layla was no weakling—that much was clear to anyone. Verner was very much aware of her greatness.

She was always by Ellize's side. Although the saint was so exceptional that her abilities outshone Layla's, the head of Ellize's guard was a force to be reckoned with in her own right. She wasn't invincible like the saints, and she couldn't eradicate an entire army of monsters in a split second like Ellize, much less perform miracles, but she was said to be just as powerful as the previous saint, Alexia. She'd risen to the position of head of the guard at twenty. It was unheard of, especially for a woman.

To say Layla was no weakling would be an understatement. Still, Verner didn't take out his sword as he continued to advance.

"You're not a weakling, but I do think you've grown weak."

Layla swiftly pointed her sword at Verner's neck. Eterna was right next to them, but Layla had moved so fast that she hadn't been able to follow the motion at all.

Verner didn't budge. He looked straight at Layla. "Miss Layla... I'm sure you're fully aware that you shouldn't be doing this. No knight should... But you don't need me to tell you any of this, do you? I know you've already found your answer."

“Shut up!”

“Even if I do, your heart won’t. You can’t silence your conscience.”

The tip of Layla’s sword quivered at Verner’s words. He was right. Deep down, Layla already knew that she’d made a mistake.

No matter how many guards they brought, Ellize could’ve easily escaped the castle at any given moment... But she hadn’t. Had she taken a liking to her current life and given up on leaving this place? Obviously not. Layla knew her master wasn’t that kind of person. Hell would freeze over before she stayed cooped up here for such a ridiculous reason.

The answer was obvious: she’d stayed for Layla’s sake. She was still convinced that Layla’d been taken as a hostage, and she’d resigned herself to her fate. Layla knew exactly how Ellize felt, yet she was using those very feelings against her.

Layla herself was the one who felt the weight of her treason the most. She realized just how sinful her conduct was.

“I know... Of course I do! But... I can’t stop the anxiety that eats at me!”

The conversation she’d had with Ellize kept going round and round in her head. She’d said that fate could be changed, that she’d break the cycle with their generation, and that she had a way to defeat the witch without becoming one herself or dying. She’d promised to create a future where everyone would smile—a true happy ending.

At first, Layla had been overjoyed. The cycle could be broken without her beloved master dying! However, she’d started wondering...how did Ellize intend to achieve that? She’d refused to say a word about that. Although she’d asked Layla to trust her, doubts began to surface.

Just then, a sly man appeared in the castle corridor to take advantage of her suspicions once more.

“Dear, you’re wavering, are you not? I believe I’ve told you many times that Lady Ellize was delusional. Such a convenient method does not exist,” a white-haired man said, walking up to them.

Each of his steps echoed through the corridor. While the man was already past seventy, his body was still strong. He was fairly tall—170 centimeters or so—walked with his back straight, and had no need for a cane. His years of experience had marked his face, but had done nothing to dull the sharpness of his icy blue eyes. In a way, he reminded Verner of a bird of prey. The deep blue mantle—one of the symbols of King Aiz And Ai Bilberry XIII of the Bilberry Kingdom—fluttered with every one of his steps.

His frigid blueberry-colored eyes settled on Layla's face as he spoke. "I've witnessed the lives of four saints, including Lady Ellize. Trust me when I say there is no such method. I believe Lady Ellize intends to take her own life after defeating the witch... But don't you think a previous saint would have broken the cycle if it were that easy? And even if she *were* to somehow succeed, we would still lose her. Would that be acceptable to you?"

"Your...Majesty..."

"Believe me, Layla—there is no way to break the cycle. Lady Ellize lied to you in order to placate you. She treasures you. If you truly want to protect her...then you have no choice but to betray her. Help us keep her confined in this castle."

King Aiz's words led Layla astray. It was perfectly understandable—he'd watched over many saints and had lived through much more than she had. He also knew the entire truth about the tragic fate of the witch and the saint. His words carried weight.

Layla was also certain that he'd been the first to order Lady Alexia's murder after she'd slain the witch. She couldn't forgive him for that, but it also only lent more credence to his words. He understood more than anyone else how bleak the situation was...

As a result, it wasn't all that strange for Layla to believe him over Ellize's baseless claims.

Verner tried to speak up. "Lady Ellize told you she could break the cycle? Then —"

"I've already told you that is impossible, child. You're just like Layla—you refuse to let go of your hopeless fantasies," the king cut in, preventing Verner

from asking him why they couldn't simply trust Ellize. He spoke with so much confidence that neither Layla nor Verner dared to question him. A nostalgic look appeared on his face as he continued, "When I was four, Griselda, the saint at the time, defeated the witch and turned into the new one. I was a naive child then, and I also believed there had to be a way to prevent such a horrible thing from happening."

Even a man like Aiz who was ready to lock up Ellize for the rest of her life for the sake of the world had been an immature child once. Verner was looking intently at the king, and for a split second, he saw Aiz's sorrow.

The king quickly steeled his expression before continuing his story. "After her came another saint, Lilia. I was nine when she was born, and she was just like a little sister to me. After I inherited the throne, I swore I wouldn't let her end up like Griselda. When she turned nineteen, I told her the truth. I was still young and foolish then... I could hardly look at the bigger picture. I simply did what I thought was right—I didn't yet have the wisdom to consider the consequences of such a choice. Well, I made a terrible mistake. What do you think happened? Lilia dedicated herself to fighting monsters without rest. She drove herself to her own brutal death. While she did not become a witch herself, Griselda was still well and alive. The situation had not improved one bit, and with no one left to oppose the witch, the world fell into a lengthy dark age. Lilia's death taught me two things: the witch does not age—she will not die until a saint slays her—and the truth is nothing but poison to the saint."

Verner had heard that the saint before Alexia had been killed by monsters, but he hadn't known the entire story until now. She'd done what she could to fight her destiny, but she hadn't been strong enough to continue fighting head-on... She must've been unable to stand the idea of becoming the witch, so she'd chosen death at the hands of the monsters instead.

If the witch had eventually died of old age, her sacrifice wouldn't have been in vain. Sadly, the witch didn't grow older.

Her death was meaningless, Verner couldn't stop himself from thinking.

She'd died without even giving the people a few years of peace like the other saints had. Because of her actions, Lilia had been almost completely erased

from collective memory. In fact, Verner had heard her name for the very first time in class, *after* he'd joined the academy.

"When I was forty-eight," the king said, "The previous saint, Alexia, fulfilled her duty. I knew for a fact that saints could be killed by monsters—after all, I'd never forgotten what had happened to Lilia. I decided to trap Alexia in this very castle and release monsters into her prison. I felt guilty about her and Dias, but I believed that this was the way to break the cycle."

"How could you..." Verner uttered, barely bothering to hide his disgust. *That's no way to treat someone who'd dedicated her life to saving humanity.*

Aiz didn't seem to mind his hostility. He simply carried on. "Do you despise me? I understand. My actions did not even yield any results. I betrayed Alexia, yet I have nothing to show for it. The monsters I'd gathered did not touch a hair on Alexia's head—they submitted to her and helped her escape instead. I failed humanity that day... After she escaped, the world was once again governed by fear. I'll be honest with you... When that happened, I gave up. I'd tried everything I could think of, but nothing had worked. The world had not changed. I truly believed that lasting peace would forever be an impossible dream."

Verner wanted to scream at him that he was completely missing the point. The king was convinced that he ought to be scorned for failing to kill Alexia, but that wasn't why Verner was angry. He was outraged that he'd even *thought* of betraying Alexia in the first place!

Aiz didn't seem to notice anything. "As for Ellize... Well, you already know the story. No other saint could ever compare to her. She makes me wonder how the others could be so different. Whenever I hear of another one of her accomplishments, that feeling grows stronger. This time, the power dynamic between the saint and the witch is completely different. While the previous saints were strong enough to defeat the witch, it came with great sacrifices. They had to avoid large swarms of monsters and hide from archmonsters. They had to conserve their strength so they could use every last bit of energy they had on the witch. On top of that, past witches never stopped terrorizing the population until they'd been killed; they never hid."

Before Ellize came along, peace was only ever graced to this world for a scant few years—from the moment a witch was killed to the moment when the next lost her sanity. The presence of a saint didn't do much to deter the witch. After all, she'd had plenty of time to grow her army of monsters and archmonsters while the saint grew up.

If the saint tried to fight every monster she could find, she'd soon be overpowered and killed. That was why saints usually focused on creating a breach in the witch's forces—a gap only big enough to get to her—without taking on too many monsters in the process. Unfortunately, even that came at a price—many innocent lives were lost to create that opportunity for the saint. That was the only way they knew how to perform the greatest miracle of all: ridding the world of the witch.

Up until now, their methods had never changed. Generations of saints and knights had devoted their blood, sweat, and tears to this oh-so-precious glimmer of peace.

However, Ellize had changed everything.

The power balance had been overturned thanks to her. The saint—who used to be the most sheltered person in the world—did not require any protection. She could instantly wipe out entire armies of monsters, heal the worst injuries, rejuvenate barren lands, and replenish dried-up rivers. She'd even regrown forests that had burned down and summoned rain in regions suffering from droughts. Ellize also refused to give up on anyone. She relentlessly traveled throughout the land, saving everyone she could reach. The witch was hiding in fear, and the world was finally full of hope and light.

This golden age had already lasted for seven years. It was an anomaly—such a thing had never happened in the past. Everyone believed that as long as Ellize was around, the special bargain sale on peace would never run out of stock.

“And then it hit me,” Aiz said. “We need to preserve this era—this saint—for as long as possible. This is the one and only miracle we will ever get. Never again will another Ellize be given to us... Do you know how long the forest she easily regrew would have taken to heal if it had been left to its own devices? Hundreds of years. Do you have any idea how long the previous kings and saints

spent trying to reclaim the land Ellize took back from the monsters in a mere three days? Countless lives were lost without success. How many soldiers do you think would have been needed to save the Lutein Kingdom from the grim fate that awaited it?”

Aiz let out a strained laugh. He seemed to be mocking himself for his futile past endeavors and, at the same time, despairing at the cruel irony of his situation. He had to live to this age to finally witness such a miracle.

“Do you finally get it? A single year of Ellize’s life is worth more than the entire lives of ten saints! Letting her fight the witch would be absurd! We need to make sure that this golden age continues for as long as possible! Every year is precious! This is our duty!”



“Brother, are you sure we should go through with this?”

Three shadows were sneaking around inside the castle, taking advantage of the confusion created by the intruders. They were King Aiz’s three sons.

The remaining royal families had already departed—they couldn’t afford to leave their duties for too long—but Aiz and his sons had remained in the castle to look over Ellize.

The one who’d just asked his older brother a question to ease his anxiety was the youngest, Prince Maca. He was a young man of fourteen whose face still retained some youthful features, but it was already plain to see he would grow to be a beautiful man.

The eldest prince, Turmeric, scoffed. “Go back to your room if you’re so scared! We won’t get another chance to see her *up close*,” he shot back before letting out a vulgar laugh.

Prince Turmeric was already nineteen, and the years of opulence he’d enjoyed were starting to show—he was quite plump. Even though people still regularly died of hunger in this world, he’d somehow managed to grow over a hundred kilograms. It went to show how little regard he had for anything else but his own stomach.

“The more beautiful the flower, the more I want to see it plucked. Her guards

must be busy right now... Needless to say, this is a grave sin, brothers. Our status won't save us if we're caught. And yet...just the thought of putting my hands on her pure white skin makes all the risks well worth it!"

The one who'd just said the most vile, preposterous things without batting an eye was Prince Amino. At seventeen years old, he was a handsome youth. Unfortunately, the words that came out of his mouth betrayed his awful personality.

As for what the three teenagers were trying to achieve... Well, they were hoping to sneak into Ellize's room while her guards were preoccupied and have their way with her.

Of course, if they succeeded in their endeavor, they'd be committing one of the most serious crimes of all. They'd certainly be sentenced to death, tortured, and paraded through town before their executions. However, they'd lost their minds. The only thought in their brains was Ellize's beauty. They revered her, adored her, yearned for her...and lusted for her.

They desired nothing more than to thread their fingers through her golden strands, to lay their hands on her pale skin...

Ellize was gorgeous, and it wasn't all that strange for men who laid eyes upon her to feel such urges. However, most did not take it to the extent that the princes did. The majority never even entertained the possibility of a carnal relationship with her—they were simply thankful whenever they got to look at her. In a way, they didn't truly see Ellize as a *human*—she was like an otherworldly being, a goddess, that they could only gaze at from afar. While they certainly admired her beauty, they didn't lust after her.

On the other hand, the princes had seen countless pretty girls and boys at parties. Nobles ate and slept much better than peasants did, so they naturally had better skin and hair. The ladies also wore makeup and worked on their appearance. While the girls the princes had seen still didn't hold a candle to Ellize, mingling with such people on a daily basis meant they had different standards in regards to beauty. As such, they saw Ellize as a woman—the most gorgeous one alive.

Her charms had gotten to them, filling their heads with such insatiable lust

that they didn't even treasure their own lives anymore. They'd lost all rationality.

It was probably for that very reason that another peculiar individual—someone who'd lost their reason long ago—picked up on their intentions so quickly.

“What an interesting conversation. I'd love to hear more.”

The three princes flinched as they heard a voice behind them. They turned around at once, but they couldn't make out the expression of the man who'd just spoken.

Supple Ment was standing with his back to the light, and his glasses sparkled mysteriously.

Chapter 30: Future

Aiz And Ai Bilberry XIII had always thought that the balance between light and darkness was terrible. For instance, the dark ages created by the witch stretched on much longer than the periods of peace earned by the saint.

The next saint could only be born after the previous saint had fully turned into a witch. This meant the saint would naturally need a long time to grow up until she was ready to face the witch. How long was it, you ask? No matter how much they rushed the saint's education, it still took fifteen to twenty years until she could rival the witch. Saints were all born with their powers, but they needed at least fifteen years to become able to wield them properly. Most weren't able to wield their saintly powers from childhood like Ellize could; they needed time.

It wasn't like anyone had arbitrarily picked their fifteenth birthday as the deadline—that was just how things were. Perhaps a child's body was too weak to handle the full brunt of their powers, perhaps not. No one really knew why.

When boys grew up, they became more manly, while girls matured into women. Just like them, saints needed some time to come into their own. The royals called this moment "awakening." Until saints awakened, they were pretty much regular girls—the only notable difference being that they couldn't be hurt by anything but dark magic.

In the meantime, the witch was free to do whatever she liked, which meant her dominion over the world always lasted for at least fifteen years. On the other hand, the peace created by saints was fleeting, to say the least. The records did not mention any stretch of peace longer than five years, which appeared to be the upper limit.

How could the gap be so large?

Mending took so much longer than destroying, and yet the side that did nothing but destroy was given a head start. The effort it took to burn down a tree could never compare to the vast amount of time and effort needed for a

new tree to grow and mature in its place. And yet, the witch and her monsters were given all the time in the world to raze to their heart's content, while the people were barely given any to nurture new lives.

The same went for monsters and archmonsters. All the witch needed to do to create new monsters was to give wild animals a bit of her power. They would then remain loyal to her under any circumstances. If the witch died, they'd immediately side with the next witch. That was how Alexia had been able to escape the saint's castle.

Aiz couldn't help but think it was all absurd. Why could the witch create as many deadly weapons to use against the saint as she wanted, when no one but the saint could kill the witch?

In the end, while saints very much risked dying before they could accomplish their duty, witches would go on living eternally until a saint managed to slay them.

The sheer difference in numbers was yet another disadvantage.

Whenever a witch died, monsters stopped attacking people for a while. Instead, they'd go into hiding. As soon as the next witch had taken over, they went back to assaulting people.

Thanks to the dark powers bestowed upon them by the witch, monsters were infinitely harder to kill than regular beasts. Unlike their normal animal counterparts, they didn't grow weak and senile with age. That same dark power, however, took a toll on their bodies and reduced their life span; unlike the witch, they were not immortal. Still, that wasn't enough to diminish their numbers. Even if their monster counterparts were to die a few years earlier, some animals had a life span of several decades—shaving a few years off wouldn't change much. That meant the witch could steadily grow her army. In other words, the number of monsters roaming the land increased with each generation.

Needless to say, if there were more monsters, there were also more people that suffered from their attacks. People had no choice but to give up entire areas to the monsters and flee to safer zones, which were gradually shrinking with the years.

With all the disadvantages they faced, how could the world move forward? How could civilization advance?

Aiz had three sons, although he thought they were still too young to inherit his throne. He'd had other sons in the past who would've been older and more mature by now...had they survived. They'd been slaughtered by monsters years ago. As a result, Aiz had become very protective of his younger sons, but their soft upbringing had turned them into fools.

How vexing, Aiz thought.

Either way, the risk of being killed by monsters was growing by the day—no, it *had* been growing by the day.

Ellize's birth had tipped the balance to the other side.

She'd exterminated thousands of monsters and reclaimed land from them. She'd worked so hard over the past seven years that the territory of the monsters had been reduced by over ninety percent.

She'd also revived the natural areas that had been destroyed by previous witches. The wastelands, barren forests, and dried-up rivers had been transformed. Ellize made flowers bloom in the cracked soil and turned deserts into plains where fauna could gather again. She entirely deserved her title as the greatest saint in history.

She also had a convenient personality: Ellize had no interest in politics. She let the people in place govern without ever trying to butt in. She stood at the very top, but she held no political power or any interest in gaining any. She was a perfect figurehead, simply content to go around defeating monsters and healing the land. The royalty and nobility also had little to complain about. They reaped the benefits and continued to rule over their people while using Ellize as a symbol.

There was still one issue, though: Ellize was eager to carry out her duty and rid the world of the witch. That didn't sit well with Aiz. Letting such a perfect saint fall for a mere five years—at best—of true peace was ridiculous!

He knew they'd never be blessed with such a golden age again. If they lost Ellize, the balance of the world would once again favor darkness.

He'd made up his mind: the best thing to do was to make this blessing last as long as possible. With Ellize around, they could increase humanity's territory even further! They could cut down the number of monsters and allow nature to heal!

All Ellize needed to do was weaken the dark side as much as possible so that the next saint would have a head start. Her successor could kill the witch; there was no need for Ellize to do that herself.

That was why he'd confined her.

From now on, he'd be the one to decide which group of monsters she fought and who she saved. If he allowed her to roam around freely and she ran into the witch, the worst would come to pass. He'd investigate and make sure the witch was nowhere near the places he allowed Ellize to visit.

Aiz was well aware that his plan was flawed.

No matter how he chose to present things, locking up the saint was a great sin. He'd decided to allow her to keep her authority—that was, to let her remain as a symbolic leader—in order to avoid invoking the people's wrath. Still, he had no doubt his name would go down as one of the worst sinners in history. He wouldn't be surprised if, eventually, everyone turned against him and brought him to the gallows.

He accepted that. He'd already lived long enough and didn't fear death. If anything, he'd gladly give up his life to give hope—however little it was—to the next generation.

The witches' eras were always hellish. Monsters ran rampant, forcing the people to live in constant fear. They burned and destroyed fields and forests, creating terrible food shortages. No matter how hard the people worked to make up for it, famine would spread, killing thousands in its wake.

Even Aiz himself had no idea how many soldiers had died in futile efforts to regain farming land.

Sometimes, he'd been forced to give up on those who were doomed in order to make sure others would survive...

He remembered the emaciated faces of the peasants who'd gone crazy. He'd

seen the despair in their eyes. They could no longer even hope that a better future would come anymore. After all, even if the saint succeeded in defeating the witch, they'd only get a short break at best.

The witch will destroy it all again anyway, they thought.

Five years was too little to recover what had been lost... Far too little...

People celebrated peace, of course, but they couldn't truly rejoice from the bottom of their hearts. And...they turned against one another.

They wanted to make reserves before the next dark age started. They wanted to ensure they were better off than their neighbors, to ensure *they* would survive. And so, people robbed, brawled over resources, and killed one another. When such conflicts escalated to a national level, wars started.

That was just how badly the future scared them.

Aiz himself had taken part in such conflicts many times. What else could he have done? With the livestock dead and both the forests and fields burnt to a crisp, his people would've died of hunger if he'd stayed passive.

It wasn't like they could all get along and share what little food and resources remained after a dark age. Had they done so, they wouldn't have been able to sustain anyone at all. There simply wasn't enough to go around.

Such situations invariably gave birth to hoarders—idiotic nobles in most cases. They took and took from their subjects, leaving them with nothing.

It was a vicious cycle. People would get scared and try to secure enough food to last them a long time, fearing there soon wouldn't be enough on the market. As soon as that started happening, even those who had no intention to hoard were forced to do so. *Oh no, I have to get my share before everything runs out,* they'd think. Soon enough, the supplies would truly run out, and those who hadn't managed to get their hands on anything would be left to die.

Aiz, as the king, would then be forced to make a choice—to decide who to give up on. He would fabricate evidence, framing the selected nobles and destroying their houses. He'd then redistribute the food to the commoners to save as many of them as possible. Obviously, there was never enough to feed everyone. He had to give up on some villages while he sent relief to others.

A few times, he'd received reports that his relief carriages had been attacked by bandits. He'd sat on the news long enough for these villages to be decimated by hunger before sending his soldiers to arrest the thieves and seize every last bit of food they could find to redistribute elsewhere.

He'd also endured hunger himself, as had his children and his deceased wife. While Turmeric had grown fat in recent years, he'd been a scrawny boy for most of his childhood.

Aiz knew he was a terrible man. He'd been told to go to hell more times than he could count. He knew that hundreds resented him. But even so, what he'd done hadn't been enough.

He'd become scum. He'd used any and every means to save his people. Regardless, they still died during poverty and fought each other during peaceful eras as they prepared for a grim future.

Aiz had learned the hard way that kindness and compassion could only bloom when people were secure enough in their own lives. Only when you had enough for yourself could you share with your neighbor. How could you be expected to care for others if you already had your hands full with your own survival?

Aiz had learned to accept that this didn't mean these people were evil. It was simply human nature. You couldn't give what you didn't have in the first place.

Ellize's endeavors over the past seven years had changed everything, though.

The fields yielded plenty of crops, and people could take what they needed from Mother Nature. Their needs were met, allowing them to care for others.

Aiz had felt it too. He was finally able to let his children eat as much as they wanted.

That was why he didn't want this era to end. He wanted to preserve this beautiful, gentle world and pass it along to the next generation. He wanted to give them a future where they wouldn't be ruled by their fear of the witch.

If that meant he had to be walked to the gallows while the people threw stones at him, he'd accept it. If that meant he had to be known as the treacherous king who betrayed the greatest saint in history forevermore, he'd accept it. He didn't mind becoming the biggest scum in the world and earning

the ire of future generations.

All he wanted was to give his children a future where they didn't need to cry from hunger, one where they got to eat their fill. He wanted to leave behind a world where no one would need to fight over food scraps.



For some reason, a super huge fight had broken out, and everyone was totally ignoring me.

I rolled around in my bed, listening to the sounds of battle and people pouring their hearts out just outside my doors.

So, uh, the thing is...you know I can totally hear you guys, right?

Okay, I *miight* have been using a teeny *tiny* bit of wind magic to amp the air vibration and deliver the sounds straight to my ears.

I had a feeling that if I refined this spell a bit more and threw some thunder magic into the mix, I'd be able to turn sound waves into electric signals. That way, I could make the sound travel across hundreds of miles. I wasn't quite there yet, though. *This needs some fine-tuning.*

"I'll turn into a sinner to protect this peace! This is my duty as much as yours!"

"Nonsense! You decided that all on your own! You're pushing your narrative onto her!"

King Aiz—who'd ordered my confinement—and Verner—who was here to save me—were going at it. I could also hear the occasional *clang* of swords clashing, but I knew the king wasn't fighting Verner—Scotterbrain was.

To think I'd end up triggering the Scotterbrain betrayal event like this. Guess there's no skipping it no matter what, huh?

I could also hear Four-Eyed Pervert blabbing about Verner and the others' fighting styles, as well as their weaknesses, to a group of knights.

And I guess we have the kidnapping and confinement arc here, huh? I'm starting to think this is fate—a very annoying one! Since Verner and his friends came for me, I should probably escape with them, right?

To be honest, I wanted to chill and enjoy my NEET life a little longer. I was worried that if I stayed put for too long, though, the witch might take advantage of my absence and walk out of the academy. She'd only remained holed up in the basement (despite the risks) because teleportation was a dangerous spell to use. Even in the game, using teleportation had taken a toll on her and seriously weakened her.

To be fair, it had mostly been used as a plot device then. In some routes, you'd take on the witch much earlier. The whole "dangerous spell" thing was how the devs had found a way to justify the huge level discrepancy. After all, the player had to be able to beat her with weaker characters.

Let's just assume she loses a few particles along the way.

Anyway, point was, the witch would most likely try to avoid using teleportation if she could.

Since I was always at the academy, she couldn't really sneak out. She'd remained cooped up in the basement this whole time—she couldn't risk running into me, after all. As soon as she heard of my current predicament, though, there was a big chance she'd make a run for it.

Obviously, I'd been feeding her false intel to avoid that, but the one in charge of that had been Four-Eyed Pervert. Now that he was clearly siding with the people who'd trapped me here, I couldn't trust him anymore.

Anyway, that was the main reason I'd had a change of heart just now. I wasn't *entirely* unhappy about Verner and his friends coming to save me.

"Layla, throw these impudent children in jail," I heard the king command.

"Yes..."

I almost thought they'd resolve their argument without fighting, but in the end, King Aiz had managed to convince Layla to do his bidding. Verner didn't hold a candle to her. She managed to capture him in just a few seconds.

Scotterbrain's just that strong.

Before long, the rest of his friends were also overpowered by the knights and soldiers and they joined him in jail. Even Eterna was caught by Scotterbrain

—game over.

Did they mess up the event? Guys... Why'd you even come here?

I had half a mind to let them rot in jail because of their shitty performance, but I couldn't *really* do that—they'd be charged with treason and exiled, or worse, sentenced to death.

I guess I need to step in, huh?

I'd learned that Layla wasn't their hostage—she was literally working with them!—so there was no reason for me to keep a low profile anymore.

Now that that's all settled... Let's blast the door with magic! BOOOM! Time to speedrun this rescue arc!

Chapter 31: Counterattack

After blowing off the door of my room, I wanted to head straight to Verner and the others. Needless to say, though, the member of my guard who was on lookout duty blocked my path.

He immediately reached out for his sword, but didn't draw it. Their goal was to keep me alive and well so they could use me as a symbol. I doubted he'd actually pull out his sword—hurting me would defeat the purpose.

What's wrong, huh? Not drawing your sword? You can't, can you? Ha ha ha! Feeling frustrated yet? Heh heh heh!

I passed him by leisurely. It felt amazing to do that knowing full well he was powerless to do anything to stop me!

"L-Lady Ellize, wait! I was told not to let you leave! If you really insist on going...could you beat me up first?"

Random-traitorous-knight-1... Oh, no, wait—random-traitorous-knight-1 was the one who'd fought what's-his-face. His name was...Sex, or something... Oh! Rex! His name was Rex! I still wasn't over the fact that a random guy like him had such a cool name.

You should take notes from that other generic dude! His name is John, he knows his place!

Anyway, the dude in front of me was another guy altogether. *I shall nickname you random-traitorous-knight-2!*

His real name was Finley Blueye. Did you picture a blond hero with blue eyes? Too bad, the dude had dark brown hair! Babies were often blond and their hair tended to get darker as they grew up. I assumed he'd been born blond, just like I'd been. Plus, his eyes were gray.

Where's the blue, bro?!

Count Blueye came from a house that had boasted beautiful blue eyes for

generations, but, from what I knew, only as infants. They almost always changed color as they grew up.

Shouldn't y'all rename your house Grayeye?

Anyway, Mister brown-hair-gray-eyes here had just asked me to beat him up.

I'll ignore the masochist and just move on. You want me to beat you up so you can pretend you did everything in your power to stop me, huh? Do I look like I care about your reputation, huh?! Idiot. I'm gonna leave you high and dry.

“My hands were not given to me so I could hit fellow human beings. The same goes for that sword of yours. I will not harm you, and I strongly believe you will not draw your sword either.” I blurted out some goody-two-shoes justification.

I left Grayeye behind without touching a hair on his head and started going down the stairs. To be fair, I had approximately zero percent faith in that dude. I'd maxed out my defensive spells just in case he tried something. In the end, though, Grayeye didn't try anything. He fell to his knees and looked at me helplessly.

I hope they all laugh at you for letting me go so easily!

“Lady Ellize, please go back to your room!”

“Please!”

As I walked down the stairs, a few other knights came running toward me, begging me to stop. None of them managed to do anything more than stare at me blankly, though, their swords left untouched. Eventually, enough of them flocked to me that they'd ended up forming a wall in front of me, preventing me from moving forward.

It was time to call upon my trusty light magic!

People—just like animals—never really saw what was in front of them. What their eyes actually saw was the light reflected by that object. The same went for colors. We never really saw the true color of anything, we saw the colors being reflected by that object...uh, or so my physics classes had claimed. Either way, my point was that, as long as you could control light however you wanted, you could create illusions. I simply had to make it so that I didn't reflect light

anymore! I also picked a random spot in the room and mimicked the way I normally reflected light there.

“Lady Ellize, please let us take you back to your room...”

“We can’t let you leave!”

The soldiers ran up to that spot and started begging the thin air (well, in their eyes, I was standing right there). I slipped through a gap without difficulty and continued my way down.

The prison was located in the basement, so I assumed Verner and the others had been taken there. It went without saying, but the true purpose of this prison wasn’t to hold intruders like them—that space was meant to trap the saint after she defeated the witch.

I stayed in stealth mode and stepped into the basement. For some reason... Verner and his friends weren’t in the cell.

Actually, the cell didn’t look like what I’d pictured at all. I’d imagined a cage, but what was in front of me was a gaping hole—the type of trap where you pushed people down and hoped they never came crawling out.

Isn’t this jail kinda shitty? Escaping would take me five seconds. I can fly.

I heard a voice. “Your Majesty... Please surrender.”

Huh? I feel like I missed something.

I had no idea how or when, but Verner and his party had turned the tables on King Aiz. The soldiers that’d been accompanying him were all down, and Four-Eyed Pervert—who’d been getting all chummy with the soldiers a few minutes ago—stood next to Verner as if they were allies. Layla was being restricted by a clay puppet, which meant she couldn’t do much at the moment. Four-Eyed Pervert had probably been the one to cast that spell. Earth magic was his specialty, after all.

I was a bit puzzled, though. Layla could easily break free if she tried to. Why hadn’t she?

I had a lot of trouble wrapping my head around the whole thing, so I decided to listen in for the time being. It looked like Four-Eyed Pervert had pretended to

be on the king's side to trick him, then waited for Verner and the others to be caught. That was when he'd made his move to overturn the situation, saving them and trapping the king instead. I assumed they intended to come to save me after that.

Not that I needed saving—I was already out of my room!

Suddenly, a soldier came running in. He didn't stop to take in the situation, he just screamed, "Your Majesty! I have urgent news from the capital! A gigantic monster—thought to be an archmonster—is marching an army of monsters on the capital! They're getting closer as we speak!"

"What?!"

Everyone panicked.

As I'd mentioned during the events in Lutein, only knights could hope to fight back against archmonsters. However, most of the knights—as well as all the members of my elite guard—were stationed in this castle for the sole sake of keeping me trapped here. At the moment, the royal capital's defenses were lackluster, to say the least.

Naturally, the king had left some knights behind. They'd most likely be able to hold out for a while, but it was sure to turn into a gruesome fight.

The royal messengers most likely used Stil's birds as well. Considering the distance that separated the capital from the saint's castle, it would've taken the bird an hour, more or less, to get here. This meant this piece of information was already obsolete. We had no way of knowing what was going on in the capital right now.

"What of the knights in the royal capital?!" the king asked.

"They're preparing to engage, but...the monsters are too numerous. They're requesting reinforcements as soon as possible."

"How could they fail to notice an entire army approaching the capital?!"

"I-I don't know, Your Majesty... They simply wrote that the monsters had appeared out of nowhere..."

I understood why King Aiz was so flustered.

I'd taken care of most of the monsters and archmonsters in the area. Although I'd obviously missed some, the soldiers and knights in charge of protecting the capital should've been more than enough to deal with the remnants. King Aiz would never have confined me here unless he was certain there weren't enough monsters left to be a serious threat to humanity.

However...archmonsters could appear spontaneously. It was incredibly rare, but as long as a few dozen monsters gathered in the same spot, they could devour one another until an archmonster appeared even without the intervention of the witch. This one must've slaughtered other monsters of its own accord until it'd turned into an archmonster. Then other monsters, who'd hidden all over the place, had flocked to their new leader, creating an army large enough to threaten the capital.

The witch's followers had their backs against the wall. That was the only way to explain why they'd go for such large-scale offensives not just once, but *twice*. They understood that unless they gathered all of their remaining forces into a do-or-die attack, they had no way to win anymore.

I miiiight have bullied them a little too much. Well, well, no need to despair! The country's in a tough spot, but fear not! I can just take a little trip to the capital and show off my peerless abilities!

It was probably about time I stopped hiding.

Yes?

"Releasing Lady Ellize would be the solution to all of our worries?"

Indeed.

"But would she listen to our request after we treated her like this?"

I mean, yeah. I don't care.

The people of the Bilberry Kingdom hadn't done me dirty—only their king had. I didn't have any reason to punish them. On top of that, I'd had a pretty good time here living my best NEET life.

If anything, I should thank that old geezer for locking me up!

"Lady Ellize?! How... Why are you here?!"

How? I escaped, duh!

To be perfectly accurate, I was trying to look cool while saving Verner and the others, but it turned out they apparently didn't need me to step in at all...

Huh? Why am I here, then? Daaaaamn, I'm the opposite of cool right now!

I felt like an idiot for getting fooled and worrying about them!

Hmm, so what now...? Oh, I know! I heard the old geezer's call for help, so I came running! wink

No need to worry about the whole confinement business, I totally forgive you! I'm not mad at all! Yes, yes, I know, I'm the generous type! I welcome all sorts of betrayals, so go right ahead, friend! I'll totally forgive you over and over again, even if you betray me a hundred—no, a thousand times! I'll even come to the rescue in times of need, so don't hesitate to give me a little NEET vacation from time to time, please and thanks!

After I said something along those lines, Aiz started crying.

LMAO!!! Your crying face's seriously ugly, bro!

For some reason, he even grabbed my hands. I had only brought them toward him for the show!

Who told you this was okay, old geezer?! Urgh... His palms are all sticky, eww.



After being caught, Verner and his group had been brought to an underground prison.

Layla—who'd followed King Aiz's orders to arrest them—looked even more pitiful than before. She'd stared at the students with an apologetic expression on her face.

Verner and Eterna hadn't struggled. They were fully aware of how much stronger Layla was, and plenty of soldiers had already caught up to them anyway. They'd decided that there wouldn't be any point in wasting their stamina here. The best course of action would be to meekly follow Layla and the king, then wait for a better opportunity to strike.

However, as soon as they'd seen the castle's prison, they'd understood that they'd made a mistake. Since the king had told Layla to throw them in jail, they'd assumed they'd be locked up inside a room closed by bars—in other words, inside a cell.

Well, they weren't exactly wrong. There *was* a room and there *were* iron bars. The thing was that, instead of the room being in front of them, it was located *under* their feet. A hole, fifteen meters deep, had been dug. The walls were made of smooth iron, and an iron grid had been installed, which meant the pit could be closed off at any given time.

There was no escaping such a place unless you were someone like Ellize, who could fly. A regular person wouldn't even be able to get up to the iron grid.

A few moments after they'd arrived, Verner had heard footsteps. Before long, another group of knights and soldiers had arrived, accompanied by Supple.

"Would you look at this? You've all been caught," he'd said. "That's what you get for storming into such a place without a plan."

Verner had called out the name of his teacher—his enemy at the time. "Mr. Supple..."

Supple hadn't paid him any mind. Instead, he'd forced Verner and his friends to walk a few steps, carefully looking at the ropes that bound them.

"Thank you for your hard work, Supple Ment. We've caught all of the students that you warned us about."

"I work hard every day. Having such poor students is tiring. I still can't believe they charged in from the front door," Supple had sneered. "I can take it from here."

"We couldn't possibly leave," one of the soldiers had answered.

"We're here to guard His Majesty as well," another had added.

Supple had simply nodded, as if he thought that their explanation was perfectly reasonable. The next second, he'd unleashed his magic, and a few clay puppets, tall as people, rose from the ground.

The soldiers had assumed he'd intended to use them to push Verner and the

others into the hole, but one of the puppets had suddenly grabbed Layla, pinning her in place.

“M-Mr. Supple?! What are you—”

Before the soldier had been able to finish his question, Supple’s puppets had knocked him and his colleagues out. The puppets had then immediately proceeded to surround Aiz, while Supple cut the ropes that restrained Verner and the others.

“Mr. Supple... Why?” Verner had asked, utterly surprised.

“You’re a bunch of fools. How could you fail to foresee where your thoughtless endeavor would get you? You ruined my plan as well! I wanted to bide my time, earn their trust, and wait for the perfect occasion to save the saint!” Supple had admonished them, then let out a long sigh. “I would have looked so dashing!”

As it turned out, Supple had never been in favor of confining Ellize. He’d only pretended to be so he could get the king and his men to lower their guard. Then, he’d save Ellize.

Eterna had yet to piece it all together. She stared at him, confused, and muttered, “B-But... You said you thought Lady Ellize had to be locked up so she wouldn’t die...”

“I cannot say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind... However, while captive birds live longer and do not have to suffer the harshness of the wild, those that aren’t allowed to soar in the sky are much more frail. They suffer from depression and oftentimes die untimely young as well, albeit for different reasons.”

People and birds lived in different environments. They did not live in the same climate, around the same sources of light and sound... If these factors were too different from their natural habitat, birds often died prematurely. A bird cared for by an ignorant owner was nothing if not pitiful. It would forget how to fly, its wings would lose all strength, and it would simply waste away day after day in a stressful environment, unable to do anything but dream of the unreachable blue sky.

A bird that was forced to rely on the choices of an owner that was ignorant of its needs would only suffer. Even though the owner felt like the temperature was perfect, the bird might have sweltered or frozen to death. Even though the owner thought the room was bright and nice, the bird might be in pain from the blinding light.

“I do believe that caring for a bird in a cage, showering it with love, and helping it live a long and fulfilled life is a beautiful thing. However, this implies you know how to care for it. You need to understand the bird on a deeper level... And most importantly, you need to truly love it,” Supple said, snapping his fingers.

Immediately, one of the clay puppets he’d created emerged from the shadows and threw something on the floor: the three princes. They were trapped in clay and couldn’t lift a finger. Although Supple ought to have respected the princes of his country, he clearly wasn’t treating them delicately. He looked down at them, his eyes cold as ice.

“Do you know what these three tried to do, Your Majesty? These lowlifes dared to lust after our glorious saint. I caught them trying to sneak into her room and assault her. Do you think this is right, Your Majesty? You said you’d keep Lady Ellize safe. Are you not supposed to keep such trash that may hurt her away from her?” Supple said, not bothering to hide the vitriol in his voice.

If anything, he was looking down on him, as if the king was less important than he himself was. As for the princes, he treated them like objects—in his eyes, they weren’t even human anymore.

“After coming here I realized how mistaken I was. No one in this castle loves the saint. You do not understand her either. I refuse to cooperate with you under such circumstances. This castle is a faulty cage. It will do nothing but harm her beauty... A terrible place, indeed. I would never allow my saint to remain trapped here. I’m ashamed that you used the taxes you wrung out of hardworking citizens to build such a sad pile of feces,” he concluded, glaring at the king.

Supple had never been loyal to the king. The only thing this twisted and perverted man cared about was the saint he worshipped. If he deemed that

someone—anyone—risked harming her, he'd get rid of them, no matter what it took.

Chapter 32: Forgiveness

In his youth, Aiz was convinced he could change the world. He thought he could extend a helping hand to the suffering people, that he'd never forsake anyone who sought his support. He believed that he'd become a good king.

Only youngsters could find such groundless optimism in their hearts. They were fearless, believing that they were capable of anything.

Aiz used to be foolish, certainly, but he had yet to become scum. If he could, he'd gladly trade his wisdom for the beautiful dreams he used to have.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, but don't worry Aiz... I'll defeat the witch and I'll come back. I promise."

He still remembered how Lilia had smiled as she said those words. Lilia was nine years younger than him, and he'd always treasured the pink-haired girl like his own sister.

She was full of mirth and loved to admire flowers... Had she not been born as the saint, she would most likely never have chosen to involve herself in the war against the witch. She was a gentle soul—the type that wouldn't hurt a fly.

She had a dream, though. After saving the world, she wanted to step down from her role as the saint, fall in love like a normal girl, and start a family. It was such an ordinary wish...but Aiz remembered how precious that dream was to her.

And yet, he'd been the one who'd taken that dream away from her. He'd told her that even if she came back victorious, she'd turn into the next witch.

Aiz had always been told not to tell the saint the truth, but he'd decided to do so anyway. He didn't have any ill will—all he wanted was to find a way to change fate. He didn't want a gentle soul like Lilia to become a hateful witch.

However, he hadn't had a plan. He hadn't thought of what would happen if the saint gave up on fighting the witch. He just thought that there had to be a way. As long as he told Lilia, they'd find a solution, somehow.

The only thing he won from speaking the truth was Lilia's death.

Lilia fell into despair. She'd understood that no matter what she chose to do, her dream would never come true.

She'd been taken away from her parents at birth and raised for the sole sake of defeating the witch. She'd studied and trained hard with that goal in mind. The only reason she'd been able to withstand the hardships was her steadfast belief that, at the end of her path, happiness was waiting for her.

Because of Aiz, she'd learned that there was no place for her in the peaceful world she was forced to create.

Aiz couldn't begin to imagine how painful that must have been. The young girl who loved to smile became a shell of her former self. After a while, she'd disappeared, leaving her knights behind.

As soon as word had reached him, Aiz had led an army to search for her. He prayed that she hadn't done anything rash. As long as she was still alive, he was convinced that they could find another path—one where she had a future and the right to look for her own happiness.

Please, he prayed. Please be alive. God, anyone! Please save her!

Aiz had continued to look for Lilia everywhere, begging someone, anyone, to help him—to help *her*.

Finally...he'd found what was left of Lilia—a corpse that didn't even look human anymore.

Even though she was the saint, she wasn't truly invincible: monsters could kill her. In the end, the saint Lilia lost her life without accomplishing anything. She hadn't been able to stay strong in the face of the truth Aiz had foolishly revealed.

Many years passed, and Aiz turned forty.

He'd learned from his mistakes and made sure that the next saint, Alexia, didn't hear a word about the fate that awaited her. He couldn't allow the dark age to go on any longer. No matter what, Alexia *needed* to kill the witch.

However, by the time Alexia had turned twelve, monster attacks had become

more and more vicious. They'd attacked villages and cities and slaughtered every human they could find mercilessly.

Alexia was still far too young to face the witch. Until she came into her own, the knights, soldiers, nobility, and royals had to protect the people. That was their duty.

At the time, the man in charge of leading the Bilberry army had been the accomplished crown prince—Aiz's firstborn son. His younger brothers had been just as admirable as him, and each of them had led a platoon, devoting themselves to the cause.

Aiz had been getting ready to step down and pass the throne to one of them. He was proud of each of his sons and trusted that the kingdom would be fine, no matter which of them succeeded him.

His first son, in particular, had recently proven that he was ready to inherit the throne by completing a trial meant to test his abilities as a ruler. Everyone had been expecting him to take over.

As soon as the upcoming campaign was over, he'd be able to sit on the throne, his legitimacy bolstered by his military achievements. He'd become a great king known to protect his people in times of need.

"I'll be back soon, Father," he'd said.

"Don't make such a grim face, Father. You didn't raise your sons to lose to monsters so easily, did you?" another of his sons had said.

"Until the saint is ready, it's our duty to protect the people. That's what you taught us, right?" the third added.

A few days later, an unbelievable report had reached Aiz. Archmonsters had appeared on each of the battlefields his sons were fighting on.

Aiz wasn't young anymore, but he set out immediately to save his sons.

Please, he prayed. Please let me arrive on time. Don't let them die!

He hadn't known who he was praying to anymore. He'd just needed someone—anyone—to save his sons. He'd continued to pray as he galloped as fast as possible until finally, he'd realized something—there was no salvation in this

world. His pleas for help hadn't reached anyone at all.

The only thing he'd found were the butchered corpses of his sons.

He hadn't even recognized them at first. Their remains no longer looked human.

Aiz's beloved sons had all met a glorious death in battle... However, their demise was glorious only in name. They hadn't brought any change. They'd died for nothing; the cities and villages they'd fought to protect had been destroyed regardless.

Aiz couldn't help but think that their losses wouldn't have been as terrible if he hadn't sent the army, and he resolved to prevent people from dying for no reason ever again. He wouldn't do useless things just because they were right.

"Your Majesty! Please help us! The village of Zinc will soon fall to the hands of the monsters!"

"I'm sure it will."

"Zinc is my home, Your Majesty! Please send help! I beg of you, call in the army!"

"There's no point. I cannot allow the soldiers to give up their lives to protect such a tiny village. The same goes for the knights. Their job is to preserve their strength so they can open a path for the saint... Give up on this village."

"Do you... Do you have no heart?!"

Aiz coldly looked at the man getting dragged out of the room by his soldiers. He didn't need that man's forgiveness. He wouldn't ask for it, not even in his heart. He knew he didn't deserve it, so why ask for it?

Apologizing for his actions would serve no purpose other than lessening his guilt. He wouldn't indulge in such behaviors. People were free to hate him and curse him. He knew too well that there was no forgiveness left for him now.

Aiz was the king. He had to pick the path that'd keep the most people alive—that was the only choice he was allowed to make.

The villages monsters attacked were far away from the royal capital. By the time the soldiers marched there, they'd be worn out. That meant an increase in

pointless casualties, and in the worst-case scenario, they'd all be decimated and the villages would be destroyed regardless.

It was better to give up on the villages altogether. At least Aiz could preserve the lives of the soldiers this way.

If he focused on defending cities with large populations, the kingdom would endure. That was the most important thing. If they held out until the saint could kill the witch, they'd get five years—at most—to get back on their feet.

Aiz always picked life...but such choices didn't always involve fighting monsters.

"Your Majesty! This doesn't make any sense! What am I guilty of?!"

"Corruption, kidnapping, mass murder...and a few other charges. Your house is finished."

"I've never done any of that!" the nobleman in front of him had cried. "Your Majesty, please investigate once more!"

"There's no point."

Aiz knew full well that this man hadn't done any of that. Aiz had made up that entire list of crimes himself, after all. However, he was far from innocent. He'd hoarded food—a crime that couldn't be pardoned given the current state of the world.

The noble didn't care what happened to others as long as he had enough for himself. He'd gathered so much food that his people were starving. With the food he'd monopolized, dozens of people could live. A few nobles couldn't compare to a hundred citizens, so Aiz had decided to crush his family and redistribute the food.

"You corrupt scum! You're the worst piece of trash in this kingdom! I'll never forgive you! I hate you! Go to hell, you bastard!"

The nobleman was dragged away, screaming and cursing. A few days later, he was hung for his crimes.

He wasn't the only one who'd met such a demise. All of the people who'd died for Aiz to preserve life cursed him before they passed.

How many times had Aiz been told he wouldn't be forgiven? It wasn't like he needed to hear it to know that.

Aiz's path was one of sin and betrayal. However, his choices had kept as many people alive as possible—that much was a fact. Aiz hadn't been able to save anyone, but he'd definitely decreased the number of casualties.

Obviously, the ones who'd been sacrificed or discarded couldn't care less about that. Even though it was all for the greater good, Aiz had betrayed Alexia, who'd done nothing but give everything she had for the sake of the world. He couldn't deny he was an odious sinner.

Aiz often wondered how much easier his life would've been if he'd been able to give up on everything and allowed himself to be a good person. He could've sent soldiers to save the people in need without thinking of the consequences. He'd surely feel less guilty.

However, Aiz knew what was bound to happen if he did that. The number of soldiers would quickly decrease, and before long, the large cities would be impossible to defend. When that happened, the monsters would take over the entire kingdom.

How wonderful it would've been to share the food equally among everyone! Sadly, Aiz knew that if he were to do so, everyone would starve to death before long.

How much easier would it have been if he'd stopped fighting and had let himself die? But Aiz knew his death would only bring solace to himself. Without him, the kingdom wouldn't hold out for long.

He couldn't save everyone. He couldn't beg for forgiveness. He couldn't even die. He could only continue to sin and betray everyone around him.

In his youth, Aiz was convinced he could change the world. He thought he could extend a helping hand to the suffering people, that he'd never forsake anyone who sought his support. He believed that he'd become a good king.

But the world didn't change. He'd forsaken his people time and time again. He'd become a corrupt, horrible king.

Aiz knew that there was no use in praying anymore. No one had ever lent him

an ear, after all. He didn't expect forgiveness—he'd sinned too many times for that.

And yet, deep inside... Aiz couldn't help but beg for someone to rescue him. He wanted to throw away his position, his responsibilities—everything—and depend on someone...anyone.



Supple's double-crossing had turned the tables around.

The king and Layla couldn't move an inch, and the soldiers they'd brought with them were all passed out on the floor.

There were still plenty of soldiers and knights in the castle, but they'd most likely need time to notice that something was off. After all, as far as they were concerned, the intruders had all been captured. There was no need to worry.

People were always most vulnerable when they thought victory was in their hands. They always let their guard down. Supple had chosen that moment to strike. There was just one variable in his plan—Layla. She was strong enough to break free and fight him, but it didn't look like she had any intention to do so. If anything, she seemed relieved to have been incapacitated.

"Your Majesty... Please surrender," Verner said.

Aiz's face contorted in anguish. To him, Verner and the others must've looked like a bunch of clueless kids. They had ideals, but couldn't see the bigger picture—irredeemable fools. However, Aiz had no way to overpower them.

He tried to scream to call for his subordinates upstairs, but Supple expected that. He immediately had the clay puppet clamp the king's mouth shut.

Now that the king was in their hands, they had the advantage. They could use him as a hostage and force the soldiers to release Ellize. Needless to say, they'd soon be chased down for treason...but that was a worry for another day.

However, as fate would have it, things didn't go as well as they'd hoped. They heard a soldier running down the stairs.

Did they notice something already?! Marie and Aina thought, getting ready to fight.

However, the soldier who barged into the basement looked off. He was clearly stressed out and had lost his cool. He didn't seem to sense the tense atmosphere in the room. "Your Majesty! I have urgent news from the capital! A gigantic monster—thought to be an archmonster—is marching an army of monsters on the capital! They're getting closer as we speak!"

Aiz pushed the puppet's hand away and screamed, "What?!" He'd only been able to do so because Supple's control had slipped because of the shock.

The capital was under attack now? The timing couldn't have been any worse! The king had gathered everyone who could hope to defeat an archmonster in this very castle. No, that wasn't exactly what had happened. The members of Ellize's guard had *insisted* on staying here to protect her in order to cope with their guilt. Aiz hadn't thought they'd be needed in the capital so soon, so he'd decided to indulge them so they wouldn't change their minds—a terrible mistake.

"What of the knights in the royal capital?!" the king asked.

"They're preparing to engage, but...the monsters are too numerous. They're requesting reinforcements as soon as possible."

"How could they fail to notice an entire army approaching the capital?!"

"I-I don't know, Your Majesty... They simply wrote that the monsters had appeared out of nowhere..."

Aiz had no idea how to react. He'd ensured that there were no powerful monsters—or worse, archmonsters—around before he'd decided to take the knights with him to the saint's castle. He'd decided to confine Ellize because he'd been *certain* that she wasn't needed anymore. And yet, an archmonster had suddenly appeared out of thin air! How was that even possible?!

Archmonsters had to be created by the witch, didn't they? Ellize had confirmed that she believed the witch was in the academy. It made no sense for an archmonster to appear spontaneously so far away from the witch's location... Had Ellize been mistaken? Or was their understanding of the archmonsters wrong all along? Aiz didn't know, and that only confused him more.

“Y-Your Majesty, what’s going on?!”

After he’d relayed his message and begun to calm down, the soldier finally noticed that something was off.

“Right here,” Supple said from behind him, pressing his hand to one of his pressure points. The soldier lost consciousness on the spot.

“Verner... Wh-What do we do?! The kingdom will fall... And my parents... My mom and my dad are in the capital...” Marie turned to Verner for help, but he didn’t know what to say.

“My mother’s also in the capital...” John said.

“And so’s my sister! What in the world are we supposed to do...?” Aina whimpered.

The students began to panic. What could they do to save the kingdom? A Stil’s bird took an hour to reach the saint’s castle, and they could fly! How long would *they* need to get there? Even if they managed to find a carriage, it’d take them several hours. Plus, once they’d arrived, then what? What were they supposed to do?

If all of the knights could be transported to the capital instantly, there was a chance they could fight against the odds, but no one could perform such a miracle. No saint in history had ever been capable of such a feat.

“Your Majesty! Now’s not the time for internal strife! Please release Lady Ellize immediately!” Verner begged. “She may be able to do something!”

If someone could still save the capital, it was Ellize.

Aiz shook his head. “Would you listen to one of my requests if you were in her shoes? Even if I release her...” he trailed off.

Aiz agreed that Ellize might be able to do something—she had exceptional powers, after all. However...how could he face her and ask her for help now? He’d betrayed and imprisoned her. How could he suddenly waltz in and tell her “Actually, I changed my mind! Go save the capital.”

Who in their right mind would agree? There was no way Ellize would. The Bilberry Kingdom was her enemy now, and so were the knights. Why would she

go out of her way to help those who'd betrayed her? She didn't owe them anything. In fact, she probably even wished they'd disappear after everything they'd done.

"If I were her, I certainly wouldn't," the king continued. "Someone who's betrayed you once will do it again. I'd never trust such a person. Why would I listen to their pleas?"

He fell to his knees in despair. The one miracle worker who could save the day was in this very castle. But he'd betrayed her and lost her trust. He'd justified his decision to confine Ellize by saying it was for the good of the world, but in the end, this entire plan was a failure. It had been doomed from the start.

Ellize had warned him—as long as the witch was alive, tragedies would occur. Monsters would attack, just like they had in the Lutein Kingdom. And what had he answered then? He'd said that the saint would be there to prevent that.

What a joke.

He'd betrayed the trust of the one person who could protect them while somehow assuming she'd continue to do so no matter what. What he'd done was akin to throwing Ellize in jail while telling her, "But make sure to protect me if things turn sour, okay?" He'd only considered his own interests. At the end of the day, Aiz And Ai Bilberry XIII of the Bilberry Kingdom was an old fool.

Ellize's light was so bright that he'd lost sight of his path and hadn't noticed that he was walking straight into a dead end. He'd told everyone who would listen he was doing this for the sake of the world, but that was just an excuse. He'd simply convinced himself that his logic was flawless and had lost himself in his own pretenses.

Had he been prepared to lose everything to give the next generation some hope? What bullshit. He'd simply tried to make himself feel better.

Sure, I'm a villain, but I'm doing this for the world! How admirable of me, he'd think. He was an irredeemable hypocrite. Somehow, he'd only just realized this.

Alexia and Dias had also been victims of his foolishness. She'd fought with everything she had to save the world. She'd risked her life to defeat the witch and lost many comrades she held dear in the battle. Surely, there was much Aiz

didn't know about what had happened during those difficult days. Alexia had suffered in ways he couldn't imagine.

And yet, when she'd finally returned after overcoming all odds he'd betrayed her and her knights. Hell, he'd even tried to kill her.

How could Alexia not have lost faith in humanity?

And here he was, repeating his mistakes once again. He hadn't learned anything. He was rotten to his very core. He could try to hide his putridness under pretenses, but nothing would change what he truly was: trash.

No one would listen to the request of a piece of garbage like himself.

Eterna and the others thought the very same. They understood how unlikely it was for Ellize to step in, so they remained silent.

Verner was the only one who thought differently. At the very least, Ellize would—

"At the very least, I can hear you out, King Aiz," a gentle voice roused Aiz from his despair.

Everyone raised their faces at once. Ellize was smiling at them, just like she always did.

"Lady Ellize?! How... Why are you here?!" Verner asked.

"Why, you ask?" Ellize seemed puzzled and stopped to think for a moment. "I heard someone's voice, that's all."

She seemed to think that the answer was obvious.

She crouched down so that she could look into Aiz's eyes. Her dress was sure to stain, but she didn't seem to mind. Aiz met her eyes, terrified of what she was about to say.

"I heard everything, King Aiz... I've heard the pleas for help you couldn't bring yourself to say aloud. You can leave the rest to me," she said.

"D-Do you not resent me? I betrayed you! I trampled your trust and locked you up! How could you forgive me?!" Aiz sounded bewildered.

He knew that he didn't deserve forgiveness. He'd done all this knowing full

well that she would *not* forgive him. His calls for help would never reach anyone, and no one would ever give him the forgiveness he so desperately craved. He knew that.

And yet, he couldn't detect even the smallest hint of anger in Ellize's eyes. He didn't understand.

"I don't resent you at all, and I hope you'll stop blaming yourself as well. If you cannot forgive yourself, then...I will instead."

"I-I might betray you again! How can you possibly forgive me when I've already betrayed your trust?!"

Even though she'd been betrayed by the people who were supposed to protect her, Ellize hadn't changed at all. As long as someone needed her, she'd rush to them, just like she always did.

Verner realized that once again, and squinted his eyes as if he were looking at the sun itself.

"I'll forgive you as many times as you need me to. Even if you betray me a hundred times—no, a thousand times—I won't abandon you," Ellize said with a smile, holding out her hand toward the king.



“So please forgive yourself, all right?” she added.

Aiz couldn't take it anymore. Tears started rolling down his cheeks.

He'd promised himself he'd protect his people no matter the cost. He'd do anything, even if it meant turning into a villain. But he'd finally understood that his reasoning had been nothing but an excuse—a sorry lie he'd told himself repeatedly to avoid his guilt.

The saint he'd idolized and adored like an older sister had fallen into darkness, while the saint he'd doted upon like a little sister had died.

He'd sworn that he wouldn't let the tragic cycle repeat itself. He'd become scum and betrayed Alexia...all for nothing. Then, he'd committed the same sin once more by betraying Ellize, utterly convinced that he was beyond redemption anyway.

And yet, one sentence from Ellize had saved him. No one else would ever know how badly he'd needed to hear her words of redemption.

Aiz was crying so much that he couldn't see, but he managed to take Ellize's hands.

She wouldn't give up on anyone—even the most wretched man in the world.

The old king held on to her hands and wept like a child.

Chapter 33: Make Haste Slowly

I left the crying old mess on the floor and hurried up the stairs. I headed out as soon as I reached the first floor, ready to head to the capital.

I know no one cares, but boy do I hate walking while wearing a skirt!

I was the saint—well, in name—so wearing these clothes was par for the course. To be honest, though, I really wished I could wear comfy outfits instead. *Like...sweatpants*. Not to mention I was a dude. I *really* couldn't get used to dresses, no matter how many times I wore them.

I started picturing my male body in a dress...and struggled to stop myself from laughing. Actually, I would've *preferred* seeing that compared to the body I had now—at least I could've pretended I was wearing it as a joke that way. If I got people to laugh, I wouldn't even mind twirling around a bit!

Not to brag, but in this body, dresses suited me *way* too well. I couldn't just laugh it off.

Well, whatever. Not that any of this truly mattered anyway.

Moving on to more important issues—I'd estimated the time it'd take me to reach the capital of the Bilberry Kingdom. Only forty kilometers or so separated my castle from the capital, so it really wasn't all that far away. If I gave it my all...it'd probably only take a few minutes.

That's not even a marathon! It's basically in the neighborhood!

The stealthy birds could cover this distance in around an hour despite their small stature, and it'd take a decent marathoner back on earth a little over two hours. As for me, I could easily reach three hundred kilometers per hour while flying, so I probably didn't need more than eight minutes.

Speaking of which, I always made sure to use a bit of light magic so no one could look up my skirt when I was flying. It wasn't like I was embarrassed about people seeing my panties—I didn't care about that. It was the thought of gross men getting excited about it that gave me goose bumps.

All righty! Let's get going and solve this whole mess real quick!

"Wait! Lady Ellize! Could you take me with you?" Verner, our very own main character, asked as he ran after me.

Take you with me? What's even the point? You won't be any use, you know? I feel kinda bad for you, so I don't wanna say it outright, but you'd be more of a burden, or...hmm...a hindrance? Maybe the word "nuisance" would fit the situation better? I'm not sure...

That being said, Verner was the protagonist. He most likely had some sort of plot armor, so he might've been able to achieve things he shouldn't normally have been capable of. That, and...it was a good chance for him to level up. Maybe taking him along would be for the best.

"Wait! Why are you trying to look cool all on your own?" random dude shouted.

"He's right! We're coming too!" Eterna added.

The two of them, along with the rest of their little group—including Four-Eyed Pervert—hurried to their side, raring to go.

Excuse me? Why're you all assuming that I'll bring you along?

To be honest, I knew they'd only end up in my way. I really wanted them to be good and stay put, but...

I can't say that now, can I?

On top of that, Layla—who usually hovered around me at all times—hadn't approached. Instead, she was stealing glances at me from a distance. I wouldn't have minded if she'd insisted on coming along as well, but if she didn't intend to, the least she could do was go off and do something else instead of standing there looking all gloomy.

She looks like an abandoned puppy!

Occasionally, she'd open her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but stopped every single time.

She looked—jeez, how would I describe it?—just like a kid who'd missed her chance to make friends at the start of the school year. It was like she was

mustering the courage to speak to a group of kids having fun together, but failing miserably.

Boy, does she ever look pitiful.

In all seriousness, though, I was a bit worried that she'd run off and try to hurt herself if I left her alone now.

"Layla," I called for her.

We don't have time, so stop being nervous and move it already!

She looked just like a puppy who'd been caught acting naughty. I really didn't have any time to waste, so I decided to pick the fastest option—I'd order her to come with me.

"Please fight alongside me," I said.

Here we go, now you don't have a choice anymore.

As long as I gave her a direct order, Layla *had* to listen to me.

She timidly started walking toward me.

For god's sake, Scotterbrain! We're in a hurry, here! Can't you just walk at your usual speed?!

"I... I'm not worthy of fighting by your side..." she said.

I'd never heard her sound so weak. She clearly hadn't gotten over the whole betrayal thing.

Frankly, I didn't care, and neither should she. The result would've been the very same regardless of what she'd chosen to do. I didn't want to sound mean, but she wouldn't have been able to stop Aiz either way. If anything, she might've gotten seriously injured if she'd tried something. If you looked at things that way, her decision not to resist arrest had been smart. She could've been killed if she'd insisted on staying loyal to me.

Even putting aside her personal security, Layla was a noblewoman. The royals had all agreed to confine me, which meant nobles had no room for negotiations. Had she refused to obey their orders, her entire house could've been destroyed.

Layla had been turned into a hostage to force me into submission, but at the same time, her entire family were hostages too. *It sure is hard, living in a feudal society.*

“Everyone makes mistakes, Miss Layla,” Verner said. “What’s important is what someone chooses to do afterward. Will you live in shame, or will you fight to make up for what you’ve done?”

“What I choose to do...”

“If you run away, you’ll never atone. If you’ve hurt someone with your actions, take out your sword and protect them until your debt is paid! I know you can do this!”

Talk about a good speech! As expected of the main character!

Verner had no way of knowing, but the words he’d just said appeared in the game. He was supposed to say that to Layla after she’d betrayed Ellize and joined their side.

In the original story, Layla had indirectly hurt many people by agreeing to do Ellize’s bidding. In particular, she felt guilty about Aina’s death, as she’d been the one to uncover her assassination attempt and she’d turned the other girl into a criminal. After she and Verner had gotten rid of the original Ellize, she’d decided to commit suicide to atone. That was when Verner stopped her and said those words.

Layla closed her eyes. “My future...huh?”

She opened her eyes again and looked down at her sword.

I had no idea what she was thinking about, but I had a feeling we were about to go off course again.

She raised her head and looked at me. “Lady Ellize... What I did can’t be forgiven. Even so, as long as you still need me...please let me be your shield.”

Scotterbrain... My little Scotterbrain... Why in the world did you reach this conclusion?

Her sense of responsibility was way too strong. There was definitely a lot to unpack in what she’d just said, but to put it bluntly, she totally intended to die,

didn't she?

Okay, but what do I do? If I bring her along, she's deeeefinitely going to jump in front of me to "protect me" when I don't need it at all and get herself killed. Scotterbrain! Take a look at Verner, he looks just as exasperated as me!

She'd been told to think about what she could do in the future, and her first reaction had been to look for a way to die.

Guess I have no choice. Someone needs to give her a stern talking-to at some point.

"If you intend to become my shield, I'm afraid I can't bring you with me. I'm looking for someone to help me part the dark clouds. I need you to be my sword, not my shield. That's the punishment I've decided upon, so I won't ask for your opinion," I said.

"Y-Yes!" Layla's voice was a bit nasal, but she answered enthusiastically enough.

That should do the trick.

I decided to leave the preaching for another day. We had to hurry to the royal capital—there was no time to waste.

Time to leave...or so I thought. Right as I was getting ready to depart, all of the random traitorous knights came running out of the castle and kneeled in front of me.

What now? I'm in a hurry here!

"Lady Ellize... Please allow us to fight to protect the capital as well."

Apparently, these guys were eager to come too. I didn't particularly mind, but what they were *really* asking was, "could you please carry us too," right?

I mean...I could take you guys too, but you do realize there's no point, right?

Regardless of who accompanied me, I'd just cast a wide-range magic spell and call it a day. If I told them I didn't need them and left, though, I was worried they'd come running after me.

"I will allow it. However, make sure to protect the city, the people, and above

all, yourselves. Do *not* attempt to give your lives for my sake. Do I make myself clear?” I stated, just in case.

I had a feeling that without my warning, they would’ve jumped in the way of the enemies’ attacks unprompted.

I’m super-duper good at defensive magic, and I most definitely don’t need meat shields on top of it, thank you very much!

I’d get annoyed if I saw people getting hurt trying to block attacks that wouldn’t even have landed a scratch on me regardless. Besides, these guys were meant to serve the saint—Eterna, that is. I couldn’t let them die and have my poor Eterna deal with the aftermath.

“Lady Ellize, you’re so merciful...”

My knights seemed moved, but I ignored them and started gathering mana. I had a way to transport a large group of people at once.

Actually, I’d been so free during my NEET confinement days that I’d created a spell to deal with the witch’s teleportation. It wasn’t as fast as the witch’s spell, but I could transport several people along with me. I’d made it so I could follow the witch if she teleported, but...I only realized *after* the fact that I needed to know where she was going to follow her.

I’d basically created a private jet I could fly from Japan to the United States at any time to follow the witch if she decided to go to the United States. The thing was, when the witch disappeared before my very eyes, I wouldn’t know whether she’d gone to the United States or somewhere else entirely—which meant it was virtually useless.

Anyway, I had the perfect adage for the occasion. As always, I couldn’t think of a good name for my new technique, so I went for a cool foreign saying.

“Festina lente.”

“Make haste slowly.” Take your time, guys!

Upon my words, a pillar of light arose around us, and I started feeling like I was floating. The others probably had no idea what was going on, but we were currently rising into the sky while inside of the pillar—*it’s basically an elevator.*

After we reached a certain altitude, the pillar changed shape. It turned into a bird and carried us away. In fact, the light wasn't what was moving us—that was nothing but a barrier. We were about to move fast—*very* fast—so I needed something to help with air resistance and all that.

As for how the wings picked up speed... Well, this was all applied mana circulation. I sucked the surrounding mana into the wings before ejecting it all toward the back at once. Immediately, the barrier—and the people in it—were propelled forward at great speed. Although some of the details were different, I'd basically made an airplane—only with magic. The fuel was mana, and since mana was pretty much a boundless bullshit energy, I could make the barrier fly even faster than a plane.

Obviously, I did a hundred other things at the same time to balance it all out, but it'd be a pain in the ass to explain everything in detail.

“Wh-What's going on?!”

“Are we...moving?”

The knights were starting to ask questions, but thanks to the light barrier obstructing their view, they weren't panicking too much. I was certain there would've been a huge commotion if they'd been able to see we were flying in the sky.

We only traveled for a few dozen seconds before arriving at our destination. I turned the bird into a pillar once more, bringing us back to the surface.

From the outside, it must've looked as if a pillar of light had suddenly appeared on the battlefield.

Hello, we're here to bother you guys a little!



A gruesome fight had already started in front of the capital of the Bilberry Kingdom. The few knights and soldiers who'd remained in the capital were facing an army of monsters so large that it covered their entire field of view.

Everyone wondered where in the world so many monsters had been hiding. They'd most likely been lurking in the areas that had yet to be reclaimed by

humans.

Monsters were merely animals who'd been given power by the witch. As such, they didn't have the intellect to band together and create an army. It was only natural—why would a bear and a tiger suddenly join paws? If anything, it was perfectly normal to witness monsters fighting one another. In fact, carnivorous beasts hunted herbivorous ones on a regular basis.

That didn't mean monsters were always found alone. Stray dogs formed packs, and so did dog monsters. However, they wouldn't welcome cats or pigs into their ranks.

There was one exception, though. When a commander appeared—that is to say, when the witch or an archmonster was in the vicinity—monsters would flock to them and serve under their command.

Needless to say, this time too, an archmonster was behind the attack.

Ever since the saint Ellize had appeared, the monster population had been greatly reduced. By now, less than a tenth of their number during the witch's heyday remained. Moreover, the witch—who should've been there to guide them—was in hiding. The monsters didn't know how to retaliate, and they'd been pushed back continuously by the humans. That was, until a particularly bright monster thought to itself, *If this keeps up, we'll be annihilated.*

That monster used to be a crow—a species known for its intellect. It thought long and hard and reached the conclusion that to defeat the saint—the biggest obstacle to the monsters' dominion—they'd have to unite and attack at the same time. Since the witch wasn't doing anything, *they* had to rise to the occasion.

First, it shared its conclusions with its fellow crows...and they started fighting to the death. To evolve to the next stage, monsters had to kill each other. Somehow, the crows understood that instinctively.

Eventually, the crow murdered all the others and emerged victorious. It immediately proceeded to attack a different species, killing more and more of its fellow monsters, until, eventually, it turned into an archmonster. It could now put its plan into action: it called upon the monsters that had gone into hiding here and there and united the greatest monster army the world had ever

seen.

The witch hadn't created new monsters in a while, nor had she led them into battle. They had no choice but to overcome the humans with their current assets.

While the monsters had controlled over seventy percent of the land a few years prior, Ellize had pushed them back so far that their sphere of influence barely covered ten percent of the land now. If they continued to hide, Ellize wouldn't even need to lift a finger anymore—the human knights could hunt them down one by one until not even a single beast was left.

The small-crow-turned-archmonster understood that this was their last chance. They *had* to come out on top if they wanted to survive.

“Damn! How are we supposed to protect the capital?!”

“How long until the reinforcements arrive?!”

“Why did that idiot king take all the saint's guard with him?! He's so out of touch with reality! He has no business making decisions!”

“Careful what you say! That's lese majesty!”

“Lese majesty? Great! Who cares?! The kingdom will fall today!”

The knights and the soldiers were hanging on, fighting with everything they had to make up for the absence of the saint's guard. Unfortunately, the monsters had the advantage. Bilberry had knights and naturally fared much better than Lutein had, but that wasn't enough. The monsters were too fierce. They were desperate too, after all. If they lost here, there'd be no second chance. They needed to get rid of as many knights as they could before they went after their real target—Ellize.

They'd elected the royal capital as their target. It was a large city, which meant that Ellize would need to fight while protecting thousands of burdens. If they got rid of the knights and entered the city, the citizens would be in their grasp. Ellize would obviously have no choice but to rush to the rescue. If enough citizens were hurt, she'd be forced to use her energy to heal them. If they buried people alive, she'd tire herself digging them out of the ground. The crow understood how this particular war had to be played. They needed to use the

helpless citizens to tie Ellize down. That was the only way they could defeat the invincible saint.

Even if everything worked according to its plan, though, the crow still wasn't sure they'd manage to take Ellize down. To be fully honest, it doubted that they would. It knew how strong Ellize was. Still, it had no choice but to try. This was a fight to the death, a fight for survival—one they couldn't give up.

“CAW CAW CAW!”

The “crow”—as the humans had very straightforwardly nicknamed it—flew over the battlefield, flapping its wings. The motion was enough to create strong winds that sent rubble, discarded swords, and even corpses flying at the Bilberrian army.

The dead soldiers were still wearing their heavy armor, and they ended up crushing some of their former comrades to death, while flying swords stabbed into others.

The gigantic crow—which had a wingspan of over eight meters—coldly studied the battlefield from the sky. Some knights tried to shoot it down with magic spells, but it easily dodged by speeding up and down to throw off their aim.

Fighting a flying opponent was incredibly tough. Naturally, the knights had plenty of ways to attack enemies from a distance. However, hitting a flying target was much harder than hitting a moving target on land. On land, you could only dodge to the sides—after all, if a projectile was hurled at you, moving forward or backward would hardly protect you. On the other hand, a flying monster could not only dodge to the sides, but also adjust its speed *and* its altitude at will. Besides, shooting an arrow toward the sky meant you also had to take gravity into consideration—even a static target could be difficult to hit.

Since the crow was constantly switching up its flying patterns, even a skilled knight would struggle to hit it. Its ability to control the wind also rendered arrows useless—it could repel them with a well-timed gust of wind. Left with no other choice, the knights attacked it with magic, but the flying corpses and debris kept getting in their way.

The crow, however, could attack them to its heart's content. A flap of its wings was enough to hurl hundreds of projectiles onto its enemies. It could also send *them* flying.

How could knights and soldiers armed with armor and swords hope to do anything against a tornado? It was obviously hopeless. Anyone in their right mind would have known that running away was the only way to survive, and yet, they didn't. Rather, they *couldn't*—not with the capital and its people behind them.

And so, they carried on with their laughable, oh-so-pathetic attempts at fighting a tornado.

Chapter 34: Eight Minutes to Victory

Almost an hour had already passed since the crow and its army launched their offensive.

Thanks to the efforts of the knights and soldiers, they'd yet to enter the city. However, as an increasing number of forces collapsed with every passing minute, the Bilberrian army was gradually being pushed back and the humans' stamina waned. They started losing focus and morale dropped. How could they remain brave when they saw their comrades drop like flies, especially when victory was impossible? The outcome had been obvious before the battle had even started. The forces that had been stationed in the capital were far from enough to drive away the crow's army.

The best they could do was buy the capital more time...but would there even be a point? They'd sent word to the saint's castle over an hour ago. By now, the news would've reached King Aiz and the saint's guard. But how long would they need to wait before the reinforcements sent by the king reached them? A Stil's bird took around one hour to fly from the capital to the saint's castle. Even if they were to run the entire way, the reinforcements would need time to arrive. They couldn't possibly be faster than a bird.

Even if their comrades miraculously made it in an hour, would they be able to hold out until then? The first sixty minutes had been hell. How were they supposed to do it all over again? It was impossible; they'd done everything they could. They'd die in vain if they stayed here.

The logical choice seemed obvious here: they ought to flee so they could survive and team up with the reinforcements.

And yet, they didn't budge.

The crow was growing increasingly flustered. "Why...?"

Their advantage was overwhelming! It couldn't think of a single way in which the human army was superior to theirs. The monsters ruled over the battlefield.

They were pushing them back, slaughtering them unilaterally. So why weren't they running away?!

The victor had been decided before the battle even started. Humans were foolish, sure, but they weren't *that* stupid. They *had* to have understood this too.

While the crow had led its army here with the goal of annihilating every single knight and soldier in the city, its plan involved going after the runaway soldiers after they inevitably broke formation. Considering the difference in strength between the two armies, that was the logical course of action. The humans *should* have fled. It didn't make sense from a strategic standpoint. It was obviously better for the Bilberrian army to regroup with the reinforcements first before trying to retake the city.

Even without taking military strategy into consideration, their survival instincts should've pushed them to flee. So why weren't they?!

"Are humans truly *that* stupid?" the archmonster wondered out loud.

It couldn't understand their reasoning, and that was making it restless.

The crow had two goals: One, to annihilate the Bilberrian army. Two, to invade the capital before Ellize could arrive. It needed the helpless citizens to become Ellize's shackles.

However, that second objective had yet to be completed. The humans' defeat was already clear, but they wouldn't run away!

"Why won't they run?!" the crow asked again.

"We've been running away long enough! We're done running!" a knight screamed, answering the archmonster's question.

That man wasn't a member of Ellize's guard; he was simply part of the crowd of knights and soldiers. He was powerless to fight an archmonster. After all, he was just like his fallen comrades—an unremarkable man. He was no hero, and his name wouldn't make it into the history books. He'd die just as he'd lived—a nameless knight.

And yet, he and the mass of other such nameless knights and soldiers were

still standing up to the archmonster. They'd managed to delay its plan.

"When I was a kid, I ran away like a coward after wetting my pants at the mere sight of monsters. I was so scared that I didn't even go back for my family—I simply ran. I only remembered them when I was already far away. Everyone else around me did the same. We knew no help would come, so we ran away. We didn't have any other option," the nameless knight screamed, thrusting his sword into the body of the monster that'd just leaped at him.

The man was about to collapse. His armor was falling apart, his sword was cracked, and one of his arms hung limply against his body. The flesh had been torn to pieces, and it looked like his arm would come off at any point.

"Ten years ago, I left my village behind and ran away when the monsters attacked," another nameless knight continued. "I wanted to die! I wanted to atone for my cowardice! I didn't know what else to do! I had no hope better days would come!"

Some things simply couldn't be changed. No matter how hard they fought, sometimes, there was no hope. In such cases, the best they could do was cut their losses. So they would run away. They would bring whoever they could with them and flee, crying and cursing their helplessness.

After becoming knights, they'd ran away countless times too. They'd turned their backs on the people who needed them, repeating to themselves that they were only following orders—that they had no other choice. All of them had gone through such trials. Up until seven years ago—when Ellize changed everything—such occurrences were far from rare.

Soldiers couldn't be sacrificed to save a small village, so massacres occurred on an almost daily basis. Up until seven years ago, humanity was on the run. People were so scared that they closed their eyes, covered their ears, and pretended not to notice the suffering of others. They were desperate to save themselves, even if it meant leaving behind their families and friends.

"But now, things are different!" the knight screamed, even as a wolf monster sunk its fangs into his arm. He didn't hesitate to plunge his sword right through his arm to kill the beast, continuing to swing his sword around with his other limb.

Another knight joined in, yelling to find the courage to continue fighting, “He’s right! As long as we buy enough time, she *will* come! You monsters will never know how much stronger her presence makes us! You’ll never understand how her existence fills our hearts with joy! Running away isn’t our only option anymore! We’ll fight to live!”

Someone had once said that Ellize didn’t need knights—well, these men all agreed. They’d said that the knights and soldiers didn’t make a difference. It was the same whether they were here or not. They couldn’t argue with that; it was true.

Ellize didn’t need anyone’s protection. She was strong enough to protect herself. The knights were supposed to be her shield, but she didn’t *need* a shield. As long as Ellize was on the battlefield, knights made no difference. They could’ve just as well gone home. Regardless, the knights were proud to call themselves knights.

“Idiots... Are you humans all morons?!” the crow cried.

“We are!”

“How can you be so foolish?”

“We have no idea!”

“Idiots! You’re all idiots! Clinging to someone who may not even come!” the crow sneered.

“We didn’t used to have anyone or anything to cling to!” another nameless knight exclaimed.

If they held on, Ellize might make it in time. No one knew whether she would or not, but the possibility filled their hearts with hope. No, Ellize *would* come. She’d definitely come and defeat all these monsters! No beast could ever understand the inspiration she provided.

Still, even Ellize—the greatest saint in history—wasn’t omniscient and omnipotent. She was only one person, and like every else, there were limits to what she could accomplish. She couldn’t conveniently teleport herself from the saint’s castle to the capital. She’d need some time to arrive...perhaps *too* much time.

That was precisely why the knights and soldiers were here. Their role was to make sure the witch wouldn't defeat the saint. If they allowed the monsters to breach the city walls and attack the people, it'd still count as Ellize's loss, regardless of whether she killed all the monsters afterward. It was up to them to prevent that.

They were here to fill in the gaps when Ellize was away. They'd hold on until she arrived and carve the path to her victory. They wouldn't allow the witch to triumph over the saint. That was their very *raison d'être*.

If they managed to stay standing until Ellize arrived, it was their win—humanity's win. For that purpose, they'd do everything in their power—no, they'd go beyond their limits.

“We won't let Lady Ellize lose to you! That's why we're here! That's why we fight!”



The nameless knights and soldiers were well aware that this battlefield would be their grave, but they no longer cared. They rushed toward the monsters.

These people weren't heroes. None of them were. History wouldn't remember their names. At most, the tales of this fight would be passed down and they'd be known as "the valiant warriors who gave their lives to protect the capital." The songs and the books wouldn't even mention how many of them had passed today.

However, this did nothing to erase their pride. They didn't need their names to be remembered in order to fight. They'd decided not to show any weakness in the face of the enemy. They marched forward, stepping over the corpses of their friends and enemies alike. They wouldn't look back. They wouldn't falter. They were ready to give their lives if it meant buying one more minute—one more second—for their saint.

The knights who'd lost both their arms held their swords in their mouths, but they continued to march regardless. Those who'd lost their legs clung to the monsters, mustering every last drop of strength they had. Meanwhile, those who'd lost their weapons didn't hesitate to use their teeth to tear off the monsters' flesh. They continued to bite down into the monsters' necks, ignoring the pain of their teeth shattering and falling out.

"What's wrong, monsters?! Come at us! You don't scare us! Even despair doesn't scare us anymore! We're here! We're alive! The knights and the soldiers of the Bilberry Kingdom are still standing! The saint's shields are still standing!"

All of them had suffered injuries—terrible ones, at that—but they were still standing.

Being a knight was hardly a glorious position. No one cared if they were to die "honorably" in battle. The world wouldn't change. They were but specks of dust in the vast world. Sure, people were quick to laud the knights and soldiers' "brave" sacrifices, but what weight did these words carry? None at all. Most of the time, their deaths were utterly pointless—honorable in name only.

Knights were the swords and shields of the saint, but they were also her substitutes. They were to give up their lives for the saint to survive—in other

words, so that she wouldn't be defeated. In the end, knights existed to be sacrificed. No amount of flowery words would change this harsh truth.

All of the knights present were aware of that fact, but that wouldn't erase their hope. It wouldn't stop them from pushing forward. If her very own shields didn't believe in the saint, who would?

And so they fought. They knew full well that they'd die in vain, but that didn't matter. They believed in the saint, and they would leave this world with a smile on their lips.

The same went for the soldiers, even if they couldn't compare to knights. They fought, believing the saint would come for them. Some of them were people who'd aspired to become knights, but had failed. Others didn't know any other way of life. Some had basically been forced to join the army to fulfill their duty as nobles. Others, still, were conscripts—peasants who'd been given a weapon and sent to the battlefield without so much as a day of training.

They were quite literally a bunch of extras, brought together to make up the numbers.

This mishmash of an army had always run away when faced with difficulties, and no one had ever expected anything else from them. They weren't prepared for battle. As soon as the first line was broken, the others would get scared, break the formation, and run away. The monsters would simply have to run after them to devour them. Even if they'd stayed put, they were bound to be killed eventually—and for what purpose? So they'd pick the most logical option and run away to protect their own lives and see the faces of their loved ones again. Their survival instinct would kick in, and they'd picked the path with the highest chance of survival.

They had no hope, nothing to believe in. So how could they have endured?

Everything was different now. They were able to repress their instincts and silence their fears. They were prepared to put everything on the line to accomplish their duty.

It wasn't like their fright had somehow disappeared. They were scared of dying, and terribly so. Some of them were so terrified that they couldn't hold their bladders anymore. Still, they refused to give up. They continued to step

over the dead bodies of their comrades and hold their ground, slowing the monsters' advance.

It was all because they were finally able to believe in something. The world was full of hope now, so they wouldn't run away, even if it meant they'd die in vain. Even if their lifeless bodies were to pile up, that was fine. Their sacrifice *might* win another second, and that one second *might* be the last one the saint needed to arrive.

I don't need honor, one of the soldiers quietly whispered in his heart. He kicked up the sword one of his dead comrades had been holding and sent it flying. Then, he leaped up to it and used it as a stepping stone, aiming for a monster's head and stabbing it right into its brain. *I don't need glory either. I don't have any regrets. I'll entrust everything I have to the future.*

He'd left his family in the capital to set foot onto the battlefield. He strongly believed that Ellize would bring about another world—one where neither the witch nor monsters existed. Then no one would have to live in fear of being attacked by monsters out of the blue. No one would have to cry and huddle together for warmth as their bodies shivered from starvation. No one would have to steal from their neighbors or kill their friends over food.

If it meant his family would get to live in such a world, he wouldn't have any regrets even if he died here.

Our gravestones don't need any engraving. Our names don't need to be remembered.

He was fine being remembered as one of the people who rose to the occasion and supported Ellize. All he wanted was for his family and his lover to become one of the happy families living in the peaceful world Ellize created. That would make everything worth it. That'd be more than enough for him to rest in peace. Even if, in the future, people mocked them for their useless sacrifices—

“Even if people laugh at us... Even if they call us useless, we—”

One of the nameless knights looked up to the sky, and the corners of his mouth immediately curled up into a smile despite his exhaustion. He could see the light—*her* light—rapidly approaching.

She's here... She came for us!

Their sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

Even if none of us could have changed a thing, even if my sacrifice was pointless... Our sacrifice, our battle wasn't in vain.

Now that he knew that, he could finally pass in peace...

"We won... Humanity won this battle!" one nameless knight screamed, carrying with him the feelings of all of those who'd passed on already.

Right as he said those words, a pillar of light fell from the sky.

Ellize had only needed eight minutes to reach the capital after she'd heard of the attack. Eight short minutes. That time had been won by her shields.

Chapter 35: Defensive Battle

A pillar of light fell from the sky.

The sight was so striking that everyone on the battlefield—monsters and men alike—stopped moving for a moment and looked at the light. The men found solace and hope in its presence, while the monsters instantly understood that a terrible threat had just arrived.

Before long, eleven elite knights who'd been chosen to protect the saint—that meant all of the saint's guard, save for Viscount Fox who was currently in the academy—stepped onto the battlefield and glared at the monsters fiercely.

Behind them was Ellize, the hope of humanity, and a few knights-in-training who attended the academy alongside her... Oh, and some weirdo with glasses that no one really knew.

Layla, the head of the saint's guard, stood at Ellize's left side, ready to protect her. Meanwhile Verner, the student who'd received a sword from the saint, stood at her right.

The crow looked at them in displeasure. It suddenly understood how shallow its planning had been.

"The saint arrived too quickly... And why are the knights...by her side?"

The crow knew that Ellize had been locked up by her fellow humans. It had no idea why they'd made such a foolish decision, but it had given them the perfect opportunity to strike.

It knew that Ellize could—quite literally—fly to the rescue if they were to march into the royal capital, but it had assumed she'd be alone. Her guards had betrayed her, after all. It thought there was no way she'd bring traitors with her to the battlefield—not to mention it didn't know she had the ability to do so in the first place. And so, the crow had assumed that Ellize would come alone. If some of her guards were to follow her, they'd arrive much later anyway.

In the end, both of its assumptions had proved wrong.

Ellize had somehow managed to transport members of her guard—as well as a few other people—all the way here in a few minutes. To make matters worse, they didn't even seem to be on bad terms.

Had the crow been given false information, or had they made up already? Either way, the worst had come to pass. Had everything gone as planned, the monsters should've already annihilated the city's defenses. However, the aggravating mob of knights and soldiers had prevented them from advancing.

"The saint! The saint's here!"

"She's here!"

"Her guards are here too!"

The morale of the Bilberrian troops shot up as soon as they saw Ellize and her group. As humanity's hope, she was the symbol of justice. Her very presence was enough to inspire those around her.

"Look, she's here... Can you see her? She made it... Our fight, your death... None of it was in vain..." one of the knights whimpered, holding the lifeless body of one of his fallen comrades.

He let go of his friend and picked up the sword the departed man had left behind instead. Now that the saint had arrived, the tide of the battle would turn. Victory was in their grasp. They only needed to hold their ground for a little longer. Even if their efforts didn't matter and the saint could win this battle all on her own, they'd keep fighting alongside her. They'd let the world hear them!

We're here! The saint is here!

The crow groaned. "Curse you!"

It unleashed a tornado, trying to create an opportunity of attack. As soon as Ellize lifted her eyes, however, the strong winds halted, then changed direction. The tornado hurtled toward the monsters, swallowing them and hurling them into the sky. Their formation quickly crumbled.

At the same time, Ellize used her healing magic. In a split second, every single knight and soldier who had yet to succumb to their injuries was as good as new.



Royal capital, here I come!

The monsters' army seemed a little larger than the one I'd seen in the Lutein Kingdom.

There are still so many of them left! And here I thought I'd done a good job clearing them all up.

The remnants had most likely gathered in a last-ditch effort. With the witch being holed up in the academy's basement, I kinda understood them. They had to take matters into their own hands if they wanted to survive.

Courageous of them, sure, but it's not going to work now that I'm here!

I should've thanked them for saving me the trouble of hunting them down. Now, I got to eradicate them in one clean sweep.

Anyway, it was time to deal the final blow once and for all! This would probably be the last time I could bully monsters to my heart's content, so I decided to go all out. Verner and the others were also here to witness my performance, and I wanted to leave them in awe.

"Aurea Libertas!" I shouted, continuing my streak of super cool foreign technique names.

This time, I hadn't picked a maxim—Aurea Libertas, or "Golden Liberty," was the name of an old Polish political system in which nobles held the country's power. They still had a king, but he didn't have any say in politics.

The king reigns but does not govern. What? You're wondering what that system has to do with the current situation...? Well nothing, really! But the name sounds cool, doesn't it?

While shouting the name, I shot a large golden laser beam at the sky. It expanded before scattering into countless thin lasers that fell upon the monsters. The lasers danced in midair, dodging my allies and targeting only my enemies. The monsters fell to the ground one after the other.

"I won't let that damn saint do as she pleases! Kill her!" the crow that seemed to be leading the army screamed.

Oh, so the archmonster is a crow. No wonder, they're super smart.

I remembered reading an article about crows. According to the researchers of, uh...somewhere—I couldn't for the life of me recall where—crows were as smart as seven-year-olds. It was pretty impressive, considering that was the age when humans started to truly understand what happened around them.

People seldom had memories of when they were three or four, but events that happened when you were seven usually stuck with you well into adulthood. Seven-year-olds' brains were developed enough for them to remember things, have entire conversations, and even read and write.

I remembered playing video games when I was that age, and I was pretty sure a modern kid would be able to use a smartphone if you handed them one.

Monsters became even smarter when they turned into archmonsters, so that crow was probably as intelligent as a human adult by now.

At the clever crow's order, the bird monsters came flying at me.

Attacking from the sky now, are we?

I was the only one on our side who could fly, so they were able to come straight at me. I effortlessly leaped up and prepared to welcome them.

A bit of light magic should do the trick.

"A picture is worth—"

"I won't let you approach Lady Ellize!" Scotterbrain exclaimed before I could finish my spell. She jumped up and cut down a dozen birds.

Scotterbrain! You're in my way! I almost killed you!

It was kinda impressive that she could reach flying enemies *and* cut them down with a single jump, but it wasn't the time for her to show off her skills!

Layla launched herself off of one of the monsters to remain in the air. She managed to kill a few more enemies before repeating the motion. Eventually, she made a final jump, leaping as high as she possibly could, before letting herself fall. She spun in the air, rotating her blade and hacking through yet another group of birds on her way down.

Is that girl even human?

Anyone who was able to witness today would immediately understand how she'd become the head of the saint's guard at twenty.

The other members of my guard followed her lead, leaping to fight with the bird monsters midair. I couldn't find an occasion to strike.

Rex was using wind magic to create denser areas he could use as footholds for his jumps. Just like Layla, he spun around in the air, cutting down monsters in his wake. Finley was using ice magic to create swords, then sending gusts of wind magic to hurl them at enemies. His fighting style, although precise, was pretty ridiculous. *Are you using seven swords at once, dude?*

Thanks to their hard work, the monsters hadn't managed to reach me at all. The only issue was... I couldn't attack either!

There were tons of monsters around and not a single one could approach me! *Guys! Can't you go help the weaker knights and soldiers instead?*

I didn't think I'd be able to launch my spell, so I gave up and decided to go for another golden laser beam. At least I could decrease the number of monsters from afar this way.

I'd always preferred playing alone for this very reason. Destroying hundreds of enemies at once with a nice AoE spell was the best feeling in the world! When you played with friends, though, you only ended up with more obstacles in your way and you couldn't use area spells. They'd all be running around on the battlefield, so you had to stick to boring spells.

I wanna dive into the middle of the enemiiiiiiies! I wanna use an AoE spell and wipe out their entire army in one goooooo!

And yet, whenever I tried to move forward, my guards stopped me. "Lady Ellize, please don't approach the front line! We'll protect you!"

I don't need your protection! I'm not some weakling!

When had they gotten the impression that I was some feeble princess that needed protecting?

Since I couldn't do much myself at the moment, I decided to buff my allies

instead. “Fortune favors the bold,” I chanted.

I liked going solo better, but since I had a bunch of ally units on the map, it would’ve been a waste not to use them.

All right, let’s change gears.

Thousands of blades of light fell from the sky, piercing through the monsters before stopping in front of the soldiers. I’d made these blades out of condensed mana, and if I dared say so myself, they looked flawless—not a nick to be seen. They also came with a few buffs.

They’d send electrical signals straight to users’ brains that allowed them to go past their limits. In a nutshell, it’d give them an adrenaline rush. Usually, humans could only use twenty to thirty percent of their strength. If you went over that, you risked damaging your body. Obviously, my swords also healed the wielders to make up for that.

With these swords, the soldiers would be able to use their abilities to the maximum. They’d continuously hurt themselves in the process, sure, but my healing would allow them to keep fighting. Speaking of which, I’d also added a numbing effect so they wouldn’t feel the pain. Oh, and I also made sure the soldiers’ brains would release tons of dopamine...or whatever that chemical was called. It would help them fight without fear. They’d stay motivated and brave—the perfect soldiers.

I’m totally acting like a villain again, aren’t I?

To be fair, I’d tested these swords out a few times, and as far as I could tell, there were no side effects. So it was fine, right? Right?

If you’d allow me to play the devil’s advocate for a moment—soldiers often died because they were too weak to measure up to monsters, faltered because of the pain, or cowered in fear. They’d be better off with my method, wouldn’t they? Whenever I gave soldiers these swords, the mortality rate dropped by a lot, so it couldn’t be that bad, right?!

All right... Who am I kidding here? This tactic is right out of the Villain 101 crash course!

“Wield these swords, soldiers!” I ordered.

Now that all of my soldiers were high thanks to the performance-enhancing swords I'd given them, they started pushing back the monsters.

They're going at it!

They'd been on the defensive this entire time, but now they were winning against our foes. The soldiers had all become as strong as knights in a split second.

As for the members of my guard, they came running to me after seeing the soldiers' prowess and knelt in front of me. "Lady Ellize, please bestow these swords of light upon us!"

You all want performance-enhancing swords too? You really don't need any doping, you know? You're plenty strong already!

I honestly thought they didn't need them, but then they looked at me with their big puppy eyes and I couldn't help but yield.

"Amazing... I feel so much stronger!"

Yeah, that's how these things work.

"Me too! My heart feels more settled too."

Like I said, that's the dopamine doing its job.

"My wounds are healing!"

Well, without the healing effects, you'd tear down your bodies using these swords.

Either way, they all looked pumped. They began slaughtering the bird monsters that kept flocking toward us.

I have nothing to doooo!

The tide had turned, and the Bilberrian army and my knights were mowing down the enemies. None of them managed to even get close to me.

Well, I guess our victory is set in stone now. I don't see how we could lose this. I can't wait for the fighting to end. I'll have a nice bath afterward.

"Damn! We need to at least get rid of the saint!"

The crow seemed to have understood there would be no coming back for them, so it shifted its objective to taking me down with them. It flew straight at me, so fast that it almost looked like a bullet.

My knights didn't react in time. It was getting closer and closer, ready to impale me on its beak.

Sorry, but it's not gonna work.

If anything, I was glad the most dangerous monster was coming at me. I didn't want it to flee—especially not with so many nuisances around. It had been fast enough to dodge my lasers, and I'd have a hard time going after it with my allies pestering me otherwise. This was my chance to bring it down.

I let it approach and extended both arms, ready to catch it.

Come on, aim straight at me... I'm right here, so you'd better not miss.

"Lady Ellize?! Why are you... Are you trying to shield the soldiers behind you?!"

Looks like Scotterbrain's misunderstood me again.

Were there even soldiers behind me? I hadn't noticed at all.

Whatever, it doesn't matter. Come on, little crow! I'm defenseless, so jump into my arms! I can't wait to see you despair when you understand your last attempt at killing me is futile!

"Lady Ellize!"

Here I was, super confident nothing could go wrong anymore, when Verner suddenly jumped in front of me and threw his arms around me. The next moment, the crow's beak stabbed his back.

Wh-What? You... WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!

Chapter 36: Self-Sacrifice

Verner had thrown himself in front of me to protect me, and he'd gotten hurt for no good reason at all.

What in the world are you doing?! You're the main character—what am I supposed to do if you die in such a stupid way? That's a bad ending right there!

I didn't have time to play mind games anymore. I quickly shot a laser beam at the crow, blowing it away.

"Urgh... I-Is this...the...end?" it whimpered, voice full of regret.

I watched it disappear, destroyed by my light, before pulling its beak out from Verner's back. I immediately followed up with a healing spell and stopped the bleeding.

He'd been lucky the crow's beak hadn't gone all the way through his body. With that speed, it *should* have happened, actually. *How sturdy are you?*

I checked to see if he was still breathing. As long as he was alive, I'd be able to heal him. Verner had dark magic inside him—most things wouldn't kill him on the spot.

As expected, he's not breathing. I can't feel a pulse either. Nothing to worry about!

Um...

Wait, what? Is he...dead?

Impossible. No way! That's just impossible!

No, no, no, no, no, no, no!!! NO!

Stop. Don't panic, me. It's okay, he's just...a little dead, that's all! Everything's fine! His corpse is still warm. Nothing to panic about...right? Right? Right?!

"Ver... No way... This can't be true..." Eterna broke down, tears falling down her cheeks.

I also wanted to believe it wasn't true, but it looked like even his dark powers hadn't been enough to protect him from that hit. Monsters could kill saints, so it made sense that they'd also be able to kill Verner. I'd already fixed his wounds, but that hadn't helped. That meant the crow's attack had killed him on the spot. His heart had simply...exploded.

The more I thought about it, the less I knew what to do. The main character had died. Was the story over, then?

So, hmm... Well... I know! It's gonna be fine. I can still make it. I healed his wounds, and his brain's still all right. What's a little fatal wound? He's only been dead for a few moments!

After four to six minutes without oxygen, a person's brain would be beyond saving. Conversely, it meant that you could save them as long as you pumped oxygen into their brains *before* that happened.

Cardiac arrest didn't mean that someone had expired yet. Someone was only dead for real when their brain stopped working. That was why CPR saved lives.

Obviously, you couldn't save someone whose heart had *literally* exploded with CPR... Under normal circumstances, that is. I was a living cheat code, and I'd already healed Verner's heart.

There's only one thing to do now... I need to create an electric current and force his heart to beat again!

At the same time, I pressed one hand to Verner's mouth and used wind magic to circulate air into his body. I was breathing in and out for him.

Come on, Verner! Come back!

He coughed.

He's back! I made it! Ladies and gentlemen, our favorite athlete, Ellize, makes it at the last second! The bases are fully loaded, and Ellize knocks it out of the park!

I'd somehow saved Verner from the brink of death, but the battle wasn't over and Verner had yet to open his eyes. There shouldn't have been anything wrong with him anymore, but he'd died once—he wouldn't recover instantly. It had

been my first time bringing someone back, and I didn't know what side effects to expect.

I couldn't waste any more time here.

Which means... It's time for some rapid-fire lasers! Sorry monsters, but I need you all dead!

"Layla, we're bringing Verner to the closest church! *Now!*"

"Y-Yes!"

After I'd gotten rid of most of the monsters in one go, I decided to let the rest of the knights deal with the aftermath of the battle. I got Layla to carry Verner and left immediately.

With healing magic around, medicine hadn't really progressed. There weren't any hospitals or clinics in this world. Instead, you'd go to a church to seek treatment. It wasn't free, though. You may be thinking churches ought to be altruistic and treat people for free, but hey. They also needed enough money to keep running, hence the fees.

Anyway, the Church worshipped the saint, so I was technically its head. That meant I got to use the facilities however I wanted!

Needless to say, I was more of a figurehead; I didn't have any *real* authority. Some old man they called the Patriarch held all the power. The reasoning behind the decision was actually pretty solid. Since saints were bound to turn into witches, giving them too much authority was unthinkable. All in all, the Church thought of me as a nice symbol—an idol for the masses to worship. Well, not that I was the real deal either way.

Leaving all that aside, my main point was that I got to use the churches however I saw fit. I made use of my—limited—authority to order a bed prepared for Verner and to borrow the kitchen. If I let the people here cook, they'd come up with something disgusting.

The Church was made up of two groups of people that were polar opposites.

The grunts didn't know anything about the many lies that surrounded the saints. They truly believed the saint to be the head of the Church, so they were

endlessly devoted to me. They thought that living frugally was a virtue and only ate unseasoned bland crap. While they accepted eating cheese and other such animal products, they didn't consume meat or fish.

If I had them cook, they were sure to bring us some horrendous dishes. I had a feeling they hadn't quite grasped the difference between frugal and sloppy. As the saint, I'd visited churches enough times to know that. I usually ended up with stale bread and barely cooked vegetables. I still wasn't sure how they dared calling the crap they served a meal.

The top brass of the Church were an entirely different story altogether. These people enjoyed a life of luxury. They had meat or fish for every meal, and I was pretty sure they'd only made up the rules about clergy needing to be frugal so that more would be left for them. I'd been served such an extravagant meal when I'd visited them that I'd almost asked them point-blank why their subordinates were living in poverty. The worst part was that the food hadn't even been good!

Long story short, I wouldn't find any high-quality ingredients in this kitchen. All they had was cheap rice, vegetables, a couple of fruits, alcohol, and water. Oh, I also spotted a few loaves of stale bread and cheese.

Even though my conscience was smaller than a cherry tomato, I'd still feel bad feeding Verner such crap. I was afraid our poor main character would rise to the heavens instead of rising from bed.

Time for some sloppy cooking!



Step one: put aside the vegetable scraps instead of throwing them away.

Layla, the other knights who'd followed me, and the people from the church looked puzzled. Their eyes seemed to scream, "Is she going to feed a sick person trash?!" I ignored them.

Step two: fill a pot with water and dump all the vegetable scraps in it—after washing them profusely, of course. Dump some alcohol in it too before turning on the fire. This step'll help remove the bad smell. And then...let there be fire!

Step three: let the veggies simmer for twenty minutes on low heat. What about the scum, you ask? Leave it as is! Who has the energy to skim?

Just kidding! There were actually two types of broth scum. I hadn't used any harmful vegetables, so there was no need to remove it. If anything, it'd do Verner some good.

Leave the scum be!

Last step: drain the broth.

And that's how you make a perfectly good, cheap, and quick vegetarian broth! I can guarantee the taste, and it's full of nutrients! Here, Layla, have a taste for me.

"Are you sure, Lady Ellize? You simply simmered scraps that were meant to be thrown away. That's...rubbish...isn't it?"

Hey! That's rude.

Layla was a noblewoman. Asking her to taste this was probably a bit much for her. Still, when I brought a spoonful to her lips, she opened them up for me, flushing red.

"Um... It's...good?! How?! This is basically rubbish!"

Yeah, yeah, sorry for making do with what I had!

Nobles—and wealthy people in general—were the only ones who were small-minded enough to call vegetable scraps trash. In small villages, people ate *everything*.

The privileged few sure live differently!

I suggested to the Church that they distribute vegetable broth to the poor. Since they usually threw the scraps away, it wouldn't cost much, and distributing food would help improve their image. The people would be full of gratitude, which would lead to more donations down the road.

A win-win deal, right?

Doing good deeds without expecting anything in return was actually pretty much impossible. Giving freely without ever receiving anything in return was a beautiful thing and all, but it couldn't last long. If one party simply gave again and again, they'd eventually run out of funds and collapse. That was why the people I trusted the least were those who pretended they were solely motivated by good intentions.

Humans aren't that selfless! Give and take is the way of life. If you're going to help others, you need to make sure there's a return, somehow.

The big shots of the Church were quick to smell profit, so they approved my plan. They liked the idea so much that they were raring to start distributing broth the next day.

Before long, the Saint's Church's prestige would surely rise, and they'd garner even more support from the masses.

Anyway, back to *my* broth. I could've given it to Verner as it was, but I still had a small touch to add.

I grated some garlic with my magic and dumped it into another pot. Garlic was great for increasing your stamina. I poured the vegetable broth over it and lit the fire again. I brought the mixture to a boil and added some rice. I left it there until the rice was done absorbing all the broth. I then seasoned it with some salt and cheese, which had been ground into a powder with magic. Voilà! My vegetarian broth risotto...thingy...was complete!

It was nutritious and would be easy to eat, even for a sick person. I used to make this dish often whenever I had leftover rice and vegetable scraps.

My cooking's too sloppy? Shut up! Men's cuisine is all about cutting corners!

To be honest, I wish I could've added some pepper as well, but it was way too precious in this world. *Verner will have to suck it up.*

Right as I was finishing up in the kitchen, a knight came to inform me that Verner had woken up.

Phew. I wouldn't have known what to do if he'd kept sleeping.

I gave Verner a good scolding. I made sure he knew what he'd done was stupid and told him never to jump in harm's way for me again. He retorted that it meant I'd be all alone and I shot back that I was perfectly qualified to take care of everything on my own. For some reason, the people of this world had a tendency to misunderstand everything I said, so I tried to make myself as clear as possible.

I'm strong enough to fight alone! You weaklings can stand aside and cheer me on!

After I gave it to him straight, Verner quieted down. I'd probably lost a few affection points, but that was fine. *I'd rather have him hate me than let him die.*

I softened the blow by telling him to take good care of himself and left it at that.

I'm such a nice guy!



His body had moved before he'd known it.

He'd seen the archmonster fly at Ellize, and while she should've been able to react in time, she hadn't dodged. Verner had immediately understood why: there were unconscious soldiers behind her. She'd healed their wounds, but they hadn't recovered enough to flee. Ellize must have refused to dodge because she was afraid they'd die if she did. Verner had seen her extend her arms, readying herself to shield the soldiers.

She's going to do it again... She's going to disregard her own safety to protect others...again, Verner had thought.

Ellize wouldn't give up on anyone. She always put others first and did everything she could to help them without ever asking for anything in return. In Verner's eyes, she was endlessly beautiful, but fragile—so very fragile—like she could disappear at any moment.

Selflessness wouldn't get her anywhere in life. People were greedy and manipulative. Their hearts were everything but pure. When a truly good-natured person appeared, they'd chew them up and spit them out.

Verner had yet to finish that thought when he jumped in front of Ellize.

He'd seen her fight firsthand. He knew that in terms of strength, she existed in a different realm altogether—a realm he could never reach no matter how hard he tried. The archmonster's attack likely wouldn't have even landed a scratch on her. She would most likely have smiled and dealt with everything as she always had—without anyone's help.

But what if she *couldn't* handle it? That fleeting thought had been enough to spur Verner into action.

Knights-to-be learned a lot of different things at the academy, but one specific lesson had always been drilled into them: "If the saint is in danger, become her shield. Don't think—move before it's too late." They'd train until protecting the saint became a reflex. In fact, those who couldn't become proper shields couldn't become knights.

Knights had one purpose: shielding the saint. They existed for the sole sake of keeping the saint alive. The saint's death was the worst thing that could possibly happen. After all, humanity would need to wait for another one to be born *and* for her to grow before the witch could be dealt with.

And so, making sure the saint survived was everyone's top priority. Knights were there to ensure that a crucial mission was carried out. Even if Ellize, as the greatest saint in history, was infinitely stronger than anyone, their *raison d'être* had not changed. If anything, they were expected to be even more careful *because* she was the greatest in history.

Everyone realized that Ellize didn't *actually* need shields, that she'd most likely always come out on top without anyone's help. But what if she lost focus for a moment? What if an attack that shouldn't have killed her *did* somehow? Who would take responsibility for that? Who could fill the gigantic gap she'd leave behind?

Ellize wasn't just the saint anymore—she was humanity's hope. Without her, the world would surely fall back into the darkness.

As a result, the knights were still very much expected to act as her shield—even if it was inefficient and mostly useless.

She'd "probably" be fine. Ellize "most likely" didn't need any protection. She'd "surely" be able to deal with monsters on her own. They couldn't accept that kind of uncertainty when it came to Ellize's precious life. Something *could* always go wrong. Even if that chance was one in a million, that was still too much of a risk. Ellize *could* die.

If a knight sacrificing their life meant that they could eliminate that risk, they ought to do it without hesitation. That's what Verner had learned. He'd been trained so that his body would react before he even had to think about it.

Giving up your life for someone who didn't need it was undoubtedly a meaningless death, but that didn't matter. The knights were expected to throw their lives away to bring that abysmally small chance of Ellize dying down to zero. And that was exactly what Verner had done.

Among the students, he was the one who cared the most about Ellize's safety, and he'd always trained with a zealous ardor. That was what had allowed him to react so quickly. Before he could've decided whether he *should* or not, he was already in front of Ellize. His body had made the choice for him.

Had he been able to think things through, though, he would've realized that jumping in to protect Ellize was foolish. Given a bit more time, he most likely would've reached the right conclusion: that standing in between her and the archmonster would more likely hinder her, rather than help her. He also would've noticed that Ellize had just finished putting up a barrier of her own.

But Verner hadn't had the time to consider all this. He'd only had a few seconds to act, and he'd ended up making the wrong choice. He'd jumped in before he could stop himself, and in the next second, his vision had gone black.

Ah... I'm going to die, he'd thought before his consciousness had faded.

"I'm alive..."

As he opened his eyes, Verner felt extremely puzzled. He was happy to be alive, sure, but a question kept spinning in his mind: *Why didn't I die?*

He understood his body more than anyone else. At that moment, he

should've died. He still remembered the sensation of having his flesh pierced, his bones shattered, and his heart destroyed beyond repair. He also remembered contracting his muscles so that the hateful crow's beak wouldn't reach Ellize. He was certain it hadn't. And then he'd felt death looming over him. He remembered the strange feeling very distinctly. He *had* died, that much was obvious to him.

And yet, here he was, breathing again. He only knew one person who could accomplish such a miracle...

The very person he'd been thinking about entered the room. "You're awake, Verner. I'm so glad..."

Verner was so relieved to see her well that he didn't immediately notice the tray in her hands. The delicious smell had his stomach growling in no time.

Ellize let out a small laugh and set the tray down on his bedside table. "It's nothing fancy, but I figured something light would be easier on your stomach. Do you think you can eat?" she asked.

"I... Yes. Hmm, Lady Ellize... Did you make this yourself?"

"I did."

Verner was ecstatic—Ellize had cooked for him! He'd eat it all! He wouldn't leave a crumb! He finally looked at the plate and noticed that the pleasant smell of vegetables was actually coming from a pile of strangely colored rice. It was almost orange.

As he picked up the plate, the strong smell of garlic stirred up his appetite further. He scooped up a mouthful with his wooden spoon and eagerly shoved it into his mouth. The sweetness of the rice and the aroma of the different vegetables Ellize had used filled his mouth. The dish had been seasoned perfectly—the faint saltiness and the fragrant garlic brought every ingredient together, and the mellow flavor of the cheese was a welcome addition. Verner would've loved it even if Ellize hadn't been the one who made it—although it was admittedly a plus.

"This is good... Amazing, even!"

Ellize smiled at Verner's praise. "I'm glad to hear you like it."

For a while, they both remained silent and the sounds of Verner enthusiastically wolfing down his food filled the room.

Ellize waited for him to finish eating before she asked, “Verner, why did you do such a thing?” Her voice was soft, but Verner could tell that she was far from pleased.

By “such a thing,” she probably meant protecting her. Verner had no idea how to answer her. He didn’t know *why* he’d done it, his body had simply reacted. *I have to protect her*, he’d thought, and before he knew it, he’d already jumped.

“I don’t know... My body suddenly moved. I just felt like I had to protect you.”

“I’m thankful for your feelings, but I don’t want you to ever do something like that again. I don’t want you... No, I don’t want *anyone* to put themselves in harm’s way for me. I don’t need it either.”

Ellize was too kind. She probably couldn’t bear the thought of someone getting hurt for her sake. But Verner was the same. He was more scared of seeing her get injured than getting injured himself. They both felt the same, yet they couldn’t get through to one another.

“But that means... You’ll be on your own, and—”

“That’s fine,” she cut him off.

You’ll be the only one who keeps on getting hurt again and again, Verner had tried to say.

“I’ve always been fine on my own,” she continued. “As long as I’m here, no one else will have to get injured for no reason... Not the knights, not Layla...and certainly not you. So, please... Don’t ever put yourself in danger trying to save me.”

Ellize intended to take on all the pain by herself. Verner couldn’t help but marvel at her noble spirit. At the same time, he hated that she refused to think of herself. In her mouth, the words didn’t sound like empty bragging. Certainly, she could do it. She’d surely continue to protect everyone, absorbing their suffering as she moved forward...until the day she died.

The thought saddened Verner. Ellize was stronger than anyone else. She stood in a higher place than anyone else. Verner, on the other hand, was so weak that he couldn't hope to stand by her side. Layla and the headmaster had trained him a lot in the past few weeks, and he'd progressed by leaps and bounds...but the last battle had shown him that it was far from enough. He'd gotten stronger, sure, but he was still lagging far behind Ellize.

Ellize was standing at the top of a mountain, higher than the clouds, while he'd barely managed to clear the base.

"I know I'm still far too weak, but... I still want to protect you—"

"You're not strong enough to protect me, Verner. I'll be honest with you... You're in my way when you try to."

Ellize's words were a slap in the face. She'd bluntly told Verner that he was weak, putting an end to his musings. She was right, though, and Verner was at a loss for words.

Ellize turned her back to him and walked to the door, reaching for the doorknob. She must've felt guilty, because she suddenly stopped.

"I brought you back to life, but your body needs rest. Please take good care of yourself," she said gently before leaving.

Verner was frustrated. Not because Ellize had pointed out his weakness, no—he was frustrated because he'd forced her to say that. She simply hadn't wanted him to get hurt. He was such a loser. In her eyes, he wasn't a reliable man. He was just another person she needed to protect. Could he get any more pathetic?

Verner's mind was filled with a single thought.

I want to become stronger... Much stronger than I am now...

Chapter 37: On the Other Side of the Screen

The series of brand-new events had come to an end, and I was finally able to return to the academy.

After the battle in the capital, the knights and soldiers—including my little Scotterbrain—had dropped to their knees and begged me for forgiveness, swearing that they'd be more loyal from now on. I'd only brushed them off. I honestly didn't mind.

Sure, I'd been calling them traitorous knights in my mind and all, but I was a fake. They technically hadn't betrayed their master at all: they'd been serving the wrong master from the start!

Anyway, I'd refused to fire anyone because of what had happened, so the members of my guard had remained the same. The only thing that had changed was Scotterbrain's sword. She'd bought a new one and refused to use the one that showed her status as the head of my guard. According to her, that sword was "too heavy" for her to bear. *I mean it is pretty heavy, so it must be hard to swing around.*

The semester had passed without any particular trouble, and the winter holiday had started. As soon as it ended, it'd be time for the second martial tournament. This time, the students wouldn't be divided by grades. And then, last but *certainly* not least, the final fight against the witch would occur. I didn't have much longer to live, and I had no idea what would happen after the one-year period covered by the game passed. I wanted to make sure everything was dealt with before then.

For the time being, my main focus was training Verner and the others. I wanted them to be strong enough to survive the first part of the witch fight. For my magic vacuum strategy to work, they'd need to tire the witch out and get her to use as much MP as possible. That was the only thing I couldn't do myself...

Hang on... I messed up, didn't I?

I'd already told Verner "I can do everything by myself!" when I totally couldn't! I needed someone to help me, or the witch would just run away!

Oh no! I'm so stupid! How do I fix this?

I couldn't just go back on my word and be like, "Actually, I was just kidding! Hewp me pweeeeeease!" That'd be so lame!

Should I just exclude Verner?

It wasn't like I absolutely *needed* him to be part of the group. I just required a few people to keep the witch busy. It didn't really matter who those people were as long as they weren't official knights—I didn't want her noticing that I was behind it. Any student or teacher could fit the bill. It didn't *have* to be Verner.

The only thing was...Verner was already as strong as a knight. He'd proven it by winning against Marie, who was always supposed to be at the same level as a knight. He still couldn't compare to Layla, though she was in a class of her own anyway as the head of my guard.

On top of that, Verner could use dark magic. That meant he was the only one besides Eterna who could actually hurt the witch. Passing him by would be a huge loss, and I didn't feel comfortable sending Eterna to the basement—I was worried she'd end up turning into the final boss if she was given a chance to fight the witch.

Eterna hadn't been standing out much recently (probably because of me) but I had a feeling that was for the best. She'd be happier that way. After all, whenever Eterna started taking up a lot of space in the game, she died.

All in all, excluding Verner from the witch fight would prove difficult. If none of the people I sent down there could hurt her, she probably wouldn't need to use much MP to fend them off.

I guess I have no choice—I'll apologize to Verner and ask for his help.

I sooo didn't wanna, though! I'd just called him a burden, so how could I suddenly change my mind and beg for his help? I'd sound so ridiculous!

I made my way to the sports ground. It was located behind the main building,

and students mostly used it to run laps, spar, or practice their swordsmanship on straw men. I'd decided to swing by to see if I could find promising students, but...the more I looked at them, the more I realized how exceptional Verner and his friends were. All these students were much worse than random dude. They'd be no use whatsoever.

Wait! That guy looks pretty strong.

There was a student swinging his sword over and over again. His form didn't look half bad. He was wielding a sword that looked very much like the one I'd given Verner, but he was handling its weight like a champ. Actually, the way he swung his sword reminded me of Verner, and...

Yeah, no, that's totally Verner. Whatever, I'm leaving.

"W-Wait! Lady Ellize!"

Unfortunately for me, he noticed me. He ran toward me at an insane speed, a serious expression on his face.

Boy, he sure is fast.

I know, I know. He must be mad about what I'd said last time. I did tell him he was a burden, after all. Oh well, que será, será—I'll be the bigger person and apologize. What d'you mean, it's my fault to begin with?!

"I'm so sorry about what happened last time!"

Huh? But I haven't opened my mouth yet!

I'd been on the verge of apologizing, but Verner had beaten me to it. I had no idea *why*, though.

If I were to sum up what had happened, I'd been confined based on the orders of the royal families. Verner had come to save me even though he knew he was committing treason. Naturally, I had a talk with the royals after the battle, and I'd made sure Verner and the others wouldn't be in trouble for what they'd done. Still, that didn't change the fact that he'd been willing to take a huge risk for me. Then he'd tagged along when I'd gone to the Bilberrian capital, and he'd used his body to shield me from the crow's attack. I hadn't *needed* him to do that, but there was no way he could've known.

Verner had put his life on the line for me not once, but *twice*. Instead of thanking him, I'd told him he was a burden.

Damn, I'm trash! And I still have absolutely no idea why he apologized.

"I-I heard from Eterna and the others that I'd truly...died...at that time."

Yup, you sure did. You better be thankful, because I did my best to save your butt!

"I tried to save you, but I ended up having to be saved instead... And yet, I was under the impression that I had protected you. I understand why you were so disappointed..."

Verner was pretty quick to convince himself that he was in the wrong, wasn't he?

You could've yelled at me and pointed out that I was rude to you even though you'd done nothing but help me, you know?

Anyone would agree that I was in the wrong here. The hero had slipped into the demon lord's castle to rescue the poor princess, but she'd escaped her cell, beaten up the demon lord all on her own, and berated the hero once he'd arrived. The hero still hadn't given up on the ungrateful princess, however, and he'd sacrificed his life to protect her...only to be told that he was a weakling and had no business being a hero if he died from such a pathetic attack.

I would've destroyed the game disc on the spot.

I'd totally forgotten up until now, but I hadn't even thanked him!

I'd always been like this, even in my previous life. I'd somehow get the idea that I'd said something when I hadn't, and I'd end up forgetting to thank people when I'd meant to. Yeah, it'd happened way too many times. Deep down, I probably thought that they'd understand I was thankful even if I hadn't put my feelings into words...but that wasn't how relationships worked, right? In my previous life, my girlfriends would always break up with me right after we'd gotten together, but it looked like I still hadn't learned my lesson!

All right, I totally missed the right moment to say it, but I'll do it anyway!

"I should be the one to apologize. You and your friends risked your lives to

save me, but I ended up being cruel to you. I deeply regret what I said, Verner. Please forgive me,” I said, bowing.

Am I holding a press conference here?

I looked like a star or a politician apologizing on TV. They always paid attention to the position of the camera and showed their best angles. Just like them, I’d even ended up using *the* most cliché wording ever (“I deeply regret what I said”) *and* added the one-two punch of every Japanese person’s most lethal weapon—the bow. It wasn’t for nothing that this traditional pose had endured for hundreds of years, if not more!

To be honest, I’d never believed the celebrities’ apologies. They always seemed so damn fake. It was just as unbelievable as when someone told you they’d “consider your suggestion moving forward.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Lady Ellize!”

Verner, you’re too much of a good guy! You should’ve said something along the lines of “I don’t know if I can forgive you just yet, let me think about it” and made me sweat a little.

“I also wanted to thank you for coming to save me. It made me really happy...” I added.

That wasn’t a lie—I’d been so certain that no one would try to save me that it had made me feel pleasantly surprised when they had. I still thought it had been a stupid idea, sure, but I couldn’t help but be glad someone had cared about me enough to go through with it.

I owed Verner a heartfelt thank you.

Verner didn’t answer me. He was staring at his feet and seemed to be deep in thought.

Are you okay?

After a few seconds, he finally raised his face. He looked so serious.

Wait. He always looks serious, doesn’t he?

“Lady Ellize... I’m still weak, but I swear to you that I’ll become stronger. I’ll become strong enough to be your knight, I promise!”

A-All right...

I didn't think he needed to worry about it too much, to be honest. He was the strongest in his grade. All he had to do was make sure not to screw up his written exams, and he'd join the saint's guard without a doubt.

I wasn't sure I'd still be the (fake) saint by then, but that was another issue. Actually, I was pretty sure I *wouldn't* be.

You'll serve Eterna when the time comes, so do your best!

For the time being, motivating him was the best thing to do. "I'm sure you will, Verner. I believe in you."

If he continued to train dutifully, he'd eventually become strong enough to defeat the witch on his own. That would make my life way easier, so I definitely wanted him to keep doing his best.

Thankfully, Verner and I had made up. I wasn't sure how I would've gotten him to help me if we hadn't, but everything would be fine now! All I had to do was just make him stronger and send him to the basement.

Phew! Victory is at hand!



I'm certain that's what that idiot's thinking right now.

Fudou Niito was looking at a CG on his computer screen as he guessed what the other him—Ellize—was thinking. He did his best to stop himself from laughing.

If he hadn't known that Ellize was him, he would've enjoyed the beautiful oath the protagonist had just made to the heroine. The scene was right out of a romance movie. The sun was setting as the protagonist swore he'd become stronger for the heroine's sake. She smiled at him, engraving his every word into her heart.

How much more cliché can you get?!

Niito knew better, though. The other half of his own soul was in Ellize's body, while he was only still there because part of his soul hadn't properly transmigrated yet. He was nothing but leftover scraps. Ellize was the *true* him—

which made her the furthest possible thing from a dating sim heroine.

“That brand new confinement arc and Verner’s death surprised me a little, but she seems to have gotten back on track. Still, Eterna is basically invisible on this route,” Niito said with a bitter smile.

He had conflicted feelings about the lack of Eterna, the main girl. Dating sims always had some characters show up more often or less frequently depending on the route you were on. In fact, Lina Thomas—the sickly heroine—had only shown up once on this one, when Ellize had healed her. Sometimes, certain heroines didn’t appear at *all* unless you did something specific in the game.

When you thought about it that way, Eterna still had a lot of screen time compared to others. After all, she was Verner’s childhood friend *and* a regular member of his party.

Eterna’s reduced screen time also meant that no one needed her to assume her duties as the saint. Ellize’s goal was to make sure the girl got the happy ending she deserved and remained out of danger, so in a way, she’d succeeded.

“I shouldn’t expect too much from him, though... If he was smart enough to make sure everything worked out in his life, my life as Niito wouldn’t have ended up like that either.”

Niito was all too aware that Ellize was far from being a genius. Truth be told, she was an idiot—just like him. If anything, he thought she’d done a pretty good job so far considering they basically shared one brain cell.

At first glance, she seemed to be doing great. Hell, she’d performed miracles! The only issue was that she grossly underestimated her enemies. Oh, and she took everything—and everyone—too lightly.

Take her confinement, for instance. Niito didn’t get why she’d stayed put in her cell for so long when she knew she didn’t have much time left. It was unlikely that the witch had noticed her absence in a single week, but what if she had? Ellize should’ve returned to the academy immediately instead of taking the risks she had.

In the end, everything had worked out well enough, but that didn’t mean she’d made the right choices. Just because the result was right, it didn’t mean

the process had been. Something could've gone wrong, and their plan would've been ruined!

Niito couldn't help but wonder whether Ellize was even dumber than he was because she was missing part of her soul.

"The fact that Eterna doesn't show up much is probably unavoidable anyway. It's hard to say for sure—I'm still in the dark about the end of Ellize's route—but the entire community already knows that Eterna's route and Ellize's can't coexist."

The idiot on the other side probably hadn't even realized it, but the reason was simple: you could only get on Ellize's route during your first run. Eterna's route, on the other hand, appeared from the second playthrough onward. This meant that it was completely impossible to start Ellize's route and hop onto Eterna's later on in the game. Naturally, the reverse was true too.

Niito had done his fair share of tests, and he'd noticed that it was still possible to get on other girls' routes. Marie or Layla, for instance, were easy targets if you started with Ellize. It just wasn't possible to get Eterna's.

All that to say that Ellize's stupid plan of playing matchmaker for Eterna and Verner had long since failed...if the game was to be trusted, that is. And these days, Niito often wondered whether the contents of the game *could* truly be trusted. One event, in particular, had triggered these suspicions: the battle of the royal capital.

In the game, Verner's party would fight the crow. As soon as the monster's HP would reach zero, it would run away and attack Ellize. Verner would then jump in its way to protect his saint and end up dying.

At that point, Ellize would bring Verner back to life. There were two ways that could go down: Ellize would either use her magic to send air into Verner's lungs, or—if her affection parameter was high enough—she performed mouth-to-mouth.

Would I do that?

If there was no other alternative, Niito believed he would. Saving someone's life always came first. He'd learned how to do cardiac massage and how to

perform mouth-to-mouth when he'd gotten his driver's license, just like everyone else in Japan. He knew very well that under such circumstances, gender didn't matter.

However, in Verner's case, there *had* been another way. Fudou Niito was certain he wouldn't have kissed another dude if he had a choice—after all, he was a man and he wasn't gay.

And yet, the Ellize in the game *did* make that choice if her affection was high enough, even though there was absolutely no need for it. She could easily use her magic to send oxygen right into Verner's lungs, but Ellize would kiss him because she *wanted* to. The whole mouth-to-mouth thing was only an excuse.

The scene had blown up online. Everyone had talked about it for days, and tons of react videos had been uploaded.

Figures! If you don't know the circumstances, it just looks like a nice romantic scene. I would have been moved too if I didn't know who Ellize was! Yup, it's definitely a very nice CG. Straight to the point and super romantic.

However, to Fudou Niito that image appeared terribly fake. It looked like the makers of the game had twisted the reality of the situation and added it in just to fit the genre of the game.

Niito coughed. He felt like something was stuck in his throat, so he immediately brought a hand to his mouth. After a few seconds of uncontrollable coughing, he opened his hand and looked down at his palm. It was covered in sticky crimson liquid. He took out a wet wipe from the pack he'd set on the desk a while back and cleaned his mouth.

"I don't have much longer, huh? But I still have some things to do before I go to the other side..." he mumbled, standing up and wobbling all the way to the entrance.

There wasn't much more he could do here.

He'd already taken out all of his savings—thirty million yen, more or less—and had paid the inheritance taxes ahead of time. He didn't want to leave the money in his account and risk it being frozen for whatever reason after his death. He'd dealt with everything beforehand, and he'd already shared what he

had between his mother and sister. He also had life insurance, so another few dozen million would go to his family after he passed.

With his duties taken care of, he was mostly focused on figuring out the connection between this world and the other one. They seemed to be linked...somehow.

Ellize's actions did have an impact, but in the end, *Kuon no Sanka* was just a game. She couldn't change the "real" world. All she could do was create texts, CGs, BGMs, and lines of code. Her actions were being *recorded*.

There was no new world on the other side of the screen, simply a polarized light filter and glass. A screen was simply a screen. Everyone knew that.

At the end of the day, data's just data. A real human can't enter the world of a game because that's not a thing in the first place. And yet...part of my soul ended up in the world of Kuon no Sanka. I know that for a fact. I've even met Ellize and talked to her. She wasn't some drawing, she was a person. That means the world she's in has to be real. She can't be inside a game...right?

No matter how hard Niito thought about it, he had no way to find the answer.

Had Ellize entered the world of *Kuon no Sanka*, or had she transmigrated into a world that simply happened to be similar? Then again, maybe Niito was thinking of it the wrong way—maybe that world had always existed, and *Kuon no Sanka* somehow reflected what happened there. While these three theories sounded quite similar, they had completely different implications.

The strangest thing, as far as Niito was concerned, was that Ellize's actions didn't just change the contents of the game—they also changed everyone's thoughts. The players somehow believed that *Kuon no Sanka* had always been like this.

Why? And how?

Niito wasn't a religious person, but even he was forced to admit that only a god or a demon was capable of such a feat. And if anyone were to know something about that...it had to be the producers of the game.

"It was produced by...Attimo Game Project. Their address is...ah. That should take me around three hours by train, huh?"

Even though he was pretty much only waiting for death to take him at this point, there were still things Niito could do. On the other side, his stupid twin was doing his best, so he had to do his part too.

Niito willed his body into obedience, trying to ignore the sharp pain that accompanied his every move. He forced himself to suppress his nausea and started looking for his coat. He couldn't find it in its usual spot. After a while, he noticed it was lying on the floor.

"I don't remember throwing it on the floor. Weird... There shouldn't be anything wrong with my memory, though..."

Niito was puzzled, but he eventually concluded that he must've forgotten he'd moved it and put it on.

He didn't take the painkillers his doctor had prescribed him. Whenever he did, he'd get drowsy, and he'd be unable to think. Unfortunately, that meant he had to live with excruciating pain that assaulted his every nerve. Niito didn't let that defeat him, though.

"I look like trash," he said, laughing as he looked at his reflection in the mirror. He was as pale as a corpse, his cheeks were sunken in, and the skin under his eyes was hollow and dark. He looked like something right out of a zombie movie, even despite the clean-shaven face and freshly washed hair.

His eyes, however, shone with purpose. He no longer looked like a man wasting away as he waited for death. Having something left to achieve had given him the sense of purpose he needed to keep on living.

"All right, it's time to go meet God. I'll bring you a souvenir, so hang tight, Ellize," he said, looking at her picture on his computer screen.

Niito left his room. Today, he'd head to the company that had created *Kuon no Sanka*.

Chapter 38: Fudou Niito

Fudou Niito had always been different from the others. Even as a child, something was wrong with him—something was *broken*.

Explaining what, exactly, was difficult, though. It wasn't obvious at first glance either—as long as Niito tried his best to seem “normal,” he managed to pass.

He wasn't coldhearted, nor was he particularly sensitive and compassionate. He wasn't a good person, but he wasn't a terrible person either. Niito simply thought of himself first. He wasn't one to break the rules for the sake of advancement, but he was calculative. He envied those who'd been born luckier and looked down on those he deemed to be below himself.

All in all, he was an egotistical person. But weren't most people like that? He just seemed to be as bad as most other human beings.

At first glance, Niito was a gloomy guy with a serious personality...who also just so happened to entertain a great many thoughts he didn't necessarily feel the need to share. This, in itself, wasn't all that strange. The world was filled with haughty people who pretended to be meek, and keyboard warriors were everywhere on the internet.

Indeed, at first glance, there was nothing wrong with Fudou Niito. He wasn't the sort of sociopath who enjoyed torturing insects and small animals. He liked manga, anime, games, foreign movies, and novels—the sort of stuff everyone else enjoys nowadays.

He was a bit of a weirdo, but he was a “normal” weirdo, just like thousands of other people.

And yet, *something* was wrong with him.

For instance, when Niito was a young child, he'd stumbled upon a dead cat on his way home from school. The cat had been run over by a car and was in a horrible state. Needless to say, Niito's friends had been horrified. They'd tried their hardest to avert their eyes as they went by in a hurry. Niito, on the other

hand, hadn't felt scared or disgusted when he'd looked at the corpse. He *had* pitied the poor cat, to some extent, and he *had* thought the driver was a terrible person for running over it, but the bloody lump of meat itself hadn't evoked any particular emotion.

Niito was missing *something* others somehow had.

When he'd been in middle school, one of the girls in his class had been bullied by a bunch of boys. She hadn't done anything wrong; they'd simply picked her as their victim. They'd film everything with their phones, pushing her around, hitting her, laughing at her tears, and having fun mocking her.

The whole thing had pissed Niito off. What they were doing was wrong, so he'd decided to bully them back.

He'd never been particularly close to the girl, and he'd never had any issues with any of the boys before those events. Up until that point, they'd always treated each other like regular classmates.

However, Niito couldn't bear to see that infuriating spectacle unfold in front of his eyes every single day. So he'd decided he'd just do whatever had to be done in order to feel better. He'd gone to the leader of the group and tried to have a talk with him, but when that hadn't yielded any results, he'd punched him. The boy had retaliated, but Niito hadn't minded one bit.

It wasn't that his blows hadn't been painful—his body had hurt like hell—but Niito had simply ignored the pain and returned every hit twofold. Whenever he saw the other boy, he'd attack him. It didn't matter if it was in the corridors, in the middle of class, or on the way to school. He'd beat him up until he cried again and again.

His teachers and parents had scolded him, but no one had been able to get him to stop. Eventually, the boy had stopped coming to school, and Niito had shifted his focus onto one of the other bullies.

This is so much fun! I get why they were bullying that girl now. I've never had this much fun before... I'm really going to get addicted to this feeling!

Beating up villains in the name of justice was Niito's greatest pleasure. To his classmates, though, he probably hadn't looked like a hero. If anything, he

must've scared them to death.

Niito hadn't realized that, though. He felt like his life had turned into a video game, and he simply narrated his actions to a group of invisible viewers as he enjoyed his everyday life.

Niito's in the red corner! He uses his entire body to deliver a powerful blow, and...WHAM! It's super effective! he'd think as he beat up yet another bully.

Here comes the counter-attack! Niito's in a bad position, but he doesn't let that faze him! He unleashes a megaton punch, and...THWACK! Success! He lands the blow despite its terrible base accuracy! Punch...BAM! It's a KO! Ladies and gentlemen, Niito made it!

Damn, I'm so stroooooong!

Even in the middle of a fistfight, Niito would always remain calm. He'd feel the same as when he played video games with his friends, or when he sat down to read a manga. He'd remain the same old cheerful guy he'd always been. At times, he was lost in thought and looked almost regretful, at others, he simply smiled fondly at his opponent.

At any rate, Niito had kept it up until all of the bullies had stopped coming to school. Then he'd gone to the girl, feeling like a savior.

"You don't have anything to fear anymore. I made sure the bullies wouldn't show their faces again," he'd told her, wondering if that would trigger some sort of event. Perhaps the girl would fall in love with him. What should he say if she asked him out?

His thoughts had been both ordinary and abnormal at the same time.

"No... Don't come near me!" the girl had immediately exclaimed, scared out of her mind.

In the end, only rejection had awaited him. Everything was over. He'd defeated the bad guys, and yet the people around him were scared. The teachers who'd once treated him normally now regarded him as a delinquent and scorned him. Even his family had started looking at him like he was a piece of shit. He'd ended up suspended from school for a while, and the story had even made it into the local newspaper.

Anyone could have predicted this outcome. Anyone but an idiot—Niito himself.

Not too long ago, Niito had stumbled upon a terrible *Kuon no Sanka* fan fiction. “I also save people whenever they get bullied. It’s no big deal, but somehow everyone loves me,” it read. That only ever happened in fiction. Eccentric people would be scorned and rejected. Everyone would despise them and speak ill of them behind their backs.

“I see... I get it now. Since I bullied those bullies back, I ended up becoming a bully too. No one likes bullies. It’s only natural that the others would get mad at me. Dang, I messed up! I’m gonna have to do some soul-searching here,” he’d said, as though he’d made a small mistake.

Sure, he was a little sad that his friends, teachers, and family seemed to hate him. As soon as he’d managed to convince himself that that was simply the way things were, though, he’d stopped minding it as much. He’d been able to tell from their reaction that something was wrong with him.

And so, he’d come to realize something.

I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed before, but I’m a piece of shit! he’d thought to himself in the usual light tone he always used.

If he *was* a piece of shit, he just had to adapt and continue living an ordinary life. As long as he copied the people around him, he’d be able to make do.

It’s all good. Hang in there, me. You can do it.

What Niito was missing was a sense of reality. He lived his life like a game character, and he had no idea how to differentiate between fiction and reality.

Most people got mad when evil characters bullied the heroes. They could also empathize with their favorite characters and feel sad when they went through hardships. However, that didn’t stop them from using those very same characters to shoot bystanders, destroy buildings, or commit other atrocities that would make even the villain look decent in comparison.

It wasn’t anything strange, and the people doing these things were by no means evil or bipolar. They were just regular people enjoying a video game who simply wanted to have fun.

Games weren't real life. You could do whatever you wanted in those fictitious spaces. What you couldn't do, however, was bring these feelings and actions *outside* of a video game. Unfortunately, that was exactly the sort of man Fudou Niito was—he lived life like he was a bystander controlling a character in his image. His reality wasn't the same as that of others. It was as though he was never really there.

That was why he'd chosen to avoid involving himself with others too much. He'd found a job as a web writer so that he could stay at home.

Even when he'd learned he was ill and didn't have long to live, Niito had taken it in stride. *That stuff happens*, he'd simply thought. However, he'd cry thinking of his favorite characters' struggles.

Ellize and Niito were exactly the same in that regard. Something was fundamentally wrong with them. They didn't take the things that ought to matter seriously, and yet, they were strangely affected by others.

However, Niito had noticed that Ellize was slowly changing. He didn't know why. It could've been because his soul had ended up in another body. Perhaps his brain was the problem, not his mind.

Originally, Ellize had been exactly like him. However, she'd started to diverge already. Niito could feel it. He had no way to be sure, and no evidence to suggest it, but that feeling grew stronger by the day.

And that thought had given him hope—hope that maybe *he too* could change in that world. Maybe he'd get to witness himself change.

Niito was full of hope as he set out on a journey to help the other him.



Niito got off the train and walked to the address written on the back of the game box. He expected to see a large building, since it was supposed to be the seat of a company that had produced a hit title, but he ended up in front of a multi-tenant building. They apparently only occupied one of the floors—the fifth, according to the signboard detailing the floorplan.

Niito walked in and used the elevator to head to the fifth floor. He confirmed that he was at the right place and approached the reception area.

“Hello, sir. What can I do for you?” the secretary asked him.

“I’m the freelance writer who called to schedule an appointment. My name is Fudou. Is Ijuuin-san here?”

She’d been slightly surprised by Niito’s appearance, but she remained professional. She quickly schooled her expression into a neutral one. “Please wait here for a moment,” she told him before calling out, louder. “Ijuuin-san! Your appointment is here!”

Niito had booked an appointment with Ijuuin, the leader of the team in charge of *Kuon no Sanka*, beforehand. Usually, a man like him wouldn’t have bothered meeting a mere web writer, but Niito had managed to grab his attention. A few words had been enough: “Ellize, 102.”

The number referred to the original Ellize’s hefty weight before the game had changed. Now that his soul had taken over the character, Ellize only weighed about forty-four kilograms, and Ellize’s former weight couldn’t be found anywhere online. Hell, if anyone tried to call Ellize a fatty now, they’d get crucified by her hardcore fans.

In other words, someone who hadn’t known the original contents of the game wouldn’t react to that number. However, Ijuuin had.

He knows something, Niito thought, smiling.

Chapter 39: Meeting the Game Developer

“I’ll have the pancakes and a coffee, please,” Ijuuin ordered before turning to Niito. “Can I get you something, Fudou-san?”

“No, thank you. I’m not hungry.”

Niito and Ijuuin Haruto—the leader of the team who’d developed *Kuon no Sanka*—had headed to a nearby coffee shop to talk. Niito was currently sitting across from the man who’d been dubbed “the god of the gaming world.”

Ijuuin had retained his youthful features, but Niito estimated he was already in his thirties. He had short, neatly combed black hair and black eyes. The man wore a pair of angular glasses that gave him the look of an intellectual—though, truth be told, Niito thought that the whole idea of equating glasses to intelligence was pretty outdated. In this day and age, everyone and their grandma had terrible eyesight because of phones and computers. Wearing glasses or contact lenses had simply become the norm.

“Now, then... I do hope you’ll forgive me for cutting to the chase, but I’d very much like to hear what you meant by ‘Ellize, 102.’”

“That number was Ellize’s original weight,” Niito answered immediately.

Ijuuin laughed. “That’s a funny joke. However, Ellize weighs forty-four kilograms. You’ve never played *Kuon no Sanka*, have you?”

Niito refused to let him play dumb. In a confident tone, he asked, “If you seriously thought I was joking, you wouldn’t have agreed to see me, right? You only made time in your busy schedule for a nameless web writer like myself because you knew what I was talking about, right?”

If Ijuuin hadn’t had any idea about what that number had meant, he never would’ve agreed to meet with Niito. He would’ve made excuses and insisted things were busy at the company or something. It wasn’t like giving an interview to a random writer held any value to him—it would have been a waste of time.

And yet, here he was, sitting in front of Niito. That told Niito everything he needed to know.

He continued to push the subject. “The original Ellize wasn’t anything like the current one—she was a villain through and through, meant to be hated. Really, she was mostly there to make Eterna look good. She played a big part during the second semester—from the end of the summer holiday to the winter one—where she wreaked havoc and abused her status until she was finally ousted for good.”

Ijuuin stayed silent for a few moments before nodding. “So you really *do* know about her...” The coffee and the pancakes he’d ordered had arrived, and he added two creamers to his cup. He mindlessly stirred his coffee as he continued, “You’re correct, Fudou-san... Ellize was always meant to be the main villain until the witch showed up. And yet, the current Ellize is even *more* of a saint than Eterna. As you yourself said, she’s nothing like the original. She doesn’t even look the same anymore. The worst part is...everyone seems convinced that Ellize has always been like that...even the members of my team. To be honest with you, I was starting to think there was something wrong with me.”

“So you weren’t the one who made these changes?”

“How could I have done that? Certainly, my team could have created a patch with a different Ellize and commercialized it, but how in the world could we have made others believe the game had been like that from the start? Do you think I’m capable of changing the past somehow?” Ijuuin asked. He poured syrup all over his pancakes, cut them, took a bite, and topped it all off with a sip of coffee. “In truth, I was hoping *you* would know something. That’s why I agreed to meet you.”

“I do know *some* things... But it’s such a crazy story that I’m afraid you won’t believe me,” Niito said.

“I’ll decide that after I hear it.”

Niito almost laughed at the irony of the situation. He’d come to this man seeking information, but he was going to be the one explaining things away. There was a chance this conversation would prove to be useful, though, so he

decided to go for it anyway. Still, he was certain Ijuuin wouldn't believe him if he suddenly blurted out that *he* was Ellize, so he decided to alter his story a little.

"Ellize—the current one, I should say—sometimes becomes a...ghost, of sorts. She's visited me several times. Her actions are changing the course of the game and everyone's perception of it. I'm not sure whether the same applies to you, but there are some parts of the game that I can't see. I've concluded that it's because these events have yet to occur in her world. I can't see them because they haven't been set in stone yet."

"You're right—that *is* absurd. Do you have any evidence?"

"The easiest way to prove I'm telling the truth would be to have you meet Ellize. The only issue is...I have no way to know when she'll show up next. She always appears in my room, though, and I think it's because of the link we share that I still remember the original game."

Ijuuin started massaging the bridge of his nose as he pondered over what Niito had just said. He took another mouthful of pancake and started chewing mechanically. He seemed to be hoping the sugar would help him think.

"Fudou-san, where do you live at the moment?"

"I have a room in a shabby apartment building in Sunekajiri."

"I see... Do you happen to know if the building has any vacant rooms?"

"Yes. The flat right next to mine is empty."

"How convenient," Ijuuin noted with a nod. He took another sip of coffee and continued, "I'll move there for the time being. If Ellize visits you, please inform me immediately, no matter what time of day."

"A-Are you sure? You don't have that much free time on your hands, do you?"

"No, I'm a very busy man. However, I don't think I'll be able to focus on anything else until I get answers. Something I created with my own two hands is out there, and it's changing all on its own. It's scaring me."

Niito understood where the other man was coming from. Ijuuin had to be creeped out beyond belief. To him, it must've been like watching a drawing

you'd made suddenly come to life. He must've wanted to understand what was going on even more than Niito himself.

As it turned out, the day when Niito would be able to show him proof came much faster than he'd thought.



After I'd made up (?) with Verner, nothing really big happened until a few days before the winter holiday started. Suddenly, I'd found myself in my previous world once more. Fudou Niito—me—noticed me and got out of bed.

"Here you are again," he greeted me.

"Indeed, here I am again."

Damn, you look like shit, me.

Niito—me—basically looked like a zombie at this point. His skin was ashen, his cheeks were sunken, and his undereye area looked incredibly hollow. He had dark circles that would put pandas to shame, and he'd lost so much weight that I could make out his bones.

He doesn't have much longer to live, does he?

Niito—me—abruptly picked up his smartphone and started to type something.

"I'm going to invite someone here, Ellize," he warned me. "I haven't told him that we're the same person because it'd be a pain to explain, so hold your tongue."

"Okay... But are you sure it's a good idea to invite an outsider here?"

"I wouldn't exactly call him an 'outsider.' He's the leader of the team that worked on *Kuon no Sanka*."

Apparently, Niito—me—had gotten chummy with the developers. *I'm guessing he's looking into the links that tie this world and the other one together.*

If you were to stop and think about it for five minutes, transmigrating into a game was absurd. At the end of the day, *Kuon no Sanka* was nothing more than

a clever collection of character sprites, CGs, background illustrations, and BGMs held together by a bunch of lines of code. *Oh, and some cool effects for the fight scenes, but that's beside the point!*

Anyway, that was no *world*, which raised an important question: what exactly *was* the world I lived in? Did it just happen to be modeled off the game, or had the game been created with that world as its basis? Since the contents of the game changed depending on what I did, the latter seemed more likely, but...

"Oh, he'll be here any minute," Niito—me—said, walking to the entrance.

I could hear someone running along the corridor. Niito—me—looked through the peephole and opened the door. A man who seemed to be in his thirties or perhaps his early forties came in.

So this is the dude who made Kuon no Sanka, huh?

He stared at me, flabbergasted. "I can't believe it... She's really here..."

"Hmm... Nice to meet you, I'm Ellize," I said, figuring a light greeting couldn't hurt.

I was meeting one of the developers, which was akin to meeting God, considering my position as one of the characters of the game. For all I knew, he could erase my entire world at will if I pissed him off. *I'd better not annoy him for the time being.*

"Ah..." he hesitated. "It's a pleasure to...meet you as well. My name is Ijuuin Haruto. I'm the leader of the team that handled *Kuon no Sanka's* development."

Ijuuin-san, huh? I committed his name to memory.

"So, what would you like to discuss today?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Niito—me—interjected, like I was an idiot for even asking. "We're here to talk about the connection between our world and yours. Whenever you do something, the people here somehow get the idea that the game has always been like that from the start. We're trying to understand why."

"Did you bring Ijuuin-san here because he has the answer?" I inquired.

"I'm afraid not," the developer answered. "The members of my teams aren't

noticing any of the changes either. They're convinced that we've made the game like that..."

I was hoping Ijuuin-san would be able to cast some light on the mystery, but it sounded like he wouldn't be much help. He'd noticed something was wrong, but he didn't seem to know anything beyond that. If the God who'd quite literally created that world didn't know anything, the situation was hopeless.

"Still, I'm certain that *Kuon no Sanka* is the key to unraveling this mystery," Niito—me—said. "I want all of us to stop and go over everything we know about the game together. There *has* to be a hint somewhere."

Ijuuin-san nodded, and I ended up getting swept up by the atmosphere and nodded along too. With one of the devs here, we'd get to hear about the inside stories, so maybe we had a *teeny* tiny chance of finding a clue.

At Niito—my—'s insistence, Ijuuin-san started talking. "First of all, the full name of the game is *Kuon no Sanka Fiore caduto eterna*. It was released four years ago, and we've sold around four hundred and twenty thousand copies. The name of the company I work for is Attimo Game Project, and *Kuon no Sanka* is, without a shadow of a doubt, its greatest hit. I lead a team of six developers—including myself—and we're currently working on a sequel, as well as a spin-off with Marie as the main heroine. Although, for the time being, these projects have been put on hold."

"Why?"

"The scenarist is suffering from a severe case of writer's block. We keep asking them to hand in their work, but they never send us anything. Online novelists have no professional consciousness, I swear!"

There'd been rumors about *Kuon no Sanka* getting a sequel for years, but nothing had been released yet. Apparently, the culprit was the scenarist.

I guess they can't do much without the scenario. I'm curious though... Did he say the scenarist was an online novelist?

"Could you tell us what kind of person the scenarist is?" I asked.

"I don't know much about them either," he answered. "I've never met them face-to-face. They use a pseudonym, and we've only talked by message. I don't

know what they look like.”

“You’ve never met? Even though you’re both part of the production team?”

“The initial story of *Kuon no Sanka* actually comes from a contest that our company held in collaboration with a popular online novel platform. The winner won the right to have their story published, a nice monetary prize, and a game award. *Kuon no Sanka* won that particular prize, and it was subsequently turned into a game. Fiori’s Turtle—that’s the writer’s username—refused to meet anyone directly. They said they’d only agree to work with us if we agreed to communicate with them online. It’s not like remote work is that rare nowadays, so we didn’t think much of it. We *did* invite them to celebrate the game’s success over a meal several times, but they always declined. Anyway, the scenarist isn’t one of our employees.”

As it turned out, that scenarist was an amateur that’d been given a chance after wooing the game company during the contest.

“In a way, we could say this man—or woman, I don’t know—is the true creator of *Kuon no Sanka*,” Ijuuin concluded. “All we did was add pictures and music to the words that this person wrote. We hired illustrators to work on the art, but Fiori’s Turtle sent very detailed descriptions of the characters’ looks as well.”

“We need to talk to them, then. Where do they live? What’s their name? If you signed a contract with them, you must’ve gotten their full name at some point,” Niito—me—asked.

“We did. We needed their address to send them the game demo, so I *do* know both their name and address. They’re called... Hmm...” Ijuuin-san trailed off and started rubbing his forehead. After thinking for a while, he raised his head, an awkward expression on his face. “I’m sorry... I’ve forgotten.”

Dude... C’mon...

To be fair, the scenarist wasn’t even one of his colleagues, and he probably used their pseudonym whenever he talked to them online.

But still, get a grip! This doesn’t bode well...

Chapter 40: Looking for a Clue

“Please calm down, Ijuuin-san. You can just go to your office. You wrote it down, right?” Niito—me—said, trying to get Ijuuin-san to relax.

Even if the man had a terrible memory, he probably hadn’t lied about sending the demo to the scenarist’s place. There was no way he hadn’t written down the name and address of the game’s scenarist. The documents were most likely still at his office.

Sure, sometimes people relied on their memory when it came to their friends and families’ addresses, but no one in their right mind would do that when it came to work. It *had* to be written down somewhere.

Ijuuin-san’s face lit up. “You’re right! I do have a document with Fiori’s Turtle’s full name and address. I even wrote it on my computer’s notes app. I just need to go check.”

People often forgot things. We’d end up storing the pieces of information we didn’t use daily in our mind’s drawers and, sometimes, they simply refused to come out afterward. That was why taking notes was so important—especially at work.

Phew, you scared me for a second.

We’d still be able to contact the scenarist. The only issue was that it would have to wait until Ijuuin-san could go back to his office. I couldn’t really control when I visited this world, so I’d have to leave the matter in their hands.

Leaving that aside, something else was bugging me.

“Fiori... That’s the name of my world, isn’t it?”

And it also happened to be the writer’s name...

Fiori was the name of the world in which the events of *Kuon no Sanka* took place. One of Verner’s friends was called Fiora. Her name actually came from the name of the world, and it was pretty popular. It was kind of like the name

“Yamato”—the former name of Japan—for Japanese people.

Anyway, my point was that people being called Fiori or Fiora in that world wasn’t all that strange. It was much stranger for a Japanese person to pick out that name as their username. I had a bad feeling about this.

Maybe... No, that’s impossible...

I’d started thinking that maybe, just maybe, the scenarist *was* that world itself, but that didn’t make any sense.

Still, rewriting people’s memories was something only a God could do. Everyone had forgotten the original scenario of *Kuon no Sanka*. They’d forgotten that Ellize was a piece of shit and seemed to think that I’d been Ellize all along. There was no logical explanation for this.

“It’s not that weird, is it? Plenty of people pick their OC’s name as their username,” Ijuuin-san stated.

“True, but, um...you can’t be sure that’s all there is to it, right?” Niito—me—argued.

The two of them had been speaking pretty politely to each other at first, but they’d already switched to casual speech. Not that I cared much.

“Ijuuin-san, can you confirm something for me? In *Kuon no Sanka*, the world *itself* gives birth to a saint after sensing that a witch has awakened, right?” Niito—me—asked.

“Yeah, that’s how it’s supposed to go. When the world senses the birth of a new witch, it conveys its will to the mana that flows through the land, prompting the birth of a saint. At the end of the day, witches and saints are both created by the world itself.”

Niito—me—and Ijuuin-san were discussing the premise of the story. Saints and witches only existed because the world willed it. It wasn’t something you’d learn just by playing the game, but it was written in the developers’ interview included in the strategy guide. Still, while all the players who’d read the guide knew that the world pretty much created saints and witches, we didn’t know *why*. There had been rumors that the answer would be revealed in the sequel, but we’d already been waiting for four years with no release date in sight.

“As one of the developers, you probably know why the world does that, don’t you?” Niito—me—asked.

Ijuuin-san paused before starting his explanation. “The scenarist did mention it, yeah. Originally, the witch was meant to be the world’s proxy. She was created to humble the humans who’d grown too arrogant. She was meant to rule over humanity for all eternity to make sure they didn’t go too far. But, the witch went mad—I’m not sure why—and she turned against humanity. At first, she only killed humans. Eventually, though, she started doing the very thing she’d been created to prevent—destroying nature. So, the world decided to create a new proxy—the first saint, Alfrea. While the first witch was eventually defeated, her grudge stuck to the saint, which turned her into the next witch. You know how Alexia cut out a part of her soul, and it ended up in Verner? That’s pretty much what happened with the first witch—except with her whole soul, not just a small part. Anyway, having lost its proxy, the world decided to create another one...and you know the rest of the story.”

So that’s how it went, huh?

In the end, the true villain really was the very first witch. If she hadn’t started messing around, none of this would’ve happened.

Urgh, some people are such a pain.

“I’ve got another question,” Niito—me—continued. “All the players know that there’re prophets that can predict the birth of the saint—they’re mentioned in the game—but, uh...what’s the deal with them? Why do they have this ability? The game’s surprisingly cryptic about them.”

Niito—me—was talking about prophets with an “s,” but there was so little information about them in the game that I didn’t even know whether there really *were* several of them or not. For all we knew, there could be just one—it was never explicitly mentioned.

For the time being, I guess we can probably assume there are, or at least have been, several prophets. After all, the guy would have to be several hundred years old if he’s predicted the birth of every saint since the very start. That’d be crazy...

Either way, the existence of the prophets *was* crazy. They’d sense the birth of

a new saint and warn the elites so they could collect the baby. However, just like Niito—me—had pointed out, we had absolutely no clue *why* they were even able to sense that in the first place. On top of that, while the existence of the prophets was crucial in the world of *Kuon no Sanka*, they never appeared in the game—in fact, they were only briefly mentioned at the start. People thought it was foreshadowing at first, but in the end, the story never touched on the topic at all.

Ijuuin-san crossed his arms and frowned. “I...don’t know. I *did* ask, but the scenarist dodged my questions. At the time, I assumed that they hadn’t given the prophets’ role much thought, and that they simply needed them to exist as a plot device...”

He probably wished he’d been a little pushier and gotten answers at the time.

The developer looked at me. “Hmm...” he started, hesitating. “Ellize...san—I hope you don’t mind me calling you that—do you know anything about the prophets? Since you live in that world, I assume you must know things we don’t...”

“I’m afraid I don’t... I’ve only been told that a prophet predicted my birth. I believe King Aiz will know more than me. I’ll ask him when I go back to my world.”

After the whole confinement incident, the old man had become super cooperative. He’d probably answer my questions without making a fuss.

Yup, being connected to important people is where it’s at. Aiz must’ve met the prophets before. He’s seen four—well, three if you removed me, the imposter—saints in his lifetime, after all.

“We all know what we have to do next. Ijuuin-san and I will try to contact Fiori’s Turtle. You try to find a way to contact the prophets. I’m sure we’ll eventually find a clue if we keep looking.”

We all nodded.

Whenever I changed the storyline, the contents of the game would be affected, and everyone’s perception would change—except for the three of us. For the time being, we had no idea *how* and *why* such things could happen. To

be honest, I had a feeling whatever was at play far exceeded human understanding. Still, if we kept looking, we'd eventually find answers.

"There's one last thing I wanna mention," Niito—me—added, looking at me.

What was this about? It looked like something was bugging him. He turned on his computer in silence. After a few clicks, the home page of a famous video platform appeared on the screen, and he launched a video. We watched Ellize being confined and Verner and the others coming to save her. After that was the battle of the capital, but for some reason, Verner's party fought the crow in the game.

That's not really what happened, but whatever. Kuon no Sanka is a game, so I suppose it's fine if they rearrange the events a little bit.

After their battle, Ellize took care of most of the enemies, but the crow launched a last-ditch attack to take her out. Verner jumped in front of her, died, and then Ellize helped him breathe...mouth-to-mouth.

I mean...mouth-to-mouth is a thing in these situations, but...

Um...

WHAT THE HELL?! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIIIIIS?!

I haven't done this! I'd never do it! I know I just said games were allowed to twist the truth a little, but not like that!

The comments poured in super fast.

FINALLY!!!

Verner, move aside, let me take your place!

Change places with me, Ellize! I'll do it!

Oho, would you look at that? She could've used magic, but she chose to kiss him, didn't she?

Hang on. Wait a minute. I had used magic, hadn't I?! I'd put my hand over his mouth and sent oxygen into his lungs, right?! So why am I kissing him?! What

the hell is wrong with you, Ellize?! They even made a damn CG out of it...

“So, if Ellize’s affection level is under fifty, she’ll treat Verner coldly and use magic to help him breathe. If it’s over fifty, though... Lemme tell you, you’re in for a very nice reward. You’ll get a kiss! That’s why you’ve got to die here, guys!” the streamer exclaimed.

What’s up with this nonsense?! My “affection level” doesn’t matter! I am not doing that!

What in the world was I watching? Was this really...me? Was this from a parallel world in which I actually fell for Verner?

What kind of new torture method is this?!

I was staring at the screen in disbelief when Niito—me—asked, grinning, “So? Did you do it?”

“No! I’d never fu—think of doing something like this! Why would I kiss him when I can use magic instead?!”

Phew. I’d almost dropped an f-bomb in front of Ijuuin-san. Thankfully, I’d managed to stop myself in time.

Anyway, I hadn’t done it, and I sure as hell *would* never do it! Unless there was no other way... Then I’d probably do it... Time was of the essence when it came to cardiopulmonary arrest. There was no time to worry about the victim’s gender in those situations. However, that only applied to cases where there was no other option. I wouldn’t go out of my way to give a man mouth-to-mouth if I could avoid it.

“I figured... Which means there are additional scenes created to please the players. I’m not sure if we can really say that the contents of the game change depending on your actions anymore... Although I suppose it’s not completely impossible that the ‘you’ of that timeline panicked so much that you forgot you could use wind magic and went for mouth-to-mouth out of desperation,” Niito—me—said with a sigh, before looking at the computer screen with suspicion.

Up until now, we’d both been convinced that every event shown in the game had either happened to me, or could’ve if I’d picked a different route. This scene, however, stuck out like a sore thumb. It had most likely been fabricated.

Everything we'd assumed could very well be wrong. We had no way of being sure, though. We lacked information. It looked like we'd really have to find a way to talk to the scenarist or to the prophets if we hoped to elaborate a new theory.

I now had a goal to fulfill during the winter holiday.

The usual telltale signs warned me that I'd wake up soon. My time here was up for today.

Do your part, Niito—me. I'll do what I can on my side too. Oh, and you'd better forget you ever saw that scene, got it?!



Good morning, everyone! It's your favorite trash saint, Ellize!

I woke up in a good mood, ready to tackle my new task. For some reason, I was always full of energy after coming back from the other world. I wasn't sure how to explain it, but it'd feel like some sort of...drowsiness or something...that'd always weigh me down would disappear at once. My mind and body were left refreshed, I felt stronger than ever, and my magic had improved.

I have no idea what happened, but hey! I'm not complaining! Everything's going swimmingly!

All right, I'll stop pretending.

I actually had a pretty good idea of what was happening. I was probably taking back pieces of my soul every time I visited the other me. That was most likely why I'd feel better and stronger after each dream. On the other hand, I imagined that Niito—me—must've ended up feeling even worse.

I probably shouldn't go to the other side anymore...

It wasn't like I visited him out of my own volition, though, so I probably had no say in the matter.

There's no point overthinking this. Let's summarize what I need to do instead.

The winter holiday would start soon. After that, it'd be time for the third semester—the last arc of the story. From now on, we'd be heading toward the

ending—the final fight with the witch—at full speed... Or at the very least, that was how things were supposed to go in the game I knew of.

In the original game, Ellize'd be out of the picture for good at this point and Eterna awakened as the saint, regardless of the route you were on. Eterna would be scared to accomplish her duty as the saint, but Verner would comfort her, and she'd eventually make up her mind. The following events would then change depending on the route.

The issue, as you may have noticed, was that I was still *very much* in the picture. As for Eterna, she had no idea that she was the saint.

The third semester probably wouldn't follow the original plot.

I should still go over what I know, just in case.

There were a few events that occurred before the witch fight, but the most important one was the battle of the academy. After marching into the Lutein Kingdom, the monsters' army was supposed to keep advancing until it reached the academy. The students and teachers would fight the monsters, and a bunch of background characters would end up dying. Eterna would've awakened her powers, and she'd fight the enemy general—that demon monkey I'd beaten up a while back, remember?—with Verner. Without a leader, the monsters would end up scattering, and the academy would be saved.

In this timeline, though, I'd already gotten rid of the monsters' army, so there was a pretty good chance that event wouldn't happen at all.

Next would be the stalking-slash-kidnapping event orchestrated by the damn Four-Eyed Pervert. He'd always go for the heroine who liked you the most at the time, except if it was Alexia. If that were the case, then the event would be delayed slightly.

After that would be the witch fight. It could happen in a few different ways depending on the route you were on, but there were three main patterns: it'd occur in the middle of the semester, at the end of it, or not at all.

The conditions to trigger that last option were pretty specific. You had to reach the event where Eterna and Verner had a chat and encourage her to fulfill her duty as the saint. Then, you had to pick a different heroine as your girl while

making sure that Eterna's affection was under a specific value, *and* that she was over level forty.

If you met the requirements, Eterna would make up her mind to live as the saint, and—after realizing that her feelings for Verner would never be reciprocated—she'd leave to fight the witch with her knights; all so that Verner could live happily with his lover. By the way, if you were on this path, Layla could die at this point depending on her affection level.

Needless to say, Eterna would become the next witch, and you'd end up having to fight *her* as the final boss instead.

Moving on to the middle-of-the-semester pattern—a classic on the other heroines' routes. The atmosphere of the game would suddenly shift, and even though you were still supposed to have quite a few days left to play, you'd end up facing the final boss. After you defeated the witch, Eterna would show up and deliver the coup de grâce. The game would then let you think that you had earned a happy ending...before throwing you for another loop.

Ellize's burdensome legacy would resurface out of the blue, and a mob of idiots who hated the saint would attack Eterna's village, killing her parents and her friends. This incident was partly due to the fact that Eterna had only taken her rightful place as the saint for a short time, and partly due to the fact that these people didn't have enough brain cells to differentiate Ellize and Eterna and never bothered to learn the saint's name.

The peasants were right to loathe Ellize, obviously, but they ended up directing their anger at the wrong person. As soon as they learned where the saint was from, they immediately attacked without stopping to think.

They're a bunch of idiots, really.

In the end, Eterna would lose faith in humanity and kill the mob, going down the path of darkness. Well, to be fair, she was doomed the moment she finished off the witch herself, but instead of getting five years of peace, humanity ended up getting zero.

Incidentally, the only way for the witch to survive was to hop onto Alexia's route. She'd end up joining you without a care in the world. Obviously, on that run, I'd just snatched up all of her equipment and sold it to buy other stuff after

she'd joined my party.

This left us with the last pattern: the witch fight taking place at the very end of the game.

This only happened on Eterna's route, and you'd end up with a few exclusive events centered around Eterna which would push the battle back until the end. After you'd defeated the witch, Eterna would die in Verner's arms. It was less horrible than the other endings, but that didn't change the fact that no matter what you did, Eterna never got her happily ever after.

My poor darling...

As I thought, giving Eterna no screen time was for the best. She'd be happier that way.

Anyway, my main issue at the moment was that all this knowledge was pretty much useless now. Most of these events were triggered by Eterna's awakening. Besides, I'd already beaten up the monsters' army. The only big event that could still come up was Four-Eyed Pervert's stalking-slash-kidnapping arc.

I'd have to tread carefully since I had no way to predict the future anymore.

I really have no idea what's gonna happen moving forward... Oh well, I'm sure I'll figure something out. I'll have to if I want to achieve my goal.

Chapter 41: On My Way to the Prophet

The winter holiday started, and the ever-tumultuous school quieted down overnight. A few students still visited the sports ground daily to hone their skills, but it was nothing compared to the usual hustle and bustle.

I was currently hosting a guest in this quiet and relaxed atmosphere. Actually, that was kind of misleading—I wasn't really entertaining *one* guest, since he hadn't come alone. The person I was meeting had been accompanied by *nine* bodyguards.

My guest was currently sitting across from me, in the area I used as a parlor in my room on the fifth floor.

"Thank you for seeing me, King Aiz. Still, I wish you would have let me come to you instead. There was no need for you to go through the trouble of traveling."

"Please, don't mention it," he answered politely. "I'll rush to you whenever you need me. It will never be enough to atone for my sins, but it's the least I can do..."

The man sitting in front of me was Aiz, the king of the Bilberry Kingdom, and the main culprit behind the confinement incident. His attitude toward me had done a total 180, and he was now oddly friendly.

I guess he always was friendly... It's just that it used to be an act.

I hadn't held him accountable for anything after the incident had come to an end. He hadn't pressed charges against Verner and the others either, so I hadn't seen a point in making a fuss. It would've been tactless.

By the way, I'd told Aiz that his concerns—the whole "me turning into the witch" thing, I mean—would never happen. I hadn't gone over the details because I didn't want Eterna to be in danger, but surprisingly enough, he'd believed me just like that.

Are you sure you're okay, old man? Aren't you supposed to be a super

skeptical character? What happened?

Anyway, I'd sent him a letter saying I wanted to have a chat, and he'd come running without even sending a reply. *Is meeting with a king supposed to be that easy?*

"Your letter said you wanted to ask me something. How can this old fool assist you, Lady Ellize?"

"I'd like to learn more about the prophets," I said.

Aiz raised an eyebrow when the word "prophets" left my lips. Considering his reaction, he definitely knew something about them.

"For generations, prophets have predicted the saints' births. They've told the kings and queens where to find them," I continued. "However, I can't help but wonder why I know so little about them. Who are they? Where do they dwell? I'm afraid I know nothing...and I also fail to understand how they can predict such things. I'd like to think that I'm somewhat versed in magic, but as far as I know, no spell can foresee the future. Please...tell me what you know."

Aiz laughed. "You're *somewhat* versed in magic, you say? Everyone else must be a novice, then," he jested.

Oh dear. I guess I really am a genius, huh? To be fair, Ellize's body is where all the talent stems from. I haven't done much myself. I obviously knew I was one of the most skilled magicians in this world, but I couldn't just say it outright, could I? *Modesty's really important to Japanese people!*

"You're right, Lady Ellize, no spell can foresee the future. The prophet does not foresee anything using magic. They simply listen to God's words and share His will with us. If the saints are God's proxy, then you could say the prophets are God's messenger. Their identity and residence is a well-kept secret, passed down only to future kings by their predecessors."

I nodded, letting out little hums as I listened to the old man's explanation. I hadn't thought of things like that at all. As it turned out, prophets didn't predict the future—they shared God's will. *I'm gonna assume that this "God" is the same entity that births the saints—the world itself.*

This explanation made more sense than the idea that some people could

somehow see the future. Since “God” was responsible for giving birth to the saints and whispering in the prophets’ ears, it was only natural they’d know where to find the saints. The only thing that bugged me was that they were kept under wraps.

“Why do they live hidden?” I asked. “If they’re so important, shouldn’t the royal families shelter and protect them?”

“You’ll understand when you meet them,” Aiz answered. “I can still remember how shocked I was when I first did.”

I’d get it when I met them, huh? Well, I was definitely down to—if I *could*, that was.

“You’ll tell me where they are, right?” I asked.

“I can take you to them, but only you. You won’t be allowed to bring anyone else along. To be honest, taking you to them is already a breach of contract...”

Just me, huh? I didn’t really mind—it wasn’t like I actually needed bodyguards anyway.

Still, to think the prophet had a contract with a king *and* had the means to force the king to respect his end of the bargain...

Don’t they have a higher status than the saint?

The saint was supposed to be the most important person in this world, but at the end of the day, she was nothing but a sacrifice.

Layla, who’d been standing by my side quietly until now, suddenly spoke up. “P-Please wait... The two of you traveling alone would be far too dangerous. Please allow me to protect you, at the very least.”

Scotterbrain! Did you even listen to what the old man just said?!

Aiz looked up at her and coldly said, “No. Only the heir to the throne is meant to know where the prophet dwells. I shouldn’t even bring Lady Ellize, and I will not compromise further.”

Layla refused to give up. “But—”

“Layla,” I cut her off. “I’ll be fine on my own. I need you to believe in me and

wait.”

There was no point in throwing a tantrum. What if the old man suddenly changed his mind and refused to take me because Layla annoyed him? I needed her to shut up and accept this.

I’d pulled the “believe in me” card, so Layla had no choice but to nod and stop arguing. Pushing the issue would be akin to saying she didn’t trust me—her master. As the head of my guard, she couldn’t do that. Especially not in front of other people.

“I understand, Lady Ellize...” she finally relented.

She didn’t seem convinced, but she’d stopped arguing. That was good enough for me.

Shall we head to the prophet’s place, then?

The winter holiday had barely started, and nothing important would happen until it ended. Verner would probably have to deal with a few events related to the heroines he was close to, but no matter how poorly he handled them, no one would die.

That means I don’t need to interfere, right?



To visit the prophet, we had to take the train! I knew that steam trains were a thing in this world, but I hadn’t ridden one yet. I usually flew around or rode a carriage, so it was a nice change of pace.

Aiz and I were sitting on opposite sides. Since I didn’t have much to do, I looked out the window to kill time. I eventually got bored of staring at the scenery and decided to start a conversation.

“I never would have imagined a train could take us straight to a place that’s supposed to remain secret,” I said.

“This track can only be used by the royal family,” Aiz answered. “Commoners aren’t allowed on this train.”

I see...

I was starting to get why they'd decided to build a train track. If you stopped and thought about it for five minutes, it was the obvious choice. The royals were the only ones allowed to visit the prophet, so they couldn't use a carriage to head there. However, you couldn't expect royals to simply walk there on their own. Although the world had gotten much safer in recent years, and you could walk alongside the main roads without running into monsters, that obviously hadn't always been the case. There was no way a king or his successor could be allowed to wander alone under such conditions.

That said, trains didn't completely eliminate the danger. Monsters attacking a train wasn't completely unheard of, and they could also destroy the tracks.

"Isn't it dangerous to let the king board a train alone?" I asked. "You could die."

"Someone who's too scared to travel alone once in a while isn't fit to become king," Aiz answered. "Visiting the prophet alone is one of the trials a prince must clear before they're allowed to ascend the throne. It's almost...a rite of passage, I suppose. I myself took on this trial a long time ago... Back when I wanted to become king as fast as possible so I could save Lilia. I passed on this duty to my son, who also rode this train years ago..."

A lonely expression crossed his face. I didn't know what to say.

What's up, Aiz? Why're you suddenly trauma dumping?

I remembered him mentioning it before. He'd done his best to ascend the throne as quickly as possible, but he hadn't been able to help Lilia at all. She'd launched a suicide attack right after learning the truth and had died a brutal death, hadn't she?

He'd also mentioned that his son had boarded the train... *But you're still king, aren't you?* If his son had undergone the rite of passage to become king, but hadn't ascended the throne, it could only mean one thing: he was dead. He'd either died during the trial, or he'd lost his life soon after clearing it.

It's kinda hard to follow up after this sort of statement, though, so I really wish you'd stop trauma dumping on me.

I finally spoke up after a long pause. "By the way... This train has a conductor,

right? Why is he allowed to be here?”

“Because the people who operate this train all come from a family that serves the prophet. We call them the ‘guardians.’”

So the train crew doesn’t work for the king, but for the prophet...

The guardians, huh? I couldn’t help but imagine a bunch of half-naked people wearing straw skirts and armed with spears. They probably bore strange patterns on their bodies and wouldn’t get our language...or something. Then again, they were operating a modern train, so I probably had the wrong idea...but still.

“The guardians... I wonder what kind of people they are. I can’t wait to meet them,” I said.

I most likely wouldn’t run into the forest people I’d imagined at first. I couldn’t guess what they’d look like. Maybe their appearance would exceed my imagination... Hell, maybe they’d look like time travelers from a distant future, and they’d be super smart!

The door of the car suddenly opened, jolting me from my reveries.

“Yks eht morf gnimoc si retsnom a!”

Huh?!

“Tnias, ytsejam ruoy, uoy tcetorp ll’ew.”

What?!

Some, uh... Hmm... You know what? I didn’t even know *how* to describe the beings that had just opened the door. They looked like monkeys with thick fur. *No, they’re not monkeys...or are they?* They looked closer to humans than regular monkeys, but still... *They’re monkeys, right?*

Either way, I had absolutely no idea what they’d just said.

I looked at the old geezer, hoping for an explanation.

“They’re guardians,” he calmly stated.

What the—?! No matter how you spin it, these...people...are primitive men!

Talk about exceeding my imagination! I’d managed to picture the complete

opposite! I would've accepted forest people, but this totally paled in comparison!

What the hell are they holding?! Is that a stick with a stone attached to it?!

"Hmm... What are they saying?" I asked.

"I don't know. All I can say is that they seem distressed," Aiz said.

It seemed like he didn't speak their language either.

The guardians surrounded us, their weapons in hand. *Are they trying to...protect us?*

"Wodniw eht morf yawa evom! Suoregnad s'ti!"

It sounded like they wanted us to do something, but I had absolutely no idea *what*. The guardians grabbed our hands and started pulling us away from the window.

What is it? What do you want?!

I was starting to get annoyed, but the next second, the guardian that had taken our place next to the window was seized by a large bird.

Oh. They were trying to tell us that sitting too close to the window was dangerous, weren't they?

"It looks like a monster found the train," I commented. Right outside the window, a large bird monster with a wing span of over three meters flapped about. It was a pretty attractive bird with a cute little face, black wings, and a white body.

The bird looked at us and cried, "Eeeediot!"

Oh boy, its cries are irritating. Ah! I remember now! That's an eediot bird!

These weaklings showed up in the game as well.

"Em dnim t'nod! Eelf! Ti tcartsid ll'i!"

The guardian it had caught was shouting something, but I still didn't get squat. I assumed it was along the lines of "Help me! Quick! It caught me because of you!"

I didn't usually go around helping monkeys, but... *I guess I could make an exception today. I'd feel bad if he died because of me. Let's deal with this in a jiffy.*

I stepped on the window frame and jumped out. The next second I was looming over the eediot bird. I brought my light blade down, killing it in one swing, before catching the guardian and returning to the train.

The other guardians started making a racket as I landed inside the train.

"Gnizama! Gnorts os er'uoy!"

"Tnias suoirolg, edarmoc ruo gnivas rof uoy knaht!"

I assumed they were happy I'd saved their friend.

The one I'd just helped grabbed my hands and started crying as it blubbered something unintelligible. "Roivas ym er'uoy! Uoy knaht! Uoy knaht!"

It was probably thanking me...or so I assumed.

Being thanked by a monkey doesn't exactly make me happy, though...

Chapter 42: The Prophet

After the little incident, the monkeys got attached to me. A few dozen minutes had already passed since the monster had attacked the train, but the guardians hadn't moved. They were hanging around me and babbling more stuff I didn't get.

One of them had slipped away for a while before coming back with a large piece of meat. It looked like chicken or some other sort of poultry. He'd used a large stick as a skewer and a big leaf as a plate...

How are these monkeys even able to operate a steam train? Are we really going to arrive at the prophet's place in one piece?

"Tnias suoirolg, eno siht evah! Tuc tseb eht si siht!" he said, handing me the large skewer.

Was this their way of thanking me? To be honest, I didn't really wanna eat meat that had only been grilled without any seasoning. Plus, this was definitely the bird I'd just killed, right? That made things even worse.

To be fair, ever since I'd gotten this body, I didn't eat much. Back in my former body, I used to eat as much as the next person—before I got sick, that is—but I didn't feel like I needed as much energy as Ellize. I'd started eating even less after I'd learned mana circulation. Nowadays, I could easily go up to five days without eating or drinking. As a result, I didn't need to use the toilet much either.

The original Ellize, on the other hand, had been a big eater.

I took a good look at the guardian that was handing me the skewer and noticed he was quite literally drooling as he gazed at the slab of meat.

"Please share this meat among yourselves. I'm not very hungry, so there is no need to hold back on my behalf," I said.

"Tnias, ecin oot er'uoy!"

They immediately dug in at my urging. I was starting to get used to the strange language they spoke. It seemed like they were calling me “tnias.”

After a few more minutes of boredom—during which I was starting to get low-key done with the weird monkeys’ behavior—the train stopped in front of a forest. We’d finally reached our destination.

“Devirra ev’ew. Niart eht ffo teg uoy nehwluerac eb esaelp,” one of them said, gesturing for me to get off the train.

The old man and I stepped out of the train. The guardians followed and surrounded us once again, as if to protect us from all sides.

“Yaw siht. Tnias, llaf ot ton luferac eb esaelp.”

They’d said “tnias” again, so they must’ve been talking to me. I had no idea what they were trying to tell me, though.

The guardian that was leading the group started walking, and the old man and I followed him without a word.

The forest was...strangely peaceful. A squirrel jumped onto my shoulder before going on its merry way. Birds were chirping, and I could see big kitties—as large as tigers—peeking out from the bushes to look at us. I couldn’t tell whether these animals were cats that had evolved into larger felines, or tigers that had become so tame they now looked like cats. Honestly, it didn’t really matter. All I knew was that this species definitely didn’t exist on Earth.

I hadn’t really given it much thought before, but even though I’d seen tons of monsters, I hadn’t seen many wild animals in this world.

The guardian who led the group came to a stop.

“Yaw siht thgir,” he said, gesturing for us to move forward.

The prophet was waiting for us right ahead, apparently.

Let’s go meet them, then.

Aiz and I stepped forward. Suddenly, a voice called out.

“I’ve been waiting for you. Lady Ellize, please come forward alone.”

I assume this is the prophet.

I had yet to introduce myself, but they already knew my name. That couldn't have been because they'd predicted the saint's birth now, could it? After all, if they knew the name of the saint, they'd also know I was a fake. Things didn't add up.

The old geezer looked at me, his eyes full of concern. I nodded confidently to reassure him and walked toward the voice. I went past clumps of foliage and entered an unnaturally large clearing surrounded by trees. There was nothing but a lake in front of me.

What the hell? Where's the prophet? Should I just jump into the lake?

I approached the lake, and suddenly something emerged—a gigantic turtle. Its shell alone seemed to be over five meters large, so a person could easily travel on its back.

I'm supposed to get on the turtle to cross the lake, aren't I? I'm starting to feel like Urashima Tarou.

I was on the verge of stepping on its back when the turtle suddenly started speaking. "Thank you for coming, fake saint. I've been waiting for you—the one who has surpassed the real deal—to visit me for a long time. I'm Profeta, but you humans usually refer to me as the prophet."

I thought the turtle would bring me to the prophet, but as it turned out, the turtle *was* the prophet. I'd automatically assumed the prophet would be human. I finally got why the old geezer had told me I'd "understand when I met them."

Hang on. In this world, the only animals that can speak are monsters, and not just the regular ones—only archmonsters, actually! Isn't this guy one of the witch's underlings?!

"Are you...a monster?" I asked.

The turtle laughed. "I can see why you'd think that," he said. "However, I'm not a monster. I'm just a regular turtle who happened to be chosen by the world to pass on its messages."

A regular turtle who happened to be chosen by the world, huh? I understood what he meant, though. At the end of the day, the saint was in a similar

position—a human chosen by the world to be its proxy. Profeta had also been chosen and given a mission. My only question was: why a turtle?

“Do you want to know why I’m a turtle? It’s quite trivial, really. It’s simply because turtles live longer than humans. My species, in particular—the millennium turtles—live over a thousand years. The world chose me so I could continue to prophesize the birth of saints for a very long time.”

While the explanation made sense—the world had created a situation where it wouldn’t need to change messengers too often—another question popped up in my brain. If other species had always been an option, why did they make the saint human? We weren’t really built for combat. In fact, we were pretty damn weak as a species—a domestic cat could technically kill a human if it got serious. Well, magic existed in this world, so humans probably wouldn’t lose to cats...but still! Even though people could develop superhuman powers by training hard enough, their base specs were pretty damn low. Most beasts were still stronger. Wouldn’t a bear saint or a tiger saint be much more effective? If they were bestowed intellect and the ability to use magic, they’d easily beat ninety-nine percent of the saints who’d ever existed in single combat.

I’m pretty confident I’m an exception, though. I’m just that good. So yeah, a strong animal saint would... It would... Hmm... Yeah, no. It would never even reach the witch.

To get to the witch, the saint first had to do something about her army of monsters and archmonsters. It usually meant she had to sacrifice hundreds of knights and soldiers to clear a path for herself. I couldn’t picture human soldiers giving their life for a bear. They wouldn’t even be able to tell the saint apart from regular monsters.

Even assuming they believed the prophet when he told them, “this bear is the saint,” I really doubted they’d willingly die for a beast. *Could you give your life for a bear? A frickin’ bear!*

You may be wondering, *why would the bear seek the support of humans instead of asking other animals?* Well, even if the bear saint was super smart, the rest of the animals would still be dumb. They’d never shield the bear.

In other words, if you made the saint an animal, it’d have to fight alone. Even

if it was much stronger than a human, it wouldn't be enough. It'd eventually end up overrun by monsters and die.

"You just called me a fake," I said. "Does that mean you know my identity?"

"I do," the turtle answered. "You're not the saint—you're a very talented young woman who happened to be born in the same village as the real saint."

As expected of the prophet. He did know that Ellize wasn't the real deal. *I would've been pretty disappointed if he couldn't tell the difference.*

Still, I didn't get how he knew my name, or how he'd been expecting me.

"Go ahead and ask me any question you may have. I'm dying to converse with someone, so I'll happily tell you everything I can. You probably couldn't communicate with these monkeys, so you must be curious," the turtle said.

"How do you know my name?" I asked. "You made it sound like you were expecting me to visit today. How did you know that?"

The turtle laughed once more. "How could I have not known?" he asked. "I never leave this place, but I'm still aware of many things. I'm always watching you and your friends, and I've seen everything you've been through."

Hey, that's one messed-up power! Where's my privacy?!

If he could watch over me at all times, it made sense that he knew my name and that I'd end up coming here. This turtle was God—or rather, this world's messenger. The world obviously knew what happened everywhere and at all times. I assumed that, in turn, the world passed on this information to its messenger.

I mean, we're doing all this stuff right here on the surface of this world.

Now that I understood the situation better, I went for another question. "You said you'd been waiting for me for a long time, right?"

"Indeed. I've been waiting for you for so long. I really wanted to have a chat with you. After all, you're a singularity."

A singularity? What in the world is that supposed to mean?

I had no clue what the turtle meant.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand. Could you clarify?”

“You’re right. There’s no way you’d get it without a thorough explanation. What I’m about to tell you is somewhat absurd, so you can decide for yourself whether you want to believe me or not.”

To be fair, the existence of magic, saints, and witches was already absurd to me. I didn’t think the turtle could come up with something even more unbelievable.

What do I know, though? Maybe I’ll get to hear something incredible!

“As I just mentioned, I’m aware of everything that happens in this world. However, one day...I started being able to see what happened in another world called Earth. I can’t be sure, but I think it might be because my time is running out. I believe a part of my soul slipped away into this world.”

Okay, I am surprised.

Apparently, Profeta could see stuff that happened on Earth too.

He shook his head slowly before continuing. “I discovered something strange there. There was this thing...a geyme—called *Kuon no Sanka*, I believe—that showed this world. It was all so strange. It mostly recounted what had happened around a young man named Verner. The drawings were very peculiar too. People had unnaturally large eyes, and for some reason, their noses were only small dots...”

Peculiar? Hey, turtle, are you calling manga-style art weird?! Don’t you know how many artists have devoted their lives to polishing this wonderful art style? You gotta respect the pinnacle of moe culture! The main point of this style is to deform reality, you uncultured swi—turtle!

I have a feeling I’m missing the point... Oh, right! The game!

From the sound of it, the turtle knew about *Kuon no Sanka*.

“In the midst of it all, something stood out,” Profeta continued. “That something would be you, Ellize.”

“Me?”

“You’re a fake, but you’ve surpassed the real deal. No saint has achieved as much as you have in the past. You’re more worthy of this title than any of your predecessors. Don’t you think it’s ironic? A fake ended up being the closest thing to a *true* saint this world has ever seen. I still have trouble believing you’re not the real deal, especially when you’re standing before me,” Profeta said. “And yet...the Ellize I saw in that geyme was nothing like you. She was hideous, both inside and out.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Profeta knew about the original contents of the game.

To be fully honest, the original Ellize and I weren’t so different—on the inside, that is. What set us apart was that she hadn’t bothered putting up a nice front. The turtle had only seen my facade and seemed to have assumed I was truly a good person—unlike Pizzallize.

Why was Profeta only able to see the state of the world before the changes I’d made, though?

It reminded me of what happened when we looked at stars. They were so far away that what we saw when we looked up at the night sky wasn’t the current state of the stars—it was how they *used* to be. Take the sun, for instance. Its light needed around eight minutes to reach us. This meant that whenever we looked at the sun, we saw it as it had been eight minutes ago. The same went for every other star—we’d never be able to observe their current appearance. The light of any given star could take a couple of years, several dozen years, several hundred years, or even more than that to reach us. What we’d see was the star’s past.

For all I knew, the same logic applied here. This world and Earth could very well be pretty far away, which would explain this discrepancy. What Profeta was seeing was the past state of Earth, and that was why he didn’t know about the changes...

It makes sense, right? ...Right? Yeah, I know, it’s pretty far-fetched.

If my theory was true, it meant I’d somehow returned to the past as well.

I’d played *Kuon no Sanka* to the end. If the game had been created by someone who was observing this world, Verner’s story should’ve ended ages

ago—back when I was still on Earth as Niito. However, I'd ended up being reborn as Ellize.

I really *had* gone back in time, hadn't I?

Just to backtrack on my point about stars—pretty much every sci-fi story agreed on the fact that if you could move faster than the speed of light, you could technically go back in time. Could it be that souls moved faster than light? Had my soul ended up going back seventeen years when I'd transmigrated?

That didn't make sense, though. I'd come and gone a few times already, and I hadn't noticed any significant delay. Actually, that wasn't exactly true. Niito—me—had said that there was most likely some sort of time difference between our worlds, but we'd only noticed that the first time I'd visited him. The first seventeen years had gone by in a blur in his world, but after that, the flow of time had seemed similar enough.

I hadn't checked thoroughly, but it did seem like a week in this world equated to a week on Earth.

I'd like to think I would've noticed if a few days on Earth equated to seventeen years in this world!

Another thing was bugging me. Niito—me—and I had assumed that I'd returned to Earth to collect the missing parts of my soul, but...why hadn't that happened until fairly recently? Could it be because I'd needed those first seventeen years to finally go back to the right timeline? Now that I was back on track, the flow of time was pretty much the same. Maybe that was why I could visit Niito—me...

At this point, my ideas were nothing but a theory. I'd need to confirm everything the next time I ended up there. If I was right, though...it would mean that transmigrating into another world also meant going back in time.

Still, Profeta was seeing Earth *after Kuon no Sanka* had come out. The game had launched four years ago—fairly recently.

So observing only came with a relatively short delay, but transmigration meant going over dimensional walls, or something. That created a larger gap, so, hmm... In short...

Yeah, no, I have no idea what I'm saying. Whatever, I'll stop overthinking this.
I'd always been an idiot. Overthinking things would only confuse me further.
I'll leave the thinking to Niito—me—and Ijuuin-san.

Chapter 43: An Unexpected Ally

I decided to stop thinking about mysteries I couldn't possibly unravel on my own and focused my attention on my conversation with the turtle once more.

Quite a few unexpected things had happened today, but most of my questions had been answered. I'd learned that the prophet didn't actually read the future, but received his knowledge from the world itself instead. Oh, I'd also uncovered the identity of said prophet—a turtle.

Unfortunately, I still hadn't been able to pierce the greatest mystery of all—why and how the events here were reflected in a game on Earth. I'd decided to leave that in the hands of Niito—me—and Ijuuin-san.

"I don't understand why the story I saw is so different from reality, but I believe you have what it takes to change the future," the turtle continued. "In the story I saw, the real saint, Eterna, ended up becoming the next witch before she was killed. I also saw another pattern where she sacrificed herself and died together with the previous witch..."

That was the plot of the original game. I wasn't sure why the turtle wanted me to change the future, though. Even though she was the saint, Eterna was a total stranger to him. Why would he want her to have a better ending? He seemed to share the same goal as me, but I had my reasons for wanting to change the future. What were his?

I didn't really want to admit it, but didn't the original ending work in the turtle's favor? As long as Eterna died at the hand of someone other than the next saint, the witch's powers wouldn't be passed to anyone else and the cycle would be broken. As far as the world was concerned, that was for the best, wasn't it?

As a die-hard Eterna stan, though, I couldn't think of a worse ending!

"You look puzzled. Are you wondering why I want to change this ending? I'll be honest with you—I don't feel that strongly about the current ending. I just

think that knowing the end of a story in advance is boring. I'm sure I'll have a much better time watching over you. I don't know what you're capable of, after all."

Oh. I understood the turtle's motivations a little better now. He wanted me to change the ending for his own enjoyment.

The corners of the turtle's mouth curled up in a smirk—just like a person's would. "I have a request," he said. "Would you mind bringing me with you? I'm very interested in you, a fake more perfect than any real saint. This world has remained the same for a thousand years, but I have a feeling you'll bring about change. I'd like to stay by your side and enjoy your adventures with you."

"You sure have peculiar tastes, Profeta. I'm afraid I don't have any reason to take you with me, though," I refused politely.

Why should I hang with a turtle? Even though the one in question was the prophet, it still stank. And I don't really like turtles.

I also wasn't sure where I was supposed to put such a huge creature. Was I supposed to let him hang in my parlor area? Anyway, I didn't want him around. *No, thank you.*

"Don't say that. I'm pretty useful, you know? Unlike the saint, I can handpick my successor," the turtle said. "If I do, I'll have to give them the rest of my life span along with my abilities and die, though, so I don't really want to pick one..."

"I'm going home," I stated.

"W-Wait! Hear me out! In thirty seconds, a small earthquake will occur, and a squirrel will fall from that tree," the turtle said, gesturing at a tree with his large head.

There was indeed a squirrel on one of the tree's branches, happily munching on a nut. After exactly thirty seconds, the ground shook and the squirrel fell, just like Profeta had predicted. I didn't care much about the squirrel, but I still caught it before it hit the ground and returned it to its spot on the branch.

I just know a certain Ainu girl would've jumped at the chance to have citatap. But how did the turtle predict the earthquake? Did he just trigger the

earthquake with earth magic? No... I would've felt it.

“Wait! I thought that the prophet couldn't predict the future. Weren't you given the ability to see what's happening in the world so you can act as its messenger?”

“That's right, I don't have the power to see the future. However, after living for a thousand years and seeing all kinds of things happen...I can just tell. I estimate what's most likely to happen next based on all the hints I observe,” he explained. “For instance, I could tell you how this world would develop if that boy called Verner fell in love with Marie—or with Eterna, for that matter. Obviously, I'd only be making estimations based on what I know at the moment. I sometimes get things wrong, and small details occasionally diverge from what I predicted.”

What the hell, turtle?! Are you telling me you can guess what the future will be like based on the present? That's impossible— No, wait, I think I read about something like that in a book a long time ago. If you assume that every event has a definite cause and a definite effect, then everything is already set in stone. The future is simply the direct consequence of the present. The theory's called causal determinism, I think.

I was pretty sure philosophers had long since rejected this school of thought, though. Well, Profeta himself had said that he sometimes made mistakes, so he probably just made fairly accurate estimations. It didn't necessarily mean that everything was set in stone.

“I won't promise you I can give you perfectly accurate predictions, but I still think I could be useful to you,” the turtle said.

Yeaaaah, it still sounds pretty shady...

“What are your true intentions?” I asked.

“All right, I'll give it to you straight. I've been living alone here for years. My only company is weird monkeys I can't even understand! I'm at the end of my rope here. Just take me with you! It shouldn't be so hard with your magic.”



For someone who'd been acting like a big shot, he sure blurted out his true motive quickly enough, huh?

To be fair, I already had a feeling that was why he wanted to come with me. Profeta had no reason to help me out, but he'd been doing his best to show me how useful he could be just so I'd accept. That could only mean one thing: his current living situation sucked, and this was his only way out.

He did say he was dying to converse with someone.

At the end of the day, Profeta wasn't offering to help: he was begging me to take him away from this shitty place.

"All right," I finally said after a long pause. "I need to get King Aiz's approval first, though. Oh, and—"

"I know," Profeta cut me off. "You want me to keep your identity secret. I won't say a thing, don't worry."

I was going to tell him not to blow my cover, but he'd agreed to it before I could even ask. *He is good at predicting the future.*

I had a feeling I'd have a hard time getting along with him, but Profeta could definitely be useful if I handled him well.

"There are a few other things we need to—" I started.

"I'd appreciate it if you could create a pond next to the academy with your magic. Do make sure it's off-limits to students, though. I like medaka fish, crayfish, and I wouldn't say no to some veggies on the side. Don't try to feed me crickets or earthworms, though. I got tired of those ages ago. Oh, and if you're wondering whether I can fight or not, just know that I can bite off a monster's head if I have to. My defense is pretty good, and I can use water magic too. Still, I'm afraid my skills aren't very impressive compared to yours, so don't expect me to wipe out entire armies like you do."

"Thanks..."

Yeah, we're definitely not going to get along.

He'd answered all of my questions before I even got to form them. Conversing with him was pretty frustrating, so I decided to return the favor.

“You’re about to ask me to guess what you’re thinking, aren’t you? You’re thinking about something completely unrelated to our current discussion. Obviously, I can’t tell what exactly. Did I get it right?” Profeta asked.

“Well done...” I answered after a pause.

Damn! I didn’t even get to speak!

He’d gotten it right too. Just in case you were wondering, I was thinking about the villain from a game I used to play ages ago. He chanted for ages before each spell and was such a poser...

Anyway, I don’t like this turtle.

Profeta pissed me off, but I’d learned something important thanks to him: as long as I put up barriers, not even the world itself had any way of knowing what I was doing. Profeta thought I was the perfect saint. However, I’d done and said far-from-perfect things inside barriers before. For instance, I remembered once introducing myself as a mighty mountain of turds. If Profeta had seen that, he would’ve noticed I was far from being a virtuous saint but he hadn’t. That meant my barriers were powerful enough that the world itself couldn’t bypass them.

I didn’t really know what to do with that piece of information, but it was *something*. Who knew? Maybe it’d be useful someday.

Well, then, should I call the old man over?

If I was going to bring the prophet to the academy, I had to let him know first.



I filled Aiz in and used magic to return to the academy with the two of them. I chose the same spell I’d used when flying to the royal capital a while back. Once I’d arrived, I explained the situation to Headmaster Fox.

“I couldn’t be more surprised...” Headmaster Fox had said, looking at the turtle. “I never would have expected the prophet to look like...*this*. And I certainly didn’t think they’d want to move here.”

Anyone would’ve been surprised. His shell was five meters wide and he was much taller than a person—well over two meters tall. He pretty much looked

like a monster.

I wouldn't be surprised to see him tuck his limbs into his shell and fly like a UFO.

Profeta laughed. "We've never had such an interesting saint. I'd like to watch over her up close," he explained.

"I see... So Lady Ellize is special even in your eyes, Prophet," King Aiz said.

"She sure is. I've never seen anyone quite like her. No, I suppose there was another saint in a similar...situation...but she certainly wasn't as good at carrying out her saintly duties."

King Aiz and the turtle were chatting, and I was already regretting my decision.

Could you not blow my cover on day one, you damn reptile?!

I'd be more than happy to reveal my identity when the time came, but I couldn't have that now!

All that was left was to create a pond next to the school. I needed to make it as fast as possible so I could throw him in there and stop him from running his mouth.

First, I used earth magic to create a large crater with a radius of around twenty-five meters. *As for the depth...twenty to thirty meters should be good enough.*

Aquatic turtles also needed a place where they could hide and an access to dry land, didn't they? I created a slope and added an underwater tunnel leading to a hiding place. Finally, I added pebbles and stones to the bottom of the pond and used a water spell to fill it up.

It was a bit of a crude pond, but the job was done.

"How do you like it?" I asked.

"Well... It will do. I'll remodel it a little to suit my tastes," the turtle said. "I knew how skilled you were, but seeing it in person is something else altogether. You made it look easy, but no saint in history has ever been able to use magic so effortlessly."

I kept my usual business smile on, but I was roaring with laughter inside. I'd finally had my revenge! I'd left him dumbfounded! I was *gloating*.

Ha ha ha! Can you tell how amazing I am? I can't help it, I'm a genius, after all. Making this little pond was child's play to me! I could make ten more!

Actually, that was kind of a lie. Digging the crater had been fairly easy, but creating that much water at once had tired me out a little. To put it in a way that was easier to understand for gamers, I had burned at least five thousand MP. If the witch tried to make a similar pond, she'd probably need to pull tons of mana from her surroundings, and even then she'd be at it for almost an hour.

This said, the turtle could probably tell I was tired.

Urgh. It's so frustrating. I feel like I lost again. I'm so pissed! Damn... Maybe I should train for real so I can blow him away with my greatness.

Chapter 44: Happy Birthday to the Saint

It had already been a week since the turtle came to the academy.

I was looking outside my window as I shivered with cold. Winter had settled in, and snow coated everything as far as the eye could see. Snowflakes continued to fall, adding to the white blanket that covered the entire school.

Turtles hibernated when it was too cold, so I'd put up a barrier to isolate the pond.

Barriers are the way to go.

That barrier let everything but the heat out, so it was pretty cost effective. It could hold up for twenty-four hours, so I only needed to touch it up once a day. It was a bit of a pain, yeah, but I'd have to live with it for the time being.

The people of this world disliked winter. There were no modern heating technologies here, so the cold could quite literally kill you. Besides, crops couldn't be harvested at this time of the year, so people could also starve if the reserves weren't enough. During this season, people gathered indoors around the fireplace. Their only distraction was chatting and doing manual labor while they waited for spring to come.

That's how tough winter was supposed to be in this world...and yet, people seemed to be having the time of their lives right under my windows. A bunch of kids were throwing snowballs at one another, while the adults merrily ate potato skewers.

"Lady Ellize, the parade will start soon," Layla said.

I looked out once more. I currently wasn't at the academy. I was in the Bilberrian capital—or, more specifically, inside the royal palace.

The royal capital was only located around ten kilometers away from the academy, so you only needed one hour to reach it by carriage. That honestly made me wonder why they'd bothered building the academy in such a spot. Why not build it inside the royal capital? You'd often get this sort of scenario in

games set in some kind of fantastical Middle Ages. An academy would be in some corner of the map, far away from any major city. If you transposed this to Japan, it'd be like building a school on top of a mountain instead of building it in Tokyo.

Come to think of it, there are schools in pretty weird places in other countries.

I remembered watching a documentary where they showed schools that were so remote that students had to go over broken bridges with no banister, cross a river on foot, or walk on the edge of a cliff for hours to commute. Some kids had to quite literally risk their lives to get an education. Compared to them, the future knights of this world had it easy.

If I had to think of an actual reason it'd been built where it was, though, it was probably because the school kept monsters for training purposes. They were locked up and strictly monitored, sure, but it was impossible to guarantee they'd never escape. The citizens of the capital probably didn't want monsters inside their walls.

Besides, the academy was a sensitive location. Knights were a thorn in the witch's side, so it risked being attacked by the witch or her henchmen. I could understand not wanting to needlessly increase the risks of an attack on the capital.

To be honest, the academy's remote location worked in my favor. If it had been inside the capital, the witch would've had a much easier time slipping away. Since there was absolutely nowhere to hide around the academy, the witch had no choice but to remain in the basement.

But I digress.

My point was, I'd left the super remote academy for the Bilberrian capital. Why, you ask? Because I was the guest of honor for today's celebrations: the saint's birth festival, or in other words, my birthday...kind of.

The saint's birthday was also the day a new witch appeared, so it wasn't usually a cause for celebration. For some reason, though, my birthday was special.

You guys really don't need to go out of your way to celebrate my birthday...

Besides, I'm a fake. You're all celebrating the wrong person! Are you sure that's okay? Why don't you celebrate the first saint's birthday, or something like that instead of bothering with me?

I wasn't sure anyone knew when Alfrea's birthday was, though. She hadn't been taken into custody at birth since she was the very first saint.

I followed Layla outside the castle and saw the sacred palanquin that'd be carried through the streets in a bit. My job would be to sit on the ridiculously extravagant chair that had been prepared on the palanquin and wave while the knights paraded me all over the city.

What did I do to deserve this?

I had yet to sit on the damn chair, but I already wanted out.

This is so embarrassing, save me.

"Let us go, Saint," one of the knights said, gesturing for me to sit. "All the citizens are gathered in the hope of catching a glimpse of you."

They should've stayed home...

Why did I have to go through something so embarrassing on my birthday? Did they actually hate me in secret? The worst thing was that I had to go through this ordeal every single year.

Who's the idiot who came up with this idea?

I resigned myself to my fate and sat on the chair. A group of soldiers lifted the palanquin and started walking through the streets. There were tons of people around, cheering and munching on their potatoes as they watched me.

Incidentally, one of the knights carrying my palanquin looked exactly like Four-Eyed Pervert... *Nah, no way. Probably just a coincidence.* That guy was a lost cause and all, but he wouldn't attack a knight and pretend to be him during an important ceremony...right? Right?

Leaving that matter aside, you're probably wondering why everyone and their grandma are eating potatoes, aren't you? Well, that would be my fault.

In this world, plenty of peasants used to die because they hadn't been able to stock up on enough food for the winter. Even I thought that sucked, so I'd

started looking for something that could be kept all through winter and feed a lot of people. That was when I'd stumbled on potatoes!

Back then they were used as ornamental plants by nobles, though. Can you believe it? You have potatoes! Eat them, you idiots! You have the perfect vegetable to get through the winter!

Anyway, I'd flown to the south to look for more potatoes and brought them back. I'd borrowed a field and used both earth and water magic to multiply the crops quickly. After that, I'd taught people how to remove the tubers and cook them.

Potatoes had become popular in the blink of an eye. Hell, by now, they'd become a staple. You could find them everywhere!

Thanks to my discovery, famines had almost completely disappeared...and people ate an extra serving of potatoes on my birthday. They also celebrated potatoes alongside me, in a way.

My birthday was now a hybrid mess of a holiday that was used to: one, celebrate me; two, celebrate potatoes; and, three, celebrate the end of the year. You can imagine a weird mix of Germany's Potatofest, Christmas, New Year, and your company's year-end party. They also built snow sculptures, so you could probably throw Hokkaido's Sapporo Snow Festival into the mix as well.

The future generations are sure to get a good laugh when they hear about this in history class.

"Bless us, saint!"

Look at all the entitled people. Yeah, yeah, sure.

I casually sprinkled healing magic over the crowd, healing their wounds and illnesses. The people of this world were idiots, so they'd probably be happy with this much.

"Oh... I can't believe I can see again!"

"My child is standing! I was told he'd never walk on his own!"

"I have hair again! I thought I was doomed to baldness!"

“How wonderful!”

They sounded happy enough.

My job here is done. I’m so done with this... Can’t the parade end already?



I’m finally free!

Uuuurgh! It was such a pain!

Having to sit tight when the palanquin swayed with every step was even more tiresome than running around. Everyone was staring at me, so I couldn’t do anything but smile either. Even though my back had started feeling itchy halfway through, I’d been forced to bear it and smile. *I call this torture!*

Anyway, my suffering was finally over. I could finally let loose and have a bit of fun in town. I’d thrown on a wimple that almost entirely covered my eyes so I wouldn’t get noticed. Layla was still stuck to my side so she could protect me, but there wasn’t anything I could do about that.

Oh yeah, I’d like to mention something in passing. After the parade, one of the knights who was supposed to carry around the palanquin had been found unconscious and naked. The suspect—a strange pervert with glasses—was currently being chased around by a bunch of guards.

Anyway, the city was positively bustling, and snowballs were flying around. I also saw a bunch of people gathered around bonfires to roast potatoes. They added a bit of butter before having them.

I didn’t remember teaching them to add butter to potatoes. *They must’ve discovered this godly recipe by themselves! The inhabitants of this world can’t be underestimated...*

Speaking of—cheese and butter were widely available in the Bilberry Kingdom, even to commoners.

Most farmers had cows, but—contrary to what one may think—it wasn’t for meat or milk. In fact, people didn’t really drink milk here. I still remembered how surprised Layla had been the first time I’d asked her to bring me some milk so that I could bake.

Nope, their cows were used so the people could enjoy cheese and butter. Currencies didn't circulate much in this country, so commoners often paid their taxes in dairy products.

Quite original, wouldn't you say?

Layla had told me that potatoes had recently started being used to pay taxes as well, but...*it can't be true, right? Are these people eating their taxes right now? Is this a joke?*

Putting all that aside, I felt like something was missing at this festival. *I know! There aren't any stalls!*

The people of this world had been suffering from starvation until a few years ago, so it was probably asking for a lot, but still... As far as I was concerned, festivals needed to have tons of stalls! The only one present was being run by the church, and they were just distributing vegetable broth to the people like I'd suggested.

"Lady Ellize! Miss Layla, you're here too."

While we were walking around, we ran into Verner and his merry bunch. They'd apparently decided to come to the capital to have some fun at the festival.

You guys get along so well.

I was happy to see how tight-knit they were, and I was *especially* glad to see that Four-Eyed Pervert wasn't with them for once.

It was a dumb thing to say, but Verner truly was the main character. He'd been rushing down the musclehead loner route at first, but he'd still managed to make friends along the way.

On the other hand...I didn't have any friends here.

I'm the loner, huh? Wait. Verner and I can be friends too! All good. I'm not a loner anymore.

"Are you going to take part in a snowball battle too?" I asked, bringing up a new topic to keep my mind occupied. Thinking of my lack of friends was kind of depressing.

Snowball battles, as the name suggested, were playful clashes during which people threw snowballs at one another. *They're snowball fights, really.*

These games had no winners or losers. The whole point was to have fun playing in the snow and—to be honest—I didn't dislike these kinds of stupid games. The thing was, no one would dare to throw anything at me if I participated. I didn't want to kill the mood, so I just watched others play.

"Well, I—"

Fiora didn't let Verner finish his sentence. "We're the only ones participating, right?" she said, looking at her friends intently.

Random dude, Marie, and Aina nodded.

Ah. I know this pattern. You're trying to exclude me, aren't you?

I had enough experience that I could pretty much read their minds:

Fiora: If we let her join us, the game'll be soooo boring. Let's get our stories straight so she'll stay away.

Eterna: We could do that.

Random Dude: No objections here!

Marie: I agree.

Aina: You're so smart, Fiora!

You're so good at deductions, me! Elementary, my dear me!

Still, while I understood why they wanted to leave me out, I felt like it was a bit mean of them to force Verner to hang out with me just so they could enjoy their snowball fight without interruptions. *You shouldn't throw your friend under the bus, kids!*

Eterna was the only one who seemed displeased at the arrangement. As *expected of the true saint! She's such a good girl.*

She couldn't win against the majority, though, so she reluctantly agreed.

And so, the group left, leaving Verner alone with me and, uh, Layla. She was staring daggers at us for some reason.

What's up, Layla? Are you cold?

Verner let out an awkward laugh. "They got me. They're weirdly tactful like that sometimes..." he said, smiling at me.

Why would you call the people who ditched you to go play 'tactful'? Wait... Hang on! This world is pretty set on Ellize's route, isn't it?

I had absolutely no interest in dating Verner (I'd thought about it long and hard, but I really had no interest in boys) but maybe he did. If you thought about it like that, it made sense for his friends to create an opportunity for us to be alone together...

Nah, I'm sure I got it wrong. Layla's here too, anyway.

Besides, if I *was* right, it'd mean Layla couldn't take a hint. She would've left otherwise, and there was no way my little Scotterbrain was that insensitive.

Yeah, no, I must be overthinking this.

In fact, I couldn't believe I'd been pondering whether a dude had a crush on me or not! *Gross.*

Anyway, Verner and I had been ditched by the others, and there was no changing that. I figured we might as well try to enjoy ourselves.

"I'm not sure I understand why your friends left you here, but would you like to come with us, Verner? We won't be doing much, just looking around the festival..."

The outcasts should band together, right, Ver?

Verner was a good guy, so he readily accepted, "Y-Yes! I'd love to."

Scotterbrain, can't you do something about your expression? You look like you're out to kill someone! Chill, we're at a festival!

So we started walking around with Verner, but it was just as boring! No matter where we went, people were either participating in snowball fights or eating potatoes.

There were also a few snowmen here and there, but they all looked like trash. Back on Earth, I remembered seeing such incredible works of art that I'd

wonder how anyone could've crafted these masterpieces out of snow. Here, though? Nothing really caught my eye. I suppose no one really had time to play in the snow and hone their craft. After all, every day was a battle for survival up to a few years ago.

I'm sure they'll do better eventually.

Eventually, we stumbled upon a pretty dense crowd. The people seemed to have gathered around a large snow statue.

Oho! Someone did craft something cool! There are geniuses in every world!

I approached to get a better look, only to find the object at the center of everyone's attention was quite literally a huge statue of *me*.

Hey! Who's the idiot who made that thing?!

"That's no good... No matter what I do, I can't seem to do her beauty any justice! This isn't it! I'm so sorry, O glorious saint!"

There he is.

Four-Eyed Pervert was currently on his knees, apologizing to the statue.

How come the guards haven't arrested him yet? Do your job, guys!

"This is quite something..."

"It'd be a pity to let it melt... Isn't there any way we could preserve it?"

And there they are.

The guards were busy admiring the statue together with the festivalgoers.

Are you for real?! Why is everyone so weird in this world?! Also... Can I just smash the damn statue?

Seeing myself like that was awkward, to say the least.

"What a splendid piece... I didn't take Mr. Supple for the kind of man who could achieve something like this," Layla said.

"It's very impressive, yes. Although I must say the real Lady Ellize is much prettier," Verner answered.

Verner truly *was* a dating sim protagonist. No one else could say something

like that without batting an eye. Nonetheless, he seemed to suddenly realize how cheesy what he'd just said was, and he looked down with an awkward expression on his face.

Had I been a proper dating sim heroine, I would've blushed and acted bashful, saying something along the lines of, "Y-You can't suddenly say something like that... It's embarrassing..."

Sadly for Verner, though, I wasn't, and I simply went for a noncommittal answer. "I know you're just trying to be polite, but thank you, Verner. I'm flattered."

"I meant it..." he muttered.

I pretended I hadn't heard him.

Look, Verner, it's about time you hopped onto Eterna's route, isn't it?!

"Ah! I almost forgot... Lady Ellize, I made this for you after hearing that your birthday was coming up," Verner said, taking a necklace out of his pocket.

He'd simply attached a green stone—it looked a lot like an emerald—to a chain. If you looked closely enough, you could see that the cut of the stone was amateurish.

Tell me, Verner, what kind of pure maiden are you to give someone a handmade gift for their birthday?

That said, I was impressed he'd managed to buy such a beautiful gem.

"You...made this yourself?" I asked.

"Yes... I wish I was better at it, but..."

In *Kuon no Sanka*, you could work during your free time to get money. The part-time jobs you could get included trimming grass and weeds around the academy, delivering packages, driving away wild dogs or bears, and other such easy missions. They were all different mini-games, and you'd get more money depending on how well you played. You could then use that money to buy presents for the heroine of your choice or new equipment for the members of your party. On top of that, working part-time improved your stats a little. It wasn't as effective as training, but if you cleared the mini-games without

making any mistakes, you'd get almost as many boons as if you trained. It wasn't necessarily that bad of a loss.

Verner had most likely worked diligently instead of training so he could save up enough money to buy this stone for me.

Boy... I can't not accept the fruit of his labor, can I?

A student had used what little money he had to buy me an expensive gem, and he'd even gone through the trouble of making it into a necklace. I'd be a monster if I turned him down. Besides...I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy about it. I hadn't received a birthday gift from a friend since primary school. As Ellize, I'd received plenty of tributes, but that wasn't quite the same.

I should thank him wholeheartedly since he went through all that trouble for my sake.

"Thank you, Verner. I'll treasure it."

How should I say this...? Receiving such a heartfelt present feels...pretty nice.

Chapter 45: Preparations Underway

Did ya think some sort of flag had been raised, huh? Well, NOPE! You can stop hoping right this second! 'Sup! Ellize here!

My birthday festival had ended without a hitch, and I was back at the academy. Nothing of note had happened after I received a present from Verner either. We'd simply walked through the streets while commenting on how the city had changed in recent years. There weren't even any restaurants in this country, so it wasn't like there was anything to do besides walk around and watch the others enjoy snowball fights.

In case you were wondering why there weren't any restaurants, well...obviously it was because people used to starve not so long ago. The Bilberrian people used to pile up the bodies of those who'd died of starvation in the streets. Winter used to be especially dreadful. Assuming a family had five children, they'd lose two on average during the winter. Some also resorted to selling or abandoning their kids to have fewer mouths to feed. How could anyone open a restaurant under such circumstances? Food was much more precious than money in those times, and anyone would eat whatever they managed to get their hands on.

The situation had gotten a lot better thanks to the introduction of potatoes, but people still couldn't waste resources to open restaurants—they were focused on getting through the winter.

Anyway, the winter holiday was over, and it was time for the third semester to start. Four-Eyed Pervert, who'd eventually been caught by the guards, had been released and allowed to return to the academy to teach.

They should've kept him in jail.

The third semester was supposed to be the climax of the game.

The first major event was the school-wide martial tournament. In the game, it was a pretty important moment. At this point, Ellize was out of the picture and

Eterna had taken back her rightful place as the saint. However, the saint's guard was severely understaffed, mostly thanks to Ellize.

In the game, she'd used to kick out everyone but the yes-men that let her get away with everything—Viscount Fox, for instance, had long since been driven out of her guard. As a result, the saint's guard was mostly composed of weak-ass rotten knights who just happened to hail from decent families. Ellize also had a liking for handsome men, and she'd tended to pick them for their looks.

(By the way, since I chose them based on their abilities, the members of my current guard were completely different.)

Anyway, Eterna obviously hadn't been able to trust Ellize's shitty guards, so she'd demoted them all—minus Layla—to the position of regular knight. That left only one person in her guard. Even with Ellize out of the picture, Eterna couldn't bring herself to trust the current knights. As far as she was concerned, they'd supported Ellize for far too long. Instead of picking out new guards from their ranks, she declared that she'd appoint the four best-ranked students.

Verner was a compulsory pick (if you messed up the fights and ended up ranked lower than fourth place, it was game over), but if you were close enough to Eterna *and* got first place, you could snatch Layla's position from her and become the head of Eterna's guard. If you were going for Eterna's route, ranking first definitely made your life easier.

However...this stuff only pertained to the game, obviously.

At the moment, the saint's guard was far from lacking in manpower, and I wouldn't add any students to it even if they performed well.

It wasn't like this tournament would be useless, though. It'd still have an impact on the students' future, obviously. Besides, I needed to find skilled students to carry out my anti-teleportation plan. This would be a good opportunity to see them at work and pick out talented people.

That said...I probably needed to rethink the whole anti-teleportation plan. Why, you ask? Because it only made sense back when I'd thought I wouldn't be able to find the witch if she teleported. And it *just* so happened that I'd gotten my hands on a certain turtle that could see what happened throughout the world in real time.

The best course of action would probably be to protect Eterna's village to avoid triggering a bad ending and allow the witch to teleport. She'd weaken herself all on her own; I'd just need to ask Profeta to find her for me afterward. It sounded like the perfect plan, right?

I was currently on my way to the pond to ask our resident turtle what he thought about it.

"I could certainly do that," Profeta said after I'd explained my plan. "No matter where she goes, I should be able to find her."

The little me inside my heart struck a triumphant pose. *All righty! My biggest headache is gone!*

If I could track the witch down, there was no need to create a magic vacuum or to put Verner and the others in harm's way. I could take care of everything on my own. As long as I could get my hands on her, the witch was done for.

I couldn't go as far as she could in one go, but I also had my own teleportation spell—*Festina Lente*. Even if she fled to the end of the world, I could get to her.

The turtle just had to rain on my parade, though. "But there's one exception," Profeta added. "I can't see through what you call 'barriers.' You put one up every night before going to bed, don't you? I've never been able to see what you've been up to when you do."

Right. I'd already deduced that. As expected, the prophet wasn't all-seeing. I was pretty happy about that, since it meant I still got to have *some* sort of privacy.

Layla—who'd been standing next to me the entire time—didn't seem so pleased. "Prophet... Do you mean to say that you've tried to peek into Lady Ellize's bedroom during the night? Even if you're the prophet, I can't condo—"

"H-Hang on! Calm down! I'm a turtle! A *female* turtle! I have absolutely no interest in humans, let alone girls!" the turtle explained in a hurry. "Hey, Ellize! Do something about her!"

Was Scotterbrain seriously out to kill Profeta? The turtle could predict the future and seemed pretty damn worried...

Scotterbrain, stay. We don't want the turtle to hate us and stop cooperating.

I stopped her with my hand, and Scotterbrain lowered her fist at once. She continued to glare at the turtle, though.

Still, I was pretty surprised. *The turtle was female, huh? I was totally convinced she was a dude this whole time!*

Profeta sighed. "What a hot-tempered young lady... Putting that aside, I simply meant to tell you that I can't see *everything*. If the witch is also able to put up barriers, I could lose her. So I don't think making her teleport on purpose is such a good idea. As I see it, the first thing the witch will do after teleporting is try to conceal herself so that you won't be able to get to her again. If she chooses to use a barrier to do so... Let's just say you'll be in a pickle."

"Can't you estimate where she'll teleport?"

"It's not impossible, but there are quite a few places she could choose. I couldn't be certain. It's a risky bet."

I was so sure I'd found a foolproof plan, but in the end, it was a bust.

Dang, Alexia's wussy tendencies are starting to get on my nerves! A runaway boss has to be the most annoying thing in existence. Don't you know bosses are supposed to sit on their fancy thrones and wait for you to invade the castle?! What kind of boss has her luggage packed just in case she needs to vanish in the middle of the night, huh? You're so freakin' lame, Alexia!

"So this means I shouldn't change my plan...right?" I asked, just to confirm.

"Indeed. You should finish things right here, in this academy. Try to stop her from teleporting. I'll be here to help out if worse comes to worst and she does escape."

In the end, I couldn't change my plan. That was just how life was—sometimes you thought you had a great idea, but things didn't work out the way you'd hoped.

There was so much I could do, and yet when push came to shove, I had to rely on others to do the job for me. It was kind of pathetic, really...

I guess the least I can do is to get them some good quality equipment...



I'm sure it won't come as a surprise, but Verner and his friends monopolized the top ranks of the tournament. Our main character came in first position, followed by Aina, Marie, and Eterna in that order. Fiora and what's-his-face had also managed to make it to the top eight. Their exact ranks were slightly different from last time, but that had all come down to luck. Marie had faced off with random dude in the quarterfinal before ending up against Verner in the semifinal. That was how she'd missed second place.

Eterna had grown a lot ever since the last tournament, and she'd only lost to Aina by a hair's breadth.

Thus concludes my not-so-detailed report of the martial tournament. I wish I had more to say, but I really don't. Verner and his pals were just much stronger than the rest, so they won. The end.

Anyway, after the tournament, I invited the top eight to my room. I intended to train them and task them with the important job of tiring the witch out.

To be fully honest, I wanted to gather a larger group of students and/or teachers, but the turtle had warned me not to. If too many of them headed down to the basement at once, the witch would never believe they'd simply gotten lost and she'd risk fleeing.

How about you stop chickening out first chance you get, Alexia?

Besides Verner and his friends, there were two students I wasn't very familiar with. One of them was a burly third-year called Crunchybite Dogman.

Is it just me, or does his name make him sound like the kind of character that gets hyped up by the author when they first appear on-screen, only to end up doing absolutely nothing?

The other one was also a third-year who wore a super suspicious-looking hooded robe that covered their face...

Wait a sec.

"What are you doing here, Mister Supple Ment?" Layla asked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm a third-year student who just

participated in the tournament. My name is Tom Toy,” Four-Eyed Pervert said, concealing his face with his hood.

Yeah, you’re not fooling anyone.

I had no idea how he’d made it into the tournament. *Are the teachers in charge of the tournament blind or what? Ah. Come to think of it, he was the one in charge of organizing the tournament.*

“O glorious saint! Please bestow upon me the weapon you promised to the best-ranking students! A weapon made with your own two hands...”

Promising a reward to the winners had somehow backfired on me.

Before the tournament started, I’d told the students I’d reward the top eight with hand-crafted weapons. I’d hoped it would motivate them, and since I intended to ask them to help me out with the witch, I figured it was only natural to give them a little gift for their trouble.

I didn’t want to force anyone, and I intended to give them the option to refuse, but...in this world, it was pretty much impossible to say no if the saint asked you for help. *Especially* if what she wanted was for you to fight against the witch.

In the game, Ellize had continuously used that to her advantage to ask for ridiculous things.

The academy existed for the sole sake of nurturing knights who would then go on to serve the saint. If the knights-to-be refused to help out the saint, then why were they even here?

I knew full well that they’d have a hard time refusing, so I wanted to prepare a little gift for them—if only to ease my guilty conscience.

I’d never expected things would turn out like, uh...*this*, though.

Oh, well. Maybe it’s for the best. I get to involve one less innocent student. At the very least, I don’t feel the slightest bit bad about involving this pervert.

“Are you an idiot? There is no way we’d let a scoundrel like you get away with —”

“It’s all right, Layla. I don’t mind.”

I felt bad for the student who'd lost to him, but at the end of the day, it meant that Four-Eyed Pervert was stronger. He'd have a better chance of making it out alive if he faced the witch.

Besides, if I complained about him now, I'd end up with one less fighter. It was better to accept the situation and make do with this.

Four-Eyed Pervert was one of the bosses in Kuon no Sanka. He is strong.

He even had two phases. His first phase was so easy to beat that it wasn't even worth mentioning, but his second phase—during which he merged with a giant golem—was pretty strong, I had to give him that. He technically shouldn't have been able to do something like that, but they'd justified it in the original story by saying that his love for the saint had made him stronger than ever.

Anyway, my point was that Four-Eyed Pervert was strong enough to hold his own against Verner and his friends—when he was cornered, at least.

"Layla, if you please."

"At once."

Layla opened the box that had been set on the floor next to me. It was filled to the brim with ores and metal.

The last time I'd made a sword for Verner, I'd rushed and used soil. Today, I'd give it my all.

I held my hand out toward the box and started merging the materials together with earth magic, turning them into a sturdy alloy. I'd tried out quite a few alternatives, but in the end, this had been the best alloy I'd found in terms of toughness and solidity. Still, I had no clue what the alloy I'd just created was supposed to be called. I'd used ores and metals that didn't even exist on Earth, after all.

Since I have carte blanche, I'll go for a cringy name! From now on, this alloy shall be known as...orichalcum! Now that that's out of the way, let's make some orichalcum weapons.

I made one for each of the seven students + Four-Eyed Pervert. While I was at it, I made one for Layla as well. She had a perfectly good sword she'd received

as proof of her status as the head of my guard, but she wasn't using it these days. I figured it couldn't hurt.

Chapter 46: Put to the Test

Ellize had invited the eight contestants who'd proven themselves to be the strongest during the martial tournament to join her on the fifth floor for a meeting. Verner, Eterna, Marie, Aina, John, Fiora, a "mysterious" individual, and a young man called Crunchybite Dogman were in attendance. The third-year student was a peculiar person. While he looked intimidating, he also seemed like the kind of person who'd give up at the first difficulty—as if one flick would be enough to make him surrender.

While Crunchybite Dogman was quite mysterious, he was still all right compared to the last person in the room—Supple Ment. The tournament was meant for students to compete against each other but a teacher had somehow found his way in the top eight. What in the world was he thinking?

"What are you doing here, Mister Supple Ment?" Layla asked, fed up.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm a third-year student who just participated in the tournament. My name is Tom Toy," Supple answered without batting an eye. Without even a hint of shame, he cried out, "O glorious saint! Please bestow upon me the weapon you promised to the best-ranking students! A weapon made with your own two hands..."

So this is what he was after... Verner thought. He remained silent, but he finally understood why their eccentric teacher had once again broken the rules. He wouldn't have missed an opportunity to receive a weapon crafted by the one person he revered: the saint. In fact, Verner had also worked harder than usual because of the reward Ellize had promised them.

In the end, Ellize decided to ignore Supple's wrongdoing and simply moved on. She crafted a weapon for each of the eight contestants using the materials Layla had presented.

Verner received a two-handed sword, even sturdier than the one he'd gotten before; Eterna got a staff, a precious stone embedded inside; Fiora received a fine bow and a quiver full of arrows; John got dual blades; Aina got a longsword;

and Marie received an elegant rapier. Supple asked for a wand with a sharp blade hidden inside, and Ellize obliged. Crunchybite—who fought with his bare hands—received a pair of brass knuckles.

Finally, Ellize crafted another longsword that she gifted to Layla. The head of her guard was so moved that she almost started crying. As someone who'd betrayed her master once, receiving a present from Ellize—a sword, at that—probably meant a lot to her...or so Verner assumed.

After she'd handed everyone their weapons, Ellize looked at them and spoke. "Once again, I'd like to congratulate you for making it to the top eight. I've seen your fights, and I'm convinced that you're just as strong as appointed knights."

The students were overjoyed to hear such glowing praise from the saint herself. Knights weren't chosen solely based on their strength—undignified boors had no right being by the saint's side, after all—but it *was* a sine qua non. Ellize herself had just approved of their abilities, so it was quite an achievement for them.

"I have a request for the eight of you," Ellize continued, a serious expression on her face.

Verner unconsciously straightened his posture. Ellize was the kind of person who did everything by herself. She was also far more powerful than all of the knights meant to protect her. Truth be told, her might put her knights' very *raison d'être* in question. And yet, here she was, with a "request" addressed to those whose strength she'd recognized. She was about to ask them to fight—Verner was certain of it.

Ellize paused before continuing. "Once you hear what I have to say, there will be no turning back. Please keep in mind that what I'm about to ask you to do is extremely dangerous. I cannot guarantee that you will make it out alive. So...I'll allow you to walk out right now if you so desire. No one will ever hold it against you, and there will be no impact on your grades."

They'd be risking their lives. Eterna and Crunchybite flinched at her words. The fact that Ellize was allowing them to walk out was proof enough that what she was going to ask of them was truly dangerous.

Verner didn't mind, though. He had no intention of refusing, no matter what

Ellize asked. If anything, he was happy. He was proud to hear that Ellize needed him.

“If you’d like to hear my request, please return again tomorrow, after class,” Ellize added.

She was giving them a day to think it over. She could have used her status to order them around regardless of their consent. As long as she said that it was for the good of humanity, they didn’t have the right to refuse. After all, they were knights-to-be—their job was to listen to the saint, and they’d have no reason to remain here if they dared to oppose her.

Still, that clearly wasn’t how Ellize wished to proceed. She was leaving the choice in their hands. Verner was certain that if none of them showed up, she wouldn’t blame them; she’d simply continue fighting alone.

Verner didn’t need to think it over—he’d accept her request. He’d never considered any other alternative. He didn’t *need* alternatives to begin with.

Eterna’s eyes were trained on Verner’s face. She immediately noticed his resolve, worry obvious on her face.



After he’d returned to his room, Verner proceeded to do what he always did: train.

Eight months had already passed since he’d entered this academy. The unreliable boy he’d once been had grown into a strong-willed young man. His handsome features had matured, and he looked more manly—to say nothing of his bulging biceps, which had doubled in size. After all his rigorous training, he’d obtained a body of steel.

Verner had no intention of resting on his laurels, though. He knew full well that he was still far from reaching his goal of becoming a man worthy of protecting *her*. And so, he continued to torment his muscles in order to shape them into stronger weapons. If he wasn’t strong enough, he just had to get stronger, simple as that.

On this day, just like any other, Verner had attached weights to his back and started doing push-ups.

Suddenly, he heard a knock at his door. He got up in a hurry, grabbed the towel he'd left lying on the floor, and wiped his sweat off. He removed his filthy shirt, put on his uniform again, and used his hands to tidy up his hair somewhat before opening the door.

Ever since he'd greeted Ellize during training, all drenched in sweat and disgusting, he'd become incredibly careful. He didn't want to commit such a blunder ever again.

As it turned out, though, he'd made himself presentable for nothing.

"It's just you, huh?" he said, opening the door.

The silver-haired young woman took offense at his rude greeting. "What do you mean, 'just me'?" Eterna fumed.

Eterna's beauty had charmed countless students since she'd entered the academy. Even though her hair was silver, it looked nothing like the dull, aged gray hair of seniors. It was lustrous and practically glittered under the sun, while her blue eyes looked like two gleaming sapphires. Her features were also delicate and perfectly balanced. Unlike Ellize, who'd stopped growing when she was fourteen, Eterna was starting to develop as a woman. There was a glamorous charm to her that Ellize could never obtain. To put it more directly: Eterna's boobs had started getting bigger.

Had Verner not been a blockhead who only had eyes for Ellize, he might've fallen for Eterna instead.

"Hey, Ver... Could we chat on the roof for a bit?" Eterna asked.

Verner considered it. Three possible answers popped into his mind. He could: one, accept her request; two, ask her why she wanted to talk; or three, refuse because it would take up too much time and he'd rather train instead. The third option was quite obviously the rudest thing anyone could've said, but a very oblivious Verner chose it anyway.

After giving it a nanosecond of thought, he replied, "Sorry, I want to get in as much training as I can."

Eterna's affection level most likely dropped a little, but Verner was far too thickheaded to realize it. Verner never paid attention to anything that didn't

directly concern Ellize.

Sylvester Lordnight—Verner's forgettable roommate who had the coolest name, but no other redeeming qualities—gasped as he watched the two interact.

Still, Eterna knew her friend well. She wasn't surprised by his answer; she simply grabbed his cheek and dragged him along by force.

She finally let go once they'd arrived at the school's roof. Verner rubbed his aching cheek and turned to look at Eterna. Why had she dragged him all the way here? If she simply wanted to talk to him, she could've done so in his room.

She probably didn't want anyone to overhear us, Verner thought.

But what could it be about? Had she fallen in love with someone? Or maybe she wanted to discuss the mysterious power they both had.

Needless to say, Verner was completely off the mark. What Eterna wanted to discuss was obviously the difficult choice they had to make. Well, difficult for anyone but Verner.

"I'm pretty sure I already know your answer, but...are you going to Lady Ellize's room tomorrow?"

"Obviously," he immediately replied.

Verner hadn't hesitated for a single instant. Ellize needed his help. The thought brought him indescribable joy. He certainly wouldn't miss an opportunity to assist her, regardless of what was required of him. Verner was sure that the others, or rather, those who were most devoted to Ellize—John, Fiora, and Supple—were of the same mind.

As it turned out, Eterna didn't feel the same way.

"Verner... Is there any way I could convince you not to go?"

Verner paused for a moment before answering, "I see... You don't want to go."

He wasn't all that surprised by her reaction. Eterna had only accompanied him to this school because she was worried about him. Unlike him, John, or Fiora, she wasn't in Ellize's debt. She certainly didn't worship her like Supple,

nor did she need to fight for the honor of her house like Aina.

Verner completely understood that she might not want to risk her life. She'd probably come to him because she was scared of incurring Ellize's displeasure if she was the only one who didn't show up the next day.

"It's okay, Eterna," he continued. "Lady Ellize won't be mad even if you don't go. It's only natural to be scared after being told you may die if you accept the mission. The others will understand too, so don't worry. There's no shame in knowing your limits."

"That's not what I'm worried about! I'm not talking about myself, here! I don't want *you* to go!" Eterna screamed.

She couldn't control herself after Verner had misunderstood her so badly. Eterna wasn't worried about her safety; she was worried about her friend who seemed all too delighted to jump into danger.

Eterna knew that Verner only had eyes for Ellize. It had always been that way. From the very first day she'd met him, he'd done nothing but dream of becoming Ellize's knight. Ellize needing him meant that his dream had finally come true.

However, Eterna couldn't find it in herself to be happy for him. He'd already died once. Ellize had brought him back, but what if she couldn't the next time something like that happened?

"Please, Verner! Lady Ellize said it'd be dangerous...life-threatening, even! You know she's not one to say such things lightly. You might die for real this time, Verner!"

"I might," Verner answered matter-of-factly.

"And you don't care?! It's not like *you* need to go! Lady Ellize is so strong... She's stronger than anyone else! I'm sure she'll take care of everything herself!" Eterna shouted.

Verner agreed. Even if he didn't go, nothing would change. Ellize would overcome anything and light up the world all on her own if she had to. But that didn't sit well with Verner. All this time, he'd been training so that Ellize wouldn't have to take on that burden by herself. It was his one and only goal.

“I’m sorry, Eterna, but I’ve already made up my mind. I... When no one needed me, she embraced me, you know? She cried for me, some useless kid she didn’t even know. If she hadn’t appeared before me...I would’ve become the kind of helpless lowlife who does nothing but curse the world.”

Until he’d met Ellize, Verner had been wandering through the darkness. His family had cast him away, calling him a monster. He hadn’t even been able to control his wicked powers. And yet, Ellize had held him tight. She’d told him not to give up on himself, to be happy.

On that day, Verner had made an oath to himself. He’d believe in the light—in *her*—no matter what.

“I also... I would’ve...” Eterna muttered before casting her eyes down and running off.



Verner stayed put, watching her leave. He couldn't bring himself to run after her.

Side Story: Generational Gap

This is the story of an incident that occurred after a training session on a regular day.

On that day, Verner and his friends were outdoors, running laps to build their stamina. Knights had to work on their sword skills, magic, and movements, but the foundation upon which all of these other skills were built was their stamina and core strength. Whether they were fighting, marching, or simply standing by on alert, they had to rely on their endurance.

Case in point: at the battle at the royal capital, the knights and soldiers had been forced to hold out for an hour until news of the attack had reached the saint's castle. After that, they'd had to hold out for an additional eight minutes until Ellize had arrived. During that time, those men and women didn't get a single chance to rest. Their endurance had been put to the test.

Being able to unleash insane attacks didn't mean a thing unless you could keep it up for long stretches of time. You'd be useless if you became winded after killing a couple of monsters...as a knight, that is. There were other career paths you could pursue with such explosive skills, but being a knight simply wasn't one of them.

Thus, students were asked to run every day. Usually, the students would move on to other activities and training after they'd completed this strenuous warm-up. On that particular day, however, the teachers had wanted to check the students' stamina, so they had them run a hundred laps. One lap was three hundred meters, which meant they had to run thirty kilometers...all while carrying their equipment.

By the time they'd finished, the students were spent. The ones that specialized in magic, such as Aina, Marie, and Eterna, couldn't even stand anymore.

On the other hand, Verner, the musclehead, and John, the former soldier, both looked like they could go for a few more laps without any issue.

Aina couldn't catch her breath. "Ha... Can't...run...anymore. I'm...dead..." she panted.

Just as she'd said, she was about to die from exhaustion.

Eterna wiped the sweat off her face. Her clothes were so wet that they stuck to her skin. "I need a bath..." she whined.

The students were wearing their sportswear. The girls' curves stood out more than usual, and the boys couldn't help but let their eyes wander from time to time.

"How are you feeling?" Headmaster Fox asked as he approached the group.

He was pretending to observe the knights-to-be's efforts, but he was most likely here to check on his beloved daughter.

"Hello, Headmaster," Verner greeted him.

"It looks like you've been working hard. How nice. I'm impressed. Endurance is vital for knights, so keep at it," Fox praised them, a smile on his face. That quickly vanished as he turned to glare at the boys who'd been looking at his dear Aina a little too much.

"Yes, Father!" Aina exclaimed. Her father's encouragement had made her lively again, but then she suddenly grimaced. "By the way... Were you running laps too, Father?"

Fox looked puzzled. "No. I only do desk work these days. My shoulders tend to get stiff when I sit all day, so I decided to take a short walk."

"Um, Father..." Aina started. "You... You do take baths, right?"

Fox seemed vexed. "Of course!"

"Yeah... Of course you do. I'm sorry for being ru—"

"I took one just four days ago!" her father exclaimed.

Aina, who'd been relieved after hearing her father's answer, froze. She looked like she couldn't believe her ears. Marie seemed to be just as shocked, while Verner, Eterna, John, and Fiora didn't react.

After a short pause, she uttered three words—four simple syllables—that

broke her father's heart. "You stink, Father."

It was Fox's turn to freeze.

"I can't believe you haven't taken a bath in four days! It's no wonder you stink, Father!" she continued.

"I-I stink...?"

"Of course you'd stink! Why aren't you bathing regularly?!"

"Four days isn't that long, and...I feel like bathing more often would be pushing it..."

"What do you mean, 'pushing it'?!" Aina shouted angrily.

Marie nodded. Fox gradually began crumbling down, his daughter's words piercing through his heart like countless sharp blades.

The other students were also looking at Fox coldly, but Verner and his friends didn't understand why. Sure, they took baths every day because the school had a communal bath (to be precise, Verner had only gotten in the habit of washing up every day after Ellize had unexpectedly visited his room) but until coming here, they'd almost never bathed. Water was precious, and it couldn't be wasted. They'd cleaned themselves with a wet cloth when they'd had to, but that was about it.

"I'm afraid the generational gap is at play here," Supple said, shifting his glasses so that they would shine under the sun. With everyone's attention firmly secured, he began his explanation with a proud look on his face.

"Nowadays, nobles take daily baths, but this custom is fairly recent—it only started twelve years ago. Before that, people feared water. It carried death, you see. Some people *did* bathe, but no more than once a month. They usually cleaned their bodies with a wet cloth instead. I'm sure you have no memories of bathing frequently when you were young, right?"

"Now that you mention it... I don't recall bathing often as a child..." Aina said.

Twelve years was a pretty short time, but for a young teen like Aina, it wasn't *that* short either. She had only been five years old at the time. Her memories of that period were hazy at best, but now that Supple Ment had mentioned it, she

realized that she didn't really recall taking baths as a young child.

"It's because water had been deemed dangerous back then," he explained. "Monsters would often poison our water supplies. We'd often hear stories about people dying right after washing or drinking from a river."

The monsters served the witch and only had one goal: to attack humanity for her benefit. They didn't stop at violent attacks either—they also used vicious tricks, such as destroying crops or poisoning water. As a result, using natural bodies of water was incredibly dangerous.

"The only safe source we had was rainwater—no, I suppose it wasn't entirely safe either. Sometimes, the witch made poisonous rain pour down on us, so we could never truly relax. For instance, I remember that Griselda, the previous witch, created a rain that could burn through human skin. Besides, water spoils if we store it for too long. No one could ever gather enough to bathe in."

"Then...the only water you could really trust was water created by magic?" Marie asked.

"Exactly, Marie. Only when a human magician had created water could we truly be certain that it was safe... Until Lady Ellize came around, that is."

No one had asked Supple for a whole speech on water, but he was more than happy to give it anyway. Whenever he got a chance to bring up one of Ellize's many achievements, he wouldn't shut up.

Everyone braced themselves for the endless lecture to come.



Hi everyone! Ellize here! Today I'm live from the saint's church in the royal capital! "Why are you here," you ask? To do my job, duh!

It was a huge pain, but I was here to use my magic in front of the believers and one of the Church's big shots. I was to produce water and create little barriers to make sure germs wouldn't get in. The barriers only had to keep out germs, though, so they weren't very sturdy—anyone could easily break them with a little flick. Since I didn't have to worry about its construction, I could focus on making them durable. They'd last for around a year.

People often said that water spoiled, but that was a bit of an oversimplification. Water *itself* couldn't spoil—the germs that proliferated in it did. As long as you made sure they couldn't get in, water wouldn't go bad.

I filled huge jars with water and sealed them with a barrier. After getting through all one hundred of them, the first part of my job was done. Each jar contained enough water to fill one bathtub.

After that, I headed to the church's basement and stood in front of the humongous water storage.

"If you please, Lady Ellize," the big shot said, bringing his hands together in prayer.

I gave him my usual business smile and answered, "Please leave it to me."

I activated my magic. I'd created that humongous water tank myself a while ago. It had taken me a few days to finish, and it was as big as the Tokyo Dome. The church had installed ditches to redirect any rainwater in there, which made my life much easier. All I had to do was kill the germs that had found their way into the tank and dispel whatever poison there was to make the water drinkable.

After that, I created a barrier so that the water I'd just purified would stay pristine, aaand...done!

"I'm finished. This water is fit for consumption now."

"It's a miracle... I'm so thankful to be able to witness you perform miracles time and time again," the big shot blubbered, shedding tears.

Lmao.

The big shot who got to witness me purify the water changed every time. Apparently, they truly believed that I was performing miracles (lol) and fought for a chance to see me at work.

Chill, guys, I'm just using magic.

The higher-ups coined names for the water I dealt with and distributed it all over the country to improve the Church's reputation. There was "purified water," which referred to the stuff in this tank, and "The Saint's Holy Shower,"

which was water I created myself using magic.

I was fine with the whole “purified water” thing, but I really wished they’d stop advertising the liquid in the jars as “The Saint’s Holy Shower!” It made me think of a, um, different kind of shower...

Anyway, purified water was given out to the people free of charge, but holy shower jars were sold—mainly to nobles.

Honestly speaking, they’re both the same. It’s all water.

Nobles often boasted that they’d gotten healthier after bathing in the holy shower water, but I suspected this was nothing more than a placebo effect.

Whatever. I’ll go handle the last part of my job and go home.

I stepped out and created a few fairies out of magic. I was using the same spell I’d practiced many times while I was bored during my little NEET confinement. I sent them to the saint churches located all over the region.

“Oh! Fairies...” the big shot gasped in awe.

Dude, this is still just magic. They’re lumps of mana that look like fairies, not the real deal. You know that, right?

I gave them this shape because people tended to get scared and think the witch was attacking if they simply saw mana spheres flying around. By now, everyone knew that these little fairies were mine.

Anyway, the other churches all had tanks in their basements similar to the one I’d just purified. These fairies could do my job for me. I’d already infused them with the spell they needed; they only had to dash into the water tank to activate its effects.

I couldn’t exactly spend my time running around, so I often used such fairies to purify water or rejuvenate natural sites. It was an easy way to increase my fame all across the land—my magic basically did the job for me, all on its own.

Sure, I was ready to put forth every effort in order to achieve my goals, but if I could do that *and* take it easy at the same time... Well, I wouldn’t say no.

What is it? Why do I bother coming to the main church if I can do it all remotely, you ask? I mean, I could but...

I kinda had to show my face once in a while, if only to maintain the Church's prestige. I wasn't all that pleased about it—I absolutely hated it, actually—but I had to put up with it. Truth be told, yeah, I *did* feel like showing up just to meet up with some old man was a waste of my time! But the one time I'd boycotted them, they'd come all the way to my castle to ask me if they'd "done anything to displease me." They'd acted like it was the end of the world, and that they wouldn't survive if I didn't grace them with my presence...

I don't really have a choice, do I?

"Thank you so much, Lady Ellize! Thanks to your hard work, the people will have enough to drink this month too," he said, bowing to me in reverence.

Could you stop worshipping me? Just say thank you, that'll be more than enough.

If you were wondering why I had to do all that, it was because the people of this world were chronically in need of water.

The situation was much better these days, but the shortage used to be quite terrible.

Since the monsters kept poisoning the rivers and lakes, they couldn't build dams to collect water. Small villages struggled to get enough to drink, so most people had to resort to beer.

The only safe source that existed here was water created by magic. Nobles could simply hire one or two specialized magicians to secure enough drinking water. If they pushed their magicians a little, they could even get enough to bathe once a week or so.

The Saint's Church also did its best to hire as many water magicians as possible so that they could distribute the precious resource to the common people, but this created a divide between them and the rich. They constantly fought over the magicians, which made it increasingly harder for ordinary citizens to access water.

Needless to say, people couldn't wash up properly, and they'd get sick more easily. It was no wonder the population of this world had never increased. People died of hunger left and right and, even when they had enough to eat,

they died of random illnesses from lack of hygiene.

I'd noticed all this a little before I'd started carrying out my duties as the saint. Back then, I took long baths every single day. One day, Fox sat me down and told me, "Filling up a bathtub every day is a little too extravagant, Lady Ellize. Would you agree to tone it down a little?" before explaining to me how precious water was.

I couldn't accept that, though! I used to be a Japanese man, and the Japanese take bathing seriously! If I didn't take baths, I simply couldn't calm down.

I hated putting up with restrictions, so I decided to do what any logical person would have done: fix the issue. If I couldn't take baths every day because water was precious, I just had to make it so that it wasn't as valuable anymore.

Besides...if washing up wasn't an option, how was I supposed to ogle pretty girls in the bath?! I'd gone through a *damn genderswap*! What was the point if I didn't at least reap the benefits in the bath, right?! Plus, I didn't want the heroines of a dating sim to *stink*. What about my *hopes and dreams*?! Was I supposed to give them all up and let perfectly good heroines smell like crap?!

I was constantly using magic to clean my body—both inside and out—so I didn't technically *need* baths. I also wouldn't get sick if I drank poisonous water. Others didn't have access to the same cheat code, though. If they didn't wash, they'd get dirty. If they drank weird stuff, they'd hurt their stomachs.

So anyway, I'd decided to tackle the issue, and—as you can see—the situation had greatly improved.

To be fair, it'd been *years* since a monster had last poisoned a river, and I'd long since purified those places anyway. The rivers were pretty much safe now. I couldn't guarantee some lone idiotic monster wouldn't try it again, though, so for the time being, we advised people not to use natural sources of water if they could help it.

All righties! My job here is done, so time to go back to the academy and enjoy a well-deserved bath!



"And that is how the value of water gradually decreased over the years.

We've all been blessed by our glorious saint. Her work has also led to better hygiene, and the spread of contagious diseases has decreased. In the past, water itself was feared, you see. Simply touching some could be enough for terrible epidemics to spread, so people thought that it brought disaster. We can only assume that this fear had been instilled by previous saints in an attempt to keep people away from dangerous sources."

Supple's detailed history lesson was finally over. Verner and his friends let out a sigh of relief. They were supposed to be training their practical skills in class today, but Supple had somehow hijacked the class to deliver his speech.

"I never knew about all of this," Aina said. "So that's why my father is so reluctant to take baths..."

"He has yet to adapt to the current values of our society. He cannot let go of the idea that safe water is incredibly precious and should not be wasted," Supple concluded.

Water had stopped being as precious thanks to Ellize. Before she'd changed everything, the only water that was entirely safe was the small quantity created by water magicians. It was only natural that the older generation felt like bathing every day was a waste.

"Another consequence of its depreciation is the depreciation of water magicians," Supple continued. "There are water storages in most cities now—including several ones in the royal capital—so the magicians aren't needed anymore. The nobles and the Church have stopped monopolizing them, and most of them moved to the countryside as a result. Even small villages have access to safe water nowadays."

As a commoner, John was revolted. He couldn't stomach the selfish ways of the elite—especially since he remembered suffering from water shortage during his entire childhood. "The nobles and the Church are so selfish... They monopolized the magicians when they needed them and threw them away the moment they didn't."

"You're right. However, the nobles 'throwing them away' also meant that they regained their freedom. We make it sound better when we say that they 'worked' for the nobles and the Church but—in truth—they didn't have a

choice. They were often forced into these positions regardless of their will. They were treated like convenient wells. I'm sure that Lady Ellize had considered them too when she'd endeavored to change the status quo," Supple replied passionately.

He almost seemed to be in a trance. Verner and the others were deeply impressed.

Needless to say, Supple was grossly overestimating Ellize. She hadn't even thought of those people when she'd decided to fix the water shortage, much less wondered if doing so would put them out of a job. She'd simply been lucky enough to end up with a result that improved everyone's life.

If they let Supple talk freely, they'd miss their chance to wash up. Eterna decided to speak up. "Hmm... It's not that I didn't enjoy hearing about the saint's achievements, but...can't we go bathe soon? I feel so gross."

"Same," Aina agreed. "You boys better wash up too, all right? Don't come to the next class all nasty!"

They were allowed to wash up after practical class since they sweated a lot, but their break wasn't limitless. The teachers had given them just long enough time to bathe and head to their next class. If they were late, the next teacher would simply start the lesson without waiting for them. In other words, they didn't have the time to stand there and listen to Supple prattle on endlessly.

Verner and his friends hurried back to the main building, leaving Headmaster Fox alone. He was crouching, his hands on the floor and his head drooped low.

"I...stink..."

His beloved daughter had dealt a lot of damage with her unexpected attack. The headmaster found himself unable to get up for a long time.

From that day onward, the headmaster started bathing every day without fail.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's been one volume since we last got to see each other. I'm Kabledondaikou—the archduke of kabledon.

Thank you very much for reading the second volume of *Fake Saint of the Year*.

I'd like to use this afterword to tell you a few things about this novel that I haven't mentioned in the main story. To be fair, you don't need this information to follow the story, but I figured I'd share it with you. Spoilers are included, so if you're reading the afterword before the book, I advise you to stop here and return after reading through the volume.

I'd like to tell you about the guardians—the forest people that pretty much only served as comic relief. Didn't you wonder what in the world these guys were? I'll start with the conclusion: they're humans.

They're the descendants of an ancient civilization that prospered over a thousand years ago, back when saints didn't exist yet. Even though they look quite primitive, they're still able to drive and maintain the steam train which Ellize rode on.

When their civilization was destroyed, these primitive men scattered all over the land. Some crossed the sea and ended up on an island, while others ended up on a large continent. There, they associated with other primitive men—humans, those who have now come to inhabit the world of Fiori. Finally, others left behind civilization entirely and chose to live in harmony with nature. Although most of their ancestors have long since vanished in favor of homo sapiens, the current guardians are their descendants.

As for why they chose to leave civilization behind... It was in order to survive. Monsters naturally target humans and do everything in their power to destroy them. That gave them an idea: "If they attack humans, then we just need to stop being humans."

That was how they decided to give up their humanity and resolved to imitate

monkeys. It's also why the characters of the story—like Aiz, for instance—consider them to be an entirely different species. Monsters also stopped attacking them...for the most part. A thousand years went by, and by now, not even the witch considers them targets. In other words, she doesn't consider them humans.

If an irregularity like Ellize had never been born into this world and humanity had fallen to the witch's forces, the guardians would've most likely survived. From time to time, monsters *do* mistake them for humans because they look so similar—well, they *are* human, but let's put that aside for now—and attack them, but it's a fairly rare occurrence.

In addition, while the guardians chose to live in harmony with nature, they still pass down their knowledge to their children. They believe that once the witch fulfills her mission of annihilating humanity, she'll disappear from the face of this world. With the witch and her monsters gone, they'll be able to rise again and rebuild civilization from scratch.

As you can see, I thought about the guardians a lot, but none of this is relevant to the main story. Therefore it won't be mentioned at all. They'll simply remain the cheerful comic relief they are.

It's about time to conclude this afterword.

I'd like to thank all those who worked hard so that the second volume could hit the shelves: KADOKAWA, for their constant efforts; Yunohito-sama, for taking care of the illustrations; and of course, you, my dear readers.

Well then, let's meet again if the third volume sees the light of day!

Kabedondaikou

Ellize is showering the masses with healing magic at her birthday festival.

“My child is standing!
I was told he’d never walk
on his own!”

“I have hair again!
I thought I was doomed
to baldness!”

“How wonderful!”

Ellize

I’m so done with this...

Can’t the parade end already?

Fake
SAINT
of the YEAR

You Wanted the
Perfect Saint?
Too Bad!

2

Layla
and Verner
fight over
Ellize?!

"If you truly
want to protect her...
then you have no choice
but to betray her.
Help us keep her
confined in
this castle."

King of the
Bilberry Kingdom
Aiz

Layla


"Your...
Majesty..."

Eterna

Verner

"Miss Layla...
I'm sure you're
fully aware that
you shouldn't be
doing this."

I'd been placed under
house arrest for a week now.
Okay, so I've been thinking this for a while,
but...isn't this exactly the life I wanted?
WHAT?! Someone's here to save me?!
NOOOOOO! Gimme a break!



“Thank you for
coming, fake saint.
I’ve been waiting for you—
the one who has surpassed
the real deal—
to visit me for a long time.
I’m Profeta, but you humans
usually refer to me
as the prophet.”

Profeta

2

KABEDONDAIKOU

ILL. YUNOHITO

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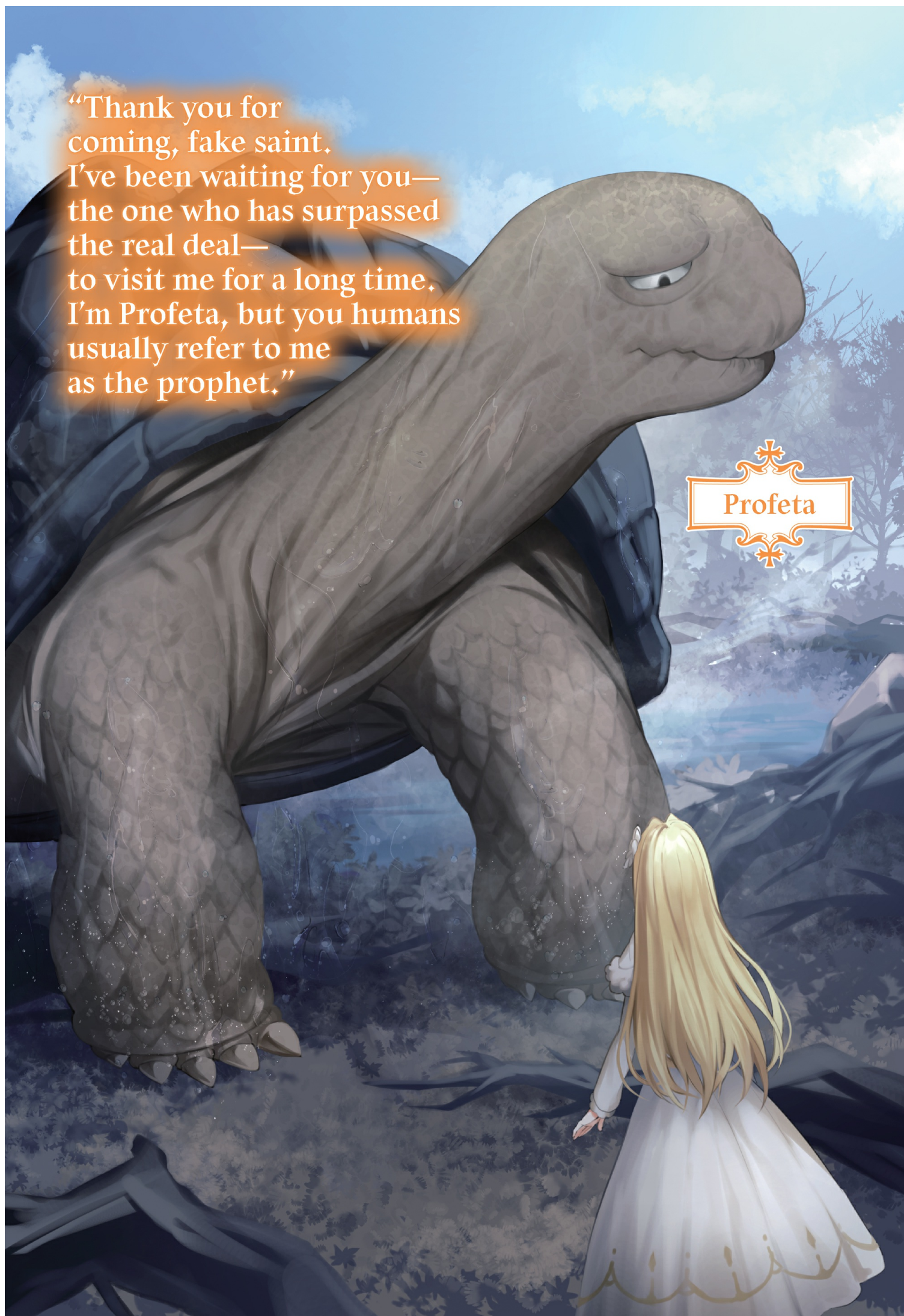
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Fake Saint of the Year: You Wanted the Perfect Saint? Too Bad! Volume 2

by kabledondaikou

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